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FROM TRAGIC FORM TO APOCALYPTIC REALITY IN FOUR AMERICAN WORKS: TOWARD AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL THEORY AND PRACTICE OF READING

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To Elder and Amy

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Abstract

The dissertation aims to articulate a theory of “the truth of literature” and a practice of reading aimed at grasping that truth, and to demonstrate and clarify this theory and practice through readings of works of modern tragedy and an modern “apocalyptic” genre emerging from the wars and horrors of the twentieth century and the imagination of nuclear and ecological disaster. Beginning from the common idea that we come to *know* something, both tacitly and explicitly, through reading great works of literature, I argue that—specifically—what we come to know are the realities and conditions of human life, conditions which are not just material but ideal—normative, narrative, and historical. Using Michael Polanyi’s theory of tacit knowledge and of “reality” conceived as both the object and condition of inquiry, I argue that in reading and reflecting on literature we are referred to our own largely tacit sense of a ground of sensemaking and judgment more adequate to our experience than the typified and conventional ground of our everyday experience. I then demonstrate a practice of reading aimed at the acquisition of this kind of knowledge, beginning from Norman Maclean’s nonfictional *Young Men and Fire* which seeks “to transform catastrophe into tragedy,” to find a tragic form adequate to the deaths of thirteen Smokejumpers in a 1949 forest fire. If tragedy represents events so as to show their underlying order, the conclusion of Maclean’s work suggests that modern tragic form must acknowledge the apocalyptic—the dawning possibility or likelihood of human self-destruction—which radically threatens any order. I further develop this idea of the apocalyptic through readings of McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*, Robert Lowell’s “The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket,” which imply the need to reconceive the telos of human life in light of its seemingly catastrophic historical trajectory and the impotence of conventional goodness, and Wallace Stevens’ “The Auroras of Autumn,” as well as his poetic theory, which imply the need to recognize the

provisional, constructed, and threatened character of all our sensemaking. Collectively these works refer us to what I call the apocalyptic sublime, the inconceivable enormity of the inhuman forces at work in human history, as an essential aspect of the horizon—or myth—against or in light of which we must comprehend our present situation—to the degree such comprehension is possible. My readings suggest that that situation necessitates an ongoing effort of disciplined attention, dispossession and reorientation—a shift from the telos of individual fulfillment and flourishing ("happiness") to that of an imperative to consciousness of the tenuous conditions of our humanity—and that a practice of reading and reflecting on literature is integral to such consciousness.

Preface

> …absent a significant adjustment to how billions of humans conduct their lives, parts of the Earth will likely become close to uninhabitable, and other parts horrifically inhospitable, as soon as the end of this century.
>
> David Wallace-Wells, "The Uninhabitable Earth," New York Magazine, July 17, 2017

I have written this dissertation in the shadow—or rather, in the rising heat—of our awareness of global warming, or climate change, and its present and future consequences, which are revealed as ever more catastrophic and imminent.

This is not the only risk we face. In addition to climate change, The Future of Life Institute lists three other categories of potential "existential risk," defined as "any risk that has the potential to eliminate all of humanity or, at the very least, kill large swaths of the global population, leaving the survivors without sufficient means to rebuild society to current standards of living": nuclear war, biotechnology, and artificial intelligence.[1]

When I first read Norman Maclean's book *Young Men and Fire* driving across the American West five years ago, it was the question of tragedy in modernity that arrested my interest. As the project progressed, Maclean's turn toward the apocalyptic at the end of the book acquired ever-greater gravity and eventually became a dominant theme, pulling in the three other works I discuss. It is hard to say whether it was my increasing consciousness of crisis—of modernity *as* tragedy—that drove this expansion of the work to include other more explicitly apocalyptic works, or whether conversely it was my immersion in these works that attuned me to crisis, but either way the appalling currency of my theme has become increasingly apparent to me.

I would emphasize that I mean not to be speaking of some potential future disaster which may or may not come to pass. It is true that it is the prospect of the human-caused extinction of

[1] "Existential Risk."

humanity that makes our situation unprecedentedly apocalyptic; and none of the 'lesser' possible catastrophes—the collapse of civilization or the degradation of humanity as imagined in dystopias like *Brave New World* or *1984*—are in the same category. The end is the end—as Clint Eastwood says in *Unforgiven*, "When you kill a man, you take away everything he has and everything he's going to have"; so with humanity. In any other scenario, at least there is some hope: of pockets of humanity persisting, of individuals resisting, of culture rising again. But the perception which underlies and was strengthened in the course of writing the dissertation is that our situation is, in some significant sense, *already* apocalyptic, whether or not we manage to "muddle through"—that we are already well underway in undermining the material and cultural conditions of humanity as we have known it, that we find ourselves collectively incapable of responding to the potential disasters that confront us, that history is being determined not by human reason and good will but by the darker forces within us and within the institutions we have created. I cannot argue for this directly in the dissertation, but I believe it to be one of the realities to which we are referred by the works I read, all the more so because they do not explicitly depict "the end of the world" but rather represent historical and more recent events *as* apocalyptic or as having an apocalyptic dimension.

The desire to reflect on the modern crisis, or calamity, in its various facets is only half of what motivates this study. The other driver is the question of why we find literature—and art more generally—so compelling; why a great novel or poem is an object of eros and of fascination—and the corresponding intuition that this eros and this fascination derive from our apprehension in art of some profound *reality* with which our everyday lives does not often put us in contact.

Numerous thinkers, beginning in the eighteenth century, have of course answered this question, some brilliantly and thoroughly. But it is my perception that even the best of those answers stand in need of new formulation, that literature's relation to truth requires a new conceptualization and new defense adequate to the current historical situation and in light of the past half century of corrosive (if necessary) deconstructionism and the increasingly pervasive climate of relativism.

For the past ten years I have been working closely with Charles Thomas Elder, whose unpublished manuscript, *The Normativity of Grammar*, articulates and argues for a conception of the normative basis of modern human life as the imperative to consciousness—deriving this imperative from what he calls, in a broadly Wittgensteinian sense, "the grammar of our humanity"—with the implication that our engagement with the higher culture is essential both to the development of consciousness and to knowledge of human realities and the conditions of human life. My dissertation can be seen as emerging from and complementary to this work, though it of course intends to be fully convincing in its own right. I articulate my version of a theory of our education by literature to the conditions of our humanity, relating this theory to other conceptions of literary mimesis and thoroughly grounding it in Michael Polanyi's work on tacit knowing. The bulk of the dissertation then approaches the question from a literary critical perspective, defending and clarifying the theory through the close reading and analysis of my modern tragic and apocalyptic texts.

I believe this approach to literature has general validity and could be explicated with respect to any work of serious literature. But there was, I believe, compelling reason to follow these questions out in relation to *Young Men and Fire*, because Maclean makes distinctively,

perhaps uniquely, transparent the struggle for a sense beyond common sense, a sense that can somehow only be attained through finding the proper literary form. It became progressively clearer in the process of my inquiry, and as I proceeded through the works to which *Fire* led me, that there is a fundamental convergence of the question of the reality to which we are educated in reading and the question of the reality to which we are referred by our readings of these works of modern tragedy and apocalypse: a convergence in the idea of a normative ground of meaning and judgment that has become fractured and dissipated under what Wallace Stevens calls "the pressures of the contemporaneous."

The ultimate point of the dissertation, therefore, is to present a compelling case that literature should be taken seriously as a unique and, in some sense, essential mode of knowing the conditions of human life, and to convey something of those conditions and their precariousness as suggested by the works I read. This is not to deny that people uneducated in the humanities are capable of judging and acting humanly (often more so than practitioners of the academic humanities)—but if our species is at a juncture, as it would seem to be, in which inhuman forces are systematically undermining both the material and the nonmaterial ("spiritual" or "ideal") conditions of our humanity, undermining our collective capacity to recognize and act upon normative imperatives and constraints, and if literature educates us to such imperatives and constraints, then it is not too much to say that preserving our humanity depends, or would depend, upon developing our collective capacity to read.

It is not just a matter of "giving literature its due," making sure it gets credit for our moral knowledge so that we as a society continue to teach and fund the humanities. Nor is it simply a matter of reading to expand the range of one's sensibilities. It is a matter of recognizing the need to inhabit a different world—a world structured not by the calculations of utility or the striving

for a narrow, self-undermining or vacuous personal happiness, but by the imperative to fulfill the demands of our humanity—including, fundamentally, the imperative to know what those demands are.

L. Atnip

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Introduction

> Looking down on the world of the Mann Gulch fire for probably the last time, I said to myself, "Now we know, now we know." I kept repeating this line until I recognized that, in the wide world anywhere, "Now we know, now we know" is one of its most beautiful poems. For me, for this moment, anyway, my world was changed to this one-line poem. Finding it a poem, I hoped I could next complete it as a tragedy, more exactly as a story of a tragedy, more exactly still as a tragedy of this whole cockeyed world that probably always makes its own kind of sense and beauty but not always ours.
>
> Norman Maclean, *Young Men and Fire*

On August 5th, 1949, fifteen men parachuted into Mann Gulch in Montana to contain an apparently controllable wildfire. Before the end of the day the fire had "blown up" into an inferno, and twelve of those men, along with a Forest Service ranger also fighting the fire, were dead or fatally burned.

The Mann Gulch incident is one we would colloquially refer to as *tragic*—shocking, horrific, seemingly senseless. But for native Montanan and longtime University of Chicago English professor Norman Maclean, the events had remained, in some sense, simply "catastrophic" and needed to be *turned into* tragedy. Maclean devoted the last years of his life to doing just that—to investigating and writing the story of what had happened at Mann Gulch, which would be posthumously published as *Young Men and Fire*.

Maclean's aim of transforming this historical event into a story, a poem, a tragedy—an aim which he states and reflects upon explicitly throughout the book—raises the question of what such a transformation entails and why it might be necessary, and this is the question that this dissertation will pursue, through a theoretical reflection on the character of literary representation and an inquiry into Maclean's work and three other twentieth-century American works that could also be characterized as aiming to transform catastrophe (broadly considered)

into artistic form: Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, Robert Lowell's "A Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket," and Wallace Stevens' poetry, particularly "The Auroras of Autumn." This is neither a narrowly literary critical question nor one confined to this cluster of works; it is a philosophical question about the role of literary and narrative art in apprehending and accommodating ourselves to the realities of human life, realities which are often difficult and sometimes disastrous. In the dissertation I propose that analyzing the "transformations" undertaken by these works will illuminate this latter question. I aim to articulate and assess what these authors achieve in their works, and to elaborate what this suggests about the knowledge we gain through reading and reflecting on works of literature, and specifically works representing catastrophe and loss—works that cover a spectrum from the tragic to what I will call the "apocalyptic."

Maclean's project implies that his search for literary form is a search for meaning, but meaning which must be derived from *knowledge*—knowledge of what might be called the narrative conditions of human life. I contend that we can see (good) literature in general as reflecting such a search, if usually less explicitly than in *Fire*, and the dissertation aims to articulate a theory of how we may be educated through literature to those conditions, and to demonstrate and clarify this theory through readings of the works listed above.

My theoretical claim is that literature educates us by representing human possibilities which we must judge in light of normative and grammatical conditions of which we have some tacit intimation—conditions which could collectively be called "myth." Essential to such an education is a practice of reading, and I will describe and attempt to demonstrate an "epistemological" reading aimed at knowing these conditions. Such a practice begins from

attending to and attempting to articulate one's initially tacit sense of the whole of the work and its referent—what the work is "about," not in the narrow sense of its subject matter but in the broader sense of its themes, what constitutes its interest—with particular attention to what is not immediately comprehensible in or about the work, what seems challenging, disturbing, or obscure, and yet seems to refer to something real or true. This effort of attention and articulation directs us to look beyond the conventional structures of meaning that govern our everyday lives—structures which distort, obscure, deny or neglect certain aspects of human experience or the human world—to a horizon of sense, both narratological and normative, that would in fact be adequate to the depth, range, significance and true character of human realities.

Each of the works under consideration seeks a literary form that will make sense of (indicate the significance and meaning of) a disastrous historical event, or, in the case of Stevens, the crisis of modern sensemaking *per se*. Through my readings of these works, I intend to show that in attempting to make sense of and judge them we are referred to an emergent historical condition that could be called apocalyptic—the prospect of the end of humanity, at least as we have known it and possibly *tout court*—an end brought about by human beings themselves, and not contingent but seemingly the culmination of the development of something intrinsic to who we are. The works, to the extent we find them compelling, therefore educate us to this condition. They suggest the need to make sense of our contemporary world and experience with respect to its ending. They further suggest that doing so entails a kind of dispossession of self, a shift of perspective from that of the achievement of our personal happiness and fulfillment, and even from the achievement of collective happiness and fulfillment, to the perspective of humanity as radically dependent on conditions which we ourselves are undermining, perhaps (though not certainly) without remedy. They move us from the center to an imagined margin from which we

can view the historical human trajectory. The works do not *tell* us we must dispossess ourselves, but in different ways they allow us or compel us to adopt such a perspective as we read and try to make sense of them.

A word about the relation between "theory" and "application" here. The two components of the dissertation, philosophical-theoretical and literary critical-practical, could, to some degree, stand independently—the former as an argument that literature educates us to human realities; the latter as an interpretation of this cluster of works, an interpretation with ethical and ontological implications, as literary criticism often has. But I believe the full significance of each part is only revealed in relation to the other. The readings gain their full force from the idea that what we come to know is not just the work but some reality. The theory is made plausible and clarified through its application, and the readings of these particular works further make clear the stakes of the theory. What we come to know through modern literature at its most extreme and challenging is not merely an adjunct to our ordinary knowledge—it is a radically different ground of intelligibility and judgment.

If my argument is successful, it ought to have implications for the general practice of philosophy and of literary criticism—to suggest that in the end, the two practices, insofar as they are understood as modes of grasping human realities, are mutually dependent and complementary.

The project stands at the intersection of two problems which are live and pressing in scholarly discourse in the humanities, as well as, to some extent, in popular discourse: first, how to conceptualize "the truth of literature," and second, how to conceptualize the ideal or normative

character of human reality. It will therefore clarify my theoretical endeavor to consider some central issues in the recent history of reflection on these problems.

The Truth of Literature

With respect to the first problem, the dissertation articulates a version of what has in contemporary analytic aesthetic philosophy come to be called "literary cognitivism": the position that holds that literature conveys some truth or reality, and therefore that we can learn something from reading. The numerous challenges for those who want to defend such a view have been widely rehearsed.[2] Much of the debate centers around the ontological status of fiction (can a fictional character be said to be real, and if so, in what sense?) and the status of propositions in literary works (are they assertions of fact, and can they be true?). This is not the kind of "truth of literature" in which I am interested. I begin from what I believe to be a common experience: that in engaging with (reading and reflecting on) literary narratives or poems, which are obviously artistic constructions—obviously "fictions" in that sense, whether or not the events that they relate are historical or the perceptions they relate are the poet's actual experience—we often feel that we come to know or to confront some reality or truth which bears upon our understanding of our own situation or the conditions of human life—a kind of reality or truth which cannot be conveyed merely by propositions or discursive prose.

The most common and intuitive form of literary cognitivism holds that we learn from literary works as we might learn from experience—our own, or that of other people's doings. One variant of this is that essentially this experience *is* the knowledge, that we learn *what it is like* to experience something we have not experienced and perhaps cannot—for instance, from

[2] See for instance Harold, "Literary Cognitivism."

Moby-Dick, what it is like to go whaling.[3] A further school argues that literature teaches *through* (vicarious) experience, that through imaginatively inhabiting the situation of the characters we can learn psychological or ethical truths as we might learn from life; a favorite example is *Pride and Prejudice*, which may be seen to teach us "something about the way otherwise attractive people sabotage their chances at happy relationships,"[4] for instance that "stubborn pride and ignorant prejudice keep attractive people apart."[5]

These conceptions of literary truth must answer to several challenges. The two most relevant to my own argument are, first of all, the question of how we can derive knowledge from literature, since it is or may be fictional; and second, whether and why we should need literature, rather than just the human sciences, reportage and our own experience, to learn it—that is, whether and how reading literature constitutes a *distinctive* mode of coming-to-know. (The example about what we might learn from *Pride and Prejudice* in fact comes from Jeremy Stolnitz's article "The Cognitive Triviality of Literature," which argues that whatever general truths we might allegedly derive from fiction are in fact things we know already from our own experience.)

To the first of these issues, the problem is to articulate how a fictional work could educate us to some truth about the real world. Of course not all literary works are fiction in the sense of inventing people and events, but the concern is to articulate how literature might educate us *apart* from its providing us with factual information about the world. (My own inquiry begins from the sense that Maclean is looking for and conveying something *beyond* the facts, something which is nonetheless true or real, and essentially so.) This problem is linked to the question of

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[3] Kajtár, "What Mary Didn't Read." Kajtár's example, adapted from the famous thought experiment about what Mary, a girl who has never seen color (but knows about it), learns when she first sees red, is that Mary, who has never been at risk, may learn from Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* what it is like to fear death.
[4] Hepola, "The Reality of Fictional Characters and the Cognitive Value of Literature," 79.
[5] Stolnitz, "On the Cognitive Triviality of Art," quoted in Hepola, 85.

the kind of truth which literature might convey. If it is a propositional truth, as the above claim ostensibly derived from Austen's novel, what kind of "argument" can the work present for it, since it is not discursive? If we learn from the novel as we might learn from experience, why should we "believe" the fiction—and if we judge it to be true (or in the first instance, plausible), how can we have *learned* anything from it since we must be referring to something we already know (or believe), or at least can recognize as plausible even if it is surprising to us?

Some contemporary aesthetic philosophers recognize the anamnetic ("un-forgetting") character of our education by literature—drawing on Plato's dialogue *Meno,* in which Socrates argues that learning (e.g. of geometry) is in fact "recollection." Socrates, whether earnestly or ironically, says that what we recollect is what we know by virtue of the soul's journey before our births. This can be and has been taken as a metaphor for intuitive or tacit knowledge, whatever its source. Noël Carroll claims that some fictional works have a "maieutic" function of midwifing such knowledge into our consciousnesses, making us aware of those truths that we know "deep down" but are motivated to ignore or repress, or perhaps have simply never had occasion before to "recall." Carroll illustrates his argument with an analysis of the film *Sunset Boulevard*, showing how it effectively conveys the reality of human aging and mortality and that the denial of these facts is self-destructive. It is the form of the film, Carroll argues—its emotionally engaging imagery and narrative—that makes this "argument," rather than anything stated.[6]

That literature educates us by evoking our own tacit knowledge—provoking us to recognize previously unapprehended aspects and laws of human experience and human history—will be my position, and I will draw extensively on Michael Polanyi's work on tacit knowledge

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[6] Carroll, Noël, "Philosophical Insight, Emotion, and Popular Fiction," in Carroll and Gibson, *Narrative, Emotion, and Insight*.

and discovery to develop a theory of we may be so educated by literature—as well as why what we learn through it should be called *knowledge*, on which more later. I want to extend Carroll's claim to any great work of literary or cinematic narrative or poetry, and to argue that a work need not be rhetorical in the way he characterizes *Sunset Boulevard* in order for it to evoke such knowledge: the author or director may not be conveying a specific, conscious "message"—as they used to say in Hollywood, "If you have a message, call Western Union"[7]—but putting forth compelling images and a compelling narrative, the meaning of which the creator of the work himself may not fully grasp—inviting the reader or audience to try to determine the reality such images and narrative suggest.

This, I believe, marks a significant departure from at least two general, often unstated, assumptions dominant in analytic theories of literary cognitivism. First of all, such theories seem to assume that if there is truth to be learned from a work of literature it is a truth that the author knows and intends to communicate. Continuous with this is another general unstated assumption that once we have read and reflected on a given work of literature, we have learned what it has to teach us—that is, literary cognitivists start with some idea of what the work has conveyed (whether or not they think this can be fully expressed explicitly) and proceed directly to questions about that alleged knowledge: whether in fact it is the work that has taught us this, whether it really constitutes knowledge, if so what kind, and whether this "lesson" is essential to the work's "aesthetic" value, that is, its value as literature.

I agree with Carroll that the work does "remind" us of conditions that we often or ordinarily fail to recognize. But I want to say that, at least with certain twentieth century works like the ones I will be reading, these conditions go yet beyond those truths that everyone knows

[7] Variously attributed to/used by Moss Hart, Samuel Goldwyn, Humphrey Bogart, and others. See O'Toole, "If You Have a Message, Call Western Union (Variant Samuel Goldwyn 1943)."

"deep down" to conditions that no one, even the author, adequately grasps, because they are the horizon of sense and judgment.

To say that literature orients us toward a reality that always transcends our knowledge of it is to move in the direction of the other tradition of reflection on the cognitive value of literature: the (modern philosophical) hermeneutic tradition, that is, the tradition of reflection on interpretation.

As Peter McCormick writes, philosophers in the hermeneutic tradition, as opposed to those in the analytic tradition, do not ask *whether* literature reveals some truth or reality but rather begin from the assumption (or experience) that it does, and ask about the nature of the truth revealed.[8]

In its etymological and conceptual roots, hermeneutics is associated with the delivery of word from the gods: the priest of the oracle at Delphi was the *hermeios*, the messenger god is Hermes. As Richard Palmer summarizes, in all three fundamental senses of *hermeneuein*—"to say or express," "to explain," and "to translate"—"something foreign, strange, separated in time, space, or experience is made familiar, present, comprehensible; something requiring representation, explanation, or translation is somehow 'brought to understanding'—is 'interpreted.'"[9] Thus hermeneutics is linked historically and conceptually to the idea of a hidden or unknown reality, and insofar as that reality is divine, it is the art of discerning what is essential and determinative for human beings. It will be one aim of the dissertation to make persuasive a modern, secular version of this rather exalted conception of the aim of interpretation (or more broadly, reading) with respect to literary texts.

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[8] McCormick, *Fictions, Philosophies, and the Problems of Poetics*, 86 ff.
[9] Palmer, *Hermeneutics*, 13–14.

As many of the general uses of the term would imply, the object of the interpretation of literary texts has often been understood as the thought, mental processes, or intention of the author. The object of Biblical hermeneutics is to understand God's message for humankind as manifested in the sacred text. When, in the nineteenth century, Schleiermacher and others extended the theory of Biblical interpretation to other works, they conceived texts generally as communications from the author—the putting of a thought into words. For Schleiermacher and many who followed him, hermeneutics is "the art of understanding another person's utterance correctly,"[10] and an utterance is the verbalization of a thought; the essential aim of interpretation, therefore, is to grasp the thought that gave rise to or is manifested by the utterance. Most of the major hermeneutic theorists have a sophisticated notion of what this entails—it is not a matter of decoding a message, so that the various ambiguities of the text can be translated into literal prose without remainder, nor is it a matter of achieving communion or empathetic identification with the author or utterer, experiencing or thinking or feeling what they were experiencing or thinking or feeling at the moment of the utterance. Nor, finally, is it a matter of biographical research or remote psychoanalysis aiming at reducing the work to the symptom or expression of life events. Rather, the interpreter is, as Schleiermacher declared, supposed to "understand the author better than he understood himself," and this means grasping the author's intention or object in a way the author himself did not.

But it is an ongoing matter of debate what exactly the nature of the underlying "thought" is, or what it would mean to understand it. There is more than one anecdote about a poet or composer who, when asked what his work meant, simply repeated the poem or piece of music, and Paul Ricoeur asserts that "[t]he mental meaning [of an utterance] can be found nowhere else

[10] Schleiermacher, *Schleiermacher*, 5.

than in discourse itself"[11]—that is, no sense can be given to the idea of the thought of the text as independent of the words into which it is put. In fact it is not that we "put a thought into words" as one would put marbles into a vessel; rather, the thought *becomes* a thought, as opposed to a vague intuition or perception, only when we find the words that express it. In the case of good literature, we could say that the author said exactly what he meant—that is, the words he used are exactly the ones that would do, and the only ones that would do, and any summary, paraphrase or explanation would convey less than the original. And yet, some further effort of articulation or translation, of interpretation, still seems required to understand the work.

What is it, then, that the interpreter is trying to grasp?

Ricoeur argues that understanding a text does not mean getting back to the original intention of the author, since a written text gains independence from its original situation. In contemporaneous communication, a speaker's words refer to the world he currently inhabits with his listeners and therefore their meaning is to be understood as referring to that common world. In written discourse, however, the text becomes distanced from its author. Moreover, while the unit of meaning in contemporaneous communication is the sentence, which makes a proposition about a subject (however the meaning of that sentence depends upon its context—both the situation and the utterances surrounding it), while in the case of a literary work, the unit of meaning is the work as a whole. We can still interpret the utterances of characters in literary works as we might interpret the utterance of a face-to-face interlocutor, and we must. When reading *Moby-Dick,* for instance, we must ask what Ahab means in his famous speech to the crew by claiming that "All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks." But in this case, there is a further level to the significance of Ahab's words. To understand them we must relate them not only to his beliefs and intentions—and the world which he is trying to describe—but to

[11] Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 13.

the whole of the novel. And our aim is finally not to understand those words in particular but to understand that whole, to understand the significance of Ahab's character and vision in relation to the novel's other images and characters, and to grasp what unifies them all. And that unity transcends the original thought of the author, insofar as by that one means what was in Herman Melville's brain in 1850-1851. The elements of the novel have manifold and indeterminate resonances with each other and with America and the world as they would develop after Melville's lifetime, as later criticism evidences. None of this is to deny that authorial intention is relevant to comprehending the work and its referent. It matters, for instance, to know that Melville was entranced by the "great power of blackness" he found in Hawthorne and that he found in the "dark characters" of Shakespeare the "insinuat[ion of] the things, which we feel to be so terrifically true"[12] these literary roots help us to understand more deeply the dark vision we find in *Moby-Dick*. It might help, too, to know Melville's politics and social views, to aid interpretation of Ahab's dictatorship on the Pequod or the role of the various non-whites on board. But as has been argued of the Bible, each age can and must reinterpret the work in light of that age's living concerns, some of which were shared by the author, some of which are new; when this is no longer possible, the text becomes a historical document rather than something we would read as literature.

The intra-referential characteristic of literary texts led structuralist literary theorists to follow structuralist linguistics in arguing that the meaning of an element of the text is *entirely* defined by its relation to the other elements within the text, and to other texts, rather than in relation to something external to the text. But Ricoeur argues that the text still has reference to our world—hence our interest in it. The whole of the text itself refers to something outside itself.

[12] "Hawthorne and His Mosses," in Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 540–42.

This referent is not the existing world shared by speaker and listener, as is the case in contemporaneous dialogue, but what Ricoeur calls a "possible world":

> The text speaks of a possible world and of a possible way of orientating oneself within it….It goes beyond the mere function of pointing out and showing what already exists and, in this sense, transcends the function of the ostensive reference linked to a spoken language. Here showing is at the same time creating a new mode of being.[13]

The text's power to engender this "new mode of being" arises from its character as a text, its distance from ostensive reference in a speech situation, which means not only independence from the person of the author but also from the immediate interests of the reader.

> Only the interpretation that complies with the injunction of the text, that follows the 'arrow' of the sense and that tries to think accordingly, initiates a new self-understanding. In this self-understanding, I would oppose the self, which proceeds from the understanding of the text, to the ego, which claims to preceded it. It is the text, with its universal power of world disclosure, which gives a self to the ego.[14]

This is first of all a matter of the fact that in reading we are taken out of our own 'interested' situation and compelled to imaginatively inhabit another situation or 'world,' which demands that we perceive things from a different center than that of our own ego.

This would suggest that *any* text would effect a transformation, and it seems to me that, on the contrary, plenty of novels (and movies) merely allow us to indulge in fantasy, experience a narcissistic inflation of the ego, or temporarily escape our everyday banalities to return in a few hours no more changed than after a trip to an amusement park. To return to the idea of "normative conditions" articulated earlier, I will argue that great literature we want to designate as such forces a decentering not only through this basic characteristic of texts and reading, but furthermore, and more significantly, by making us refer to a different ground in order to understand it. Clearly Ricoeur is thinking of texts that do this—that refer us to some ultimate ground of meaning, that "disclose" something to us that changes us. But what distinguishes such

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[13] Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 87–88.
[14] Ricoeur, 94–95.

texts is, to my knowledge, never made fully explicit in Ricoeur, and the problem with the hermeneutic approach in general is that the characterization of the reality to be known remains somewhat mystical. As S.H. Clark asks of Ricoeur's "positive" alternative to the "hermeneutics of suspicion":

> Is the positive side of the dialectic essentially sacramental, a vindication of hierophany, a warning against "forgetting the signs of the Sacred, losing hold of man himself, as belonging to the Sacred"; or does Ricoeur succeed in utilizing all the resources of postmodernist skepticism in order to prompt a new beginning, a "second naïveté," on the far side of the "hermeneutics of suspicion"?[15]

Clark believes that Ricoeur's argument rests on a ground that may not compel the conviction of those who don't already have some kind of faith in the "Sacred":

> The issue remains…of whether Ricoeur's search for meaning-generating capacity in language is ultimately reliant on a model of communion, kerygma, and whether his conclusions are therefore vitiated for those of us who do not share his faith.[16]

Thus the question of the truth of literature leads to a second fundamental subject of inquiry and debate in the humanities—that of whether and how we can conceive of the norms governing human life as not just subjective or ideological but having some objective reality.[17]

The Reality of the Ideal

The question of the objectivity of some normative ground of judgment became particularly acute after the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment critiques of previous philosophical and religious ways of conceiving the normative structure of our lives—critiques which are reflected popularly in a widespread, more or less conscious, uncertainty about the

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[15] Clark, *Paul Ricoeur*, 8.
[16] Clark, 8.
[17] As has been noted—cf. James Harold, Introduction to Carroll and Gibson, *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Literature*.

character or even existence of an objective basis for sensemaking and judgment. As Charles Taylor puts it, for premodern people

> some framework stands unquestioned which helps define the demands by which they judge their lives and measure, as it were, their fullness or emptiness….
>
> It is now a commonplace about the modern world that it has made these frameworks problematic…[There is a] sense that no framework is shared by everyone, can be taken for granted as *the* framework tout court…[18]

The confidence in the objectivity of our normative frameworks was profoundly shaken beginning in the nineteenth century by theorists who showed, in various ways, the irrational sources of our reasons. Darwin, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud and their intellectual descendants argued that many of our beliefs about what was right and good in fact derived from amoral sources—our evolutionary past (what is good is what allows for successful adaptation and victory in the struggle for survival), social functionality (what is good is what enables the mode of production and maintains the social order), psychological need (what is good is what I have internalized from those whose approval I need, or what allows me to feel superior). (This intellectual trajectory depended, of course, on the complex and interconnected economic, social, cultural phenomena that collectively constitute "modernity" and which I will not attempt to summarize here.)

There have been numerous attempts in the past century to reground ethics, attempts which are sometimes classified under the heading of "moral realism," that is, positions that hold that normative propositions can be true or false and that we can, at least in theory, make rational judgments about what is good and bad, right and wrong—existentialist (Sartre), Kantian (Christine Korsgaard), Aristotelian or virtue ethics (G.E.M. Anscombe, Alasdair MacIntyre), utilitarian (Peter Singer), to name some major strands and figures—but little consensus, and many of these approaches are limited to the consideration of a narrow sphere of moral duties

[18] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 16.

rather than with the thick background by which we (ought to) judge, make decisions, and orient our lives generally.

It is beyond my scope to thoroughly evaluate the variants of moral realism or to give a rigorous defense of a particular variant, but in my first chapter I will articulate one version that I believe appeals to fundamental features of our experience. These features are manifest in two variants of moral realism that do provide a holistic ethical and ontological vision: the ancient schools of Plato and Aristotle and their modern-day followers, in particular the neo-Platonist Iris Murdoch and the neo-Aristotelian Martha Nussbaum. As I will discuss further in Chapter One, both Nussbaum and Murdoch appeal to a transcendent standard of moral judgment which cannot be formalized: the former in the idea of a reflective equilibrium between our experience and our ideals; the latter in a transcendent good in light of which we see objectively rather than according to our own selfish desires and fears. Significantly, for both of these thinkers we come to know these standards through reading literature.

Nussbaum and Murdoch do not and arguably cannot provide a "proof" of their ethical views or their conceptions of literary truth—which ultimately converge—but argue for their positions through a combination of analysis of common morality, phenomenology of human experience, and (importantly) reflection on literature. It may be that this is in fact the kind of argument that is called for—but to show this would require further philosophical grounding that neither offers.

Thus we are brought to the same aporia as with hermeneutic philosophy, the dilemma that our knowledge seems to rest on an "ungrounded ground," and, if it is to remain *knowledge*, how to conceive of this ground in a way that it can be an object of rational inquiry and apprehension and not just mystical experience and faith.

Towards a "Morally Realistic Literary Cognitivism"

The theoretical portion of the dissertation (Chapter One) proposes that the solutions to these two problems--the truth of literature and the basis of human judgment—intersect. I make use of the work of Michael Polanyi, who offers a way of understanding how norms and values may be just as "objective" as what we know of the physical world through science. Polanyi shows that even scientific knowledge cannot be fully formalized and depends upon interpretation of the data and on the tacit knowledge of the scientist, his or her intimation of a whole that makes sense of the data and directs inquiry. Polanyi argues that therefore the lack of an empirical basis or formal rules for normative judgments does not mean that they are merely "subjective." In the first chapter, I extend Polanyi's work to a theory of literature, proposing that literature evokes our tacit knowledge of a basis for sense and judgment that transcends the conventional ways of making sense, which are often ideologically distorted and inadequate in their typification.

Polanyi offers the criterion of *increasing coherence* as the standard that guides discovery—that indicates whether a new hypothesis is more adequate to reality—and I argue that through their narrative or temporal structures as well as their poetic imagery, great works of literature suggest ways of making sense that allow for a more comprehensive and objective grasp of fundamental human realities—love, death, duty—and norms—goodness, justice, and truth. I then describe a practice of literary criticism aimed at articulating what we come to *know* in reading and reflecting on the work—a practice which begins with attending to those aspects of the work (in content and in form) which are surprising, unusual, disturbing, or otherwise depart from our expectations or conventional ways of making sense but which nonetheless seem *right*—and trying to make explicit our initially tacit sense of reasons for their rightness. The ultimate object of this practice of reading is not the work but the conditions of our understanding and

judging of the work—those human and historical realities, including the normative standards inherent in the human world, to which we are referred us in our efforts to understand it. This, I will try to show, is the cognitive value of literature that is intrinsically and distinctively literary.

From Tragedy to Apocalypse

The first chapter articulates this epistemological theory of literature and practice of reading. In the remainder of the dissertation, I do, or attempt to do, this kind of reading.

For Polanyi, we come to know reality by following out problems—a phenomenon for which our given framework does not adequately account. The problem that inaugurates my readings comes from Maclean. The form Maclean finds for the story of the Smokejumpers is significantly different from the form of classical tragedy: *Young Men and Fire* is narrative rather than dramatic; it tells the story of an "outfit" rather than an individual; the destructive force is natural rather than divine or human; and it situates the story of the Smokejumpers in a frame story about Maclean's own investigations. It therefore provokes us to ask what Maclean means by "tragedy," whether Maclean has achieved his goal of transforming catastrophe into tragedy, and if so why a "modern tragedy" would have this form, which opens upon more general questions of what kind of tragedy is possible in modernity.[19]

In Chapter Two, "Norman Maclean and the Search for Modern Tragic Form," I argue that Maclean's task as he conceives it and as it is manifested in his work is fundamentally one of *making sense*—that is, to find tragic form for the events of Mann Gulch is to find their deeper significance, a significance which is not fabricated but which is implied by the shape of the

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[19] For a sense of the recent debate on this issue see the first chapter of Terry Eagleton's 2003 *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic*, entitled "A Theory in Ruins," in which Eagleton reviews dozens of accounts of the tragic and enumerates their contradictions and inadequacies. In her introduction to the 2008 *Rethinking Tragedy*, Rita Felski marks out another broad set of current contentious issues on the subject, including the continuing question of whether a "modern tragedy" is possible.

events themselves and needs to be drawn out by the "storyteller." Maclean intuits that this significance is "tragic," which for him means that it pertains to the absolute defeats that human beings face, defeats that are not simply arbitrary or random but which reveal the underlying workings of "the universe" and even something worthy of awe—the magnitude of both the destructive forces and the heroism of the human beings that confront those forces.

My claim is that the form of *Fire is* tragic, if not "a tragedy," and that Maclean's innovations, considered in light of theories of tragedy, suggest something not only about modern literature but about the modern historical situation that would demand a new tragic form (and perhaps something particularly, if not exclusively, American, especially if America is seen to represent one extremity of modern autonomy, individualism, freedom, self-determination, utilitarianism, rationalization, and "progress")—the absence of the kind of order that underpinned classical tragedy, and the need to contend with a radical uncertainty about the prospects for and conditions of making sense of human experience, and indeed about the very viability of a (truly) human life. This is suggested by Maclean's framing of the story as the *search* for a story, as well as by his explicit reflections on whether the story he wants to find is there to be found or whether, on the contrary, the reality is the grim fact of "bod[ies that] ran out of brains for lack of oxygen and rolled downhill into black death,"[20] with no further sense or meaningfulness.

Fire suggests that one can only make sense of the men's deaths against the background of an inhuman sublime, which in the book is manifested in powerful poetic descriptions of the geological setting of the events, vast both spatially and temporally, and in the awful but beautiful force of the fire itself. *Making sense* here means not only explaining what led to the catastrophe—filling in "the missing pieces"—but evoking and accounting for the compelling

[20] Maclean, *Young Men and Fire*, 201.

power of the events of Mann Gulch despite their devastating sadness. *Fire* shows the story of Mann Gulch not only to be the terrible tragedy (in the colloquial sense) of the deaths of thirteen young men but an encounter with the immense and inhuman forces of the universe, and it shows such encounters to be somehow essential to the fullness of our humanity because they are encounters with *reality*, with that which resists our wishes and will.

Fire remains classically tragic to the extent that it finds some positive resolution in the evocation and affirmation of an underlying order to what happened at Mann Gulch, and—by implication—to human existence generally; Maclean seeks and finds catharsis, which for him means that we have learned something about nature and can live in profounder accord with it as a consequence of that understanding—at least in profounder consciousness, if not in avoidance of all future disasters. We can at least affirm some reason, if not justice, in what has happened, and humanity endures to affirm the heroism of the Smokejumpers.

The penultimate pages of *Fire*, however, suggest the limits of the tragic. They consist of a phantasmagoric description of the final conflagration, which in its poetic wrenching of language and its invocation of the atom bomb and the end of the world suggests the uncertainty of this sense, and perhaps of any sense, in our current historical situation, in which humanity has become capable of—and perhaps inexorably compelled toward—self-destruction, and therefore all previous ways of conceiving the trajectory of human history put into question.

This apocalyptic thread is, for better or worse, subdued and perhaps even finally denied in Maclean's work. But I find the apocalyptic thread followed to its logical conclusion in several otherwise diverse twentieth-century American works. The literary critical portion of the dissertation considers this emerging genre or mode of the "modern apocalyptic" and what it implies about the conditions of intelligibility of our contemporary situation.

Apocalypse, Past and Present

The best known work declaring itself an apocalypse—"unveiling," "uncovering"—is the New Testament Book of Revelation, ἀποκάλυψις (*apokalypsis*). The Revelation of John epitomizes the original apocalyptic genre, which relates a vision vouchsafed to the author by a divine figure, a vision of "eschatological salvation."[21] It is also the source of the modern usage of "apocalypse" to mean cataclysm, as the vision it recounts is that of the end of the world. Although the direct referent of the word is the vision *per se*, the end itself—the event envisioned—is a revelation as well, both in Revelation and in apocalyptic works generally—a revelation of the fragility and limitations of the old order and of the forces or powers that would sweep it away, a revelation of God's judgment against that order. There is both a destructive and a creative aspect to the Jewish and Christian apocalyptic vision—it is "God and heaven's in-breaking on earth"[22] which destroys the former order of things. Contemporary secular visions of the end share this quality of revelation; as Eva Horn puts it, "What is revealed by the apocalypse is the true value and the true power of everything and everyone. The end of the world is the *unmasking of all things*, the manifestation of their true essence."[23]

Apocalyptic visions are historically associated with crisis, a crisis which is beyond the power of the individual or the collective to rectify.[24] The apocalyptic vision emerges when it does not seem or no longer seems that reform is possible, that only some utter disruption of the current state of things could create the conditions for the restoration or establishment of right

[21] Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 5.
[22] Duff, "Christian Apocalyptic."
[23] Horn, "The Last Man," 55.
[24] As L. Michael White writes, the Judeo-Christian genre of apocalypse emerges from prophecy, which was originally not a prediction of the future but an indictment of present sin and a summons to God's people to do God's will. But after the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, oracles began "calling for people to hold fast, saying that there would be a restoration of the nation and that the enemies would eventually be punished by God. A future-looking sense of history was born..." White, "Apocalyptic Literature in Judaism and Early Christianity."

order. The imagining then of the end of the current world and the ushering in of a new one could be simply a matter of consoling fantasy, but it is also a matter of apprehending the current state of the world as unsustainable, incoherent, and evil.

The apocalyptic vision therefore also implies a wholly different ground of judgment and sense than that of the present world, a different standard of “good” and “bad” than that of the reigning powers on earth. The recognition and inhabiting of this different ground may be the most important aspect of the apocalyptic vision. As Frank Kermode notes, from early on, with the first disappointment of the prediction of the coming of God’s kingdom, believers had to adjust their understanding of the meaning of the revelations and expectation of the End. In his well-known formulation, Kermode writes that even Christians as early as John and Paul begin to conceive the End as “immanent” rather than “imminent.”[25]

In Kermode’s account, this immanentization of the apocalypse seems to have two aspects. First, the categories of the apocalyptic vision become something like archetypes—recurrent types embodied in different historical figures and events, categories according to which we make sense of history—as opposed to singular instances which are to occur only once at some point of the future. Kermode cites Josef Pieper’s comment that “many have been called Antichrist because many have indeed been Antichrist, or types of him, so that Nazism is a ‘milder preliminary form of the state of Antichrist,’ and so is any other tyranny.”[26] This is to see these regimes not just as bad human institutions responsible for earthly ills, but as instantiations of the battle between God and Satan, ultimate good and ultimate evil.

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[25] “No longer imminent, the End is immanent. So that it is not merely the remnant of time that has eschatological import; the whole of history, and the progress of the individual life, have it also, as a benefaction from the End, now immanent. History and eschatology...are the same thing.” Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, 25.
[26] Kermode, 26.

The other and corresponding implication of seeing the End as "immanent" is that the individual's life becomes a synecdoche for the eschatological arc of human history. Kermode quotes Rudolf Bultmann:

> *...the meaning of history lies always in the present,* and when the present is conceived as the eschatological present by Christian faith the meaning in history is realized....Always in your present lies the meaning in history, and you cannot see it as a spectator, but only in your responsible decisions. In every moment slumbers the possibility of being an eschatological moment. You must awaken it.[27]

In Bultmann's demythologized, existentialist view, one conceives every moment in history in light of salvation and the ultimate victory of God over evil, but this is not understood as some future event for which one passively waits; each individual is called upon to be instrument of the realization of this end which is a present moment of decision; and, just as any and many particular earthly evils may be understood as Antichrist, the possibility of victory over those evils, in the world and in oneself, is ever-present.

The works I treat are more obviously apocalyptic in the modern sense of alluding to catastrophic endings, but the original sense of revelation—and the religious origins of the apocalyptic—is relevant too to understanding what "modern apocalyptic literature," in the sense I mean it, would be.[28] There is a whole popular genre of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction that imagines some literal, near-future end of the world as we know it, or the aftermath of such a

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[27] Bultmann, *History and Eschatology*, 155; Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, 25.

[28] Some theorists distinguish between apocalyptic and "anti-apocalyptic" views, where the former entails a creative aspect (e.g. the establishment of the Kingdom of God) while the latter involves only destruction; others between apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic perspectives, where in the former the end is still to come while in the latter it is already happening or has happened. In this terminology, the works I treat could be said to manifest an anti-apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic rather than apocalyptic viewpoint, but in keeping with the contemporary colloquial use of "apocalyptic" to refer simply to catastrophic endings, I will use this term with the appropriate qualifications.

cataclysm; none of the works considered here fall into this category of "speculative fiction."[29] Yet in each there is a strong "sense of an ending"; they allude to the passing away of worlds and of humanity and make use of apocalyptic imagery—the bomb (Maclean), the "darkening of [man's] day" (McCarthy), the Flood (Lowell), the aurora borealis (Stevens). I characterize these works as apocalyptic because they suggest that making sense of human experience and human history depends upon recognizing that the modern situation is radically untenable, governed by a logic and by forces directed toward destruction. To return to the "imminent" and the "immanent," there is a sense both of an unveiling that will come in time, that this world will pass away, but also of another reality that is present even now—not literally another world, a supernatural sphere that is elsewhere in space, but a true order of meaning that is radically other than the one we typically inhabit. In each work treated here this other order is conveyed in particular by ambiguous and evocative—and disturbing—poetic imagery, which seems to refer to some reality but cannot be made sense of with reference to our ordinary experience. And, as in the Judeo-Christian apocalyptic visions, these two dimensions are integrally related.

Our ordinary sense-making depends tacitly on the assumption of a future that is continuous with the present. These works reflect the challenges to that sense posed by the anticipation of a radical break. Such a break implies that the conditions of human life are other than what we recognized, that we have failed to recognize the reality which will inevitably "break through" into the world as it (apparently) is. We engage in "business as usual" under the assumption that we can continue it indefinitely; if we anticipated catastrophe, we would be called upon to enter a state of emergency or to dramatically alter our ways in order to avert that catastrophe. Even if no action were possible, for whatever reason, going on doing what we are

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[29] Which comprises, for instance, W. Warren Wagar's survey of modern apocalyptic literature, cf. Wagar, *Terminal Visions*.

doing would still have a very different sense—or perhaps would cease to make sense entirely—knowing that it could not be sustained (all the more so if "business as usual" itself was actively bringing about the catastrophe).

It is a sense of crisis in light of unsustainable conditions that connects the works treated here. The fact that none predicts or imagines a concrete world-ending event is in fact significant, because they therefore imply that our apocalyptic situation is not "just" a matter of some possible or probably future catastrophe, but of a pervasive current crisis of our humanity.

The most obvious difference between the Judeo-Christian apocalyptic visions and the modern visions is that in the former it is *God*—an intelligent and benevolent power—that "breaks in and breaks up the established order"[30] and establishes a new order. The end is not just an end but a beginning; there *is* a new order on the other side of cataclysm, and it is divine, ultimately good. Some modern, secular apocalyptic visions have had a positive moment—Marx's communist revolution; images of humanity living in harmony with nature after the breakdown of an industrial civilization radically at odds with ecological conditions. But the works that I treat raise the specter of an end that is really and only an end. They suggest in different ways that even if the species is not extinguished, whatever survives will be diminished and crippled, no longer capable of a fully human form of life or consciousness, of a fully flourishing human life. (If there is a God, he is the bungler of the Gnostics, and I will explore the emergence of a modern Gnostic vision in my discussion of McCarthy.)

From Maclean's foray into the apocalyptic, I proceed in Chapter Three to Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, which wholly immerses us in the dark vision that only breaks fitfully through Maclean's generally humane and healthy-minded narrative voice.

[30] Attributed to Paul Lehmann, in Nancy J. Duff, "Christian Apocalyptic," in *Theology Today*, April 2018.

McCarthy's vision is one in which the ultimate destructive forces of the universe are revealed as human forces—human violence, human evil—and it confronts the trajectory toward destruction as intrinsic to humanity, if not inevitable. *Blood Meridian* is infamous for its depiction of a world populated by characters barely human and for its uncompromising narrative in which violence apparently triumphs totally over justice, real or poetic. The dominating character, Judge Holden, articulates a philosophy of war and violence which proceeds from the apprehension that only power is real, that all moral constraints on human beings are illusory. McCarthy's novel thus raises the problem of how to conceive of the normative constraints and imperatives that bear upon us when it becomes apparent that goodness, at least as traditionally and historically conceived, is impotent against the overwhelming forces which are in fact driving human history, and driving it toward destruction—in particular the human proclivity for violence and domination, unleashed as it has been within Western civilization with its Faustian breaking loose from traditional constraints.

It is not just the story of *Blood Meridian* that seems apocalyptic but its narrational style. McCarthy employs arcane, elevated diction that is at times Biblical, invoking a world beyond in light of which this one is mere shadow—but the world invoked, through his strange and estranging descriptions and metaphors, is alien, dark, and hostile, or else empty void. The world as we find it in the novel seems to confirm the judge's orientation within it, with any moral constraints or deeper meaning to human activity seeming mere rumor or impotent dream, and nothing to prevent history from barreling along according to its belligerent and destructive logic.

I suggested above that literature educates us by challenging our ordinary manner of making sense, referring us to our own deeper tacit knowledge in our efforts to make sense of and judge what we read. In narrative, the problem of making sense largely concerns the action, the

unfolding of the plot—why should this character do that, why should this follow that, and what does it imply about human beings and the human condition (or a particular historical condition)? In poetry—at least in modern lyric poetry—making sense is more a matter of discerning what is evoked by figures that do not make literal sense, and this involves attending to a deeper ground of association—a ground which could be called mythical. Maclean and McCarthy's use of poetic description already present this kind of challenge in addition to the demands of comprehending their plots, but in Chapter Four, I turn from narrative to lyric poetry, and more specifically elegy, to reflect more exclusively and directly on this aspect.

Both elegy and tragedy can be thought of as modes of coming to terms with those things that disappoint and deny human desire and needs—realities that resist conformity to our wishes. If tragedy allows for making sense of loss or catastrophe by showing it to be in conformity to some law, elegy affirms and articulates the significance of the lost object, and shows how its value—its spirit—still persists in the abiding world, if only in the elegiac poem itself.

But the elegies I discuss, Robert Lowell's "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket" and Wallace Stevens' "The Auroras of Autumn," mourn not only or primarily the loss of an individual within the world but the loss of a world[31] entire. And the myth that makes sense of the loss or ending of a world is by definition an apocalyptic one.

There are two aspects to this loss of world. Like *Blood Meridian*, "Quaker Graveyard" (written in 1946) depicts human history as driven by violence and greed, a motor destined to impel human beings toward a cataclysmic end. The loss of world here is literal, and the only consolation is the kind of awful exhilaration of seeing the coming destruction from a distance—from a cosmic viewpoint—and grasping its terrible logic, seeing humanity's own deepest

[31] I mean "world" in a nontechnical and flexible sense. More narrowly it could be the way of life of a particular culture or civilization; more broadly, the extinguishment of life on planet Earth.

tendencies leading it (us) toward destruction. Lowell's poem allows us to inhabit such a perspective both through what it depicts and through its prophetic, oracular tone, which carries the reader along with thundering and inexorable force such that the final lines, which intimate a world after human beings—"The Lord survives the rainbow of His will"—feel like a dramatically fitting, if terrible, conclusion to the human career.

In "The Auroras of Autumn," however, even this prospect of consummation through consciousness is called into question. Like much of Stevens' poetry, "Auroras" is concerned with the myths according to which we make sense of our experience, and it expresses a fear that these structures of sense are themselves illusory, evanescent, and that the reality of our world is not a human reality but something inhuman—the distant and indifferent flaring of the northern lights.

Returning to the idea that literature educates us by referring us, in our attempts to understand it, to the deep conditions of our human and historical situation—what is it that we come to know through reading these works and reflecting on the new apocalyptic genre they seem to create?

As my summary indicates, the particulars of the modern apocalyptic sensibility vary from work to work. But in general, I will argue, the veil they rend is that of what one might call the liberal individualistic view of the world and of history—liberal in the popular rather than the technical political sense of the word: that human life is given satisfactory meaning and purpose through the individual's "pursuit of happiness," primarily through love, family, and (for the fortunate) meaningful work (though any job could potentially be made meaningful under this conception as a source of income to support one's family and to fund gratifying consumption). Coinciding with this view is a sense that the way of life it underwrites is temporally sustainable.

Because it ought to be appealing to everyone to fuel capitalistic growth and prosperity, there is no need for war, ideological or economic. We live at or after the end of history, in a sustainable cosmopolitan commercial society, with no dramatic upheavals to come, only the furthering of individual freedoms, tolerance, and material well-being.

The works I read suggest two fundamental challenges to this conception of the world that have emerged in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and manifest themselves to one degree or another in the literature of the modern (American) apocalyptic sublime.

First, there is what one might call the ontological challenge: the inhumanity and incomprehensibility of the world shown to us by modern science, the fact that the natural world is out of all proportion with and utterly indifferent to human concerns. The roots of this vision can be traced back to Lucretius, and it emerges more widely in the nineteenth century after the Enlightenment and Darwin, as in *Moby-Dick*; it is a vision of the "naturalistic sublime." With the emergence of quantum physics in the twentieth century, "nature" becomes incapable even of being conceptualized; physical reality can be represented only by complex mathematical and statistical formulae. Rather than the reality of God's plan underlying (and to some degree belying) the reality of the perceptible and social world, it is the random and chaotic reality of atoms and void—or something even stranger.

The fact of a physical universe governed by purely physical laws, indifferent and even incomprehensible to human beings, does not automatically imply meaninglessness in human life. Various philosophers have argued, I believe persuasively, that the domain of human experience, action and judgments is *sui generis* and not reducible to the facts of biology or physics. But others continue to take the Hobbesian view that human concepts such as "love," "goodness" or "justice" have no objective correlate because, put crudely, what is real are physical objects and

forces—thus human experiences can be reduced to physical realities (love is "really" the reaction of dopamine molecules, agents of the laws of evolution) and ideal concepts cannot be correlated to or derived from any physical reality. And regardless of whether the fear is rigorously defensible, there is remains something disturbing about the idea that all our experience rests upon a physical reality that is dumb, random, and perhaps ultimately beyond our reckoning.

This apprehension of the inhuman and unreasoning forces governing the physical universe—and even organic life—is one source of the crisis of nihilism in the late nineteenth century. This crisis seems to have largely abated after a few generations—after secularism became simply a way of life—but the perception of the meaninglessness of "nature," and the potential threat it poses to sense, continues to simmer beneath the surface, ready to reemerge when things go wrong and we are thrown back upon deeper sources of meaning. When present and future comfort, security and flourishing are threatened, we must find a different way to make sense of our lives. This is true of the individual's death; many who are not religious find the sense of their lives in what they give to others and are reconciled to their deaths by the idea of bequeathing something to the future, or at least by the idea that humanity will survive them. When humanity itself becomes threatened, however, this source of sense becomes tenuous.

This leads to the other and in this way related challenge to the common sense of modern liberal individualism: the historical challenge. In 1945 it became realistically conceivable—and progressively more so thereafter—that human beings could annihilate themselves as a species. While the threat of destruction of a people or culture by another (as for the ancient Jews) presents a challenge to sense, as does the threat to humanity from a major natural disaster (such as an asteroid or gigantic volcanic eruption), the idea that human beings might destroy themselves apart from their will or intention presents a challenge to comprehending human

history that is distinctive to the last seventy years, and I believe that this threat is what is reflected in the works that I read.

This is the apocalyptic sublime—the vision of human history as driven by structural forces incommensurate with human ends, and driven not toward a human end (the realization of reason and freedom) but toward inhumanity and destruction. (The victory over those destructive forces in World War II seen as only temporary, a stay against the inevitable.)

The challenge to sense of living in an unsustainable world is not just that of the threat of no future. It is also a challenge to the way we make sense of the present. Actions make sense in relation to some end, and we cannot make sense of our collective actions if they are driving us toward an end that is radically other than what we would will—even if we might by luck escape catastrophe.

The works discussed in what follows suggest that making sense of our present situation involves confronting both the inhuman immensity of the natural universe and the enormity of humanity's own inhumanity. In modernity the traditional constraints are swept away, and lacking those, humanity needs to conceive of a new objectivity—but this is severely challenged both by the inhuman immensity underlying and relativizing all human knowledge, purposes and institutions, and by that within ourselves which would drive us toward domination and violence.

Again, it is essential that this is not just a prediction that may or may not come to pass but an image and judgment of the present situation—one which implies a certain orientation toward the present.

The dissertation both argues and attempts to demonstrate that in the effort to comprehend these four works and to judge their rightness and their limitations as "representations of reality,"

we are referred to a radically different ground of intelligibility—a perspective from the end of or outside of humanity which suggests the need for what might be called an ethics of consciousness: a recognition that all the old certainties of judgment are gone, and a commitment to the ongoing task of discerning a new ground of judgment adequate to the modern situation in its enormous tenuousness.

Chapter 1: Reconceiving Mimesis, Again: Toward a Polanyian Theory of Literature

> Aristotle…has said, that Poetry is the most philosophic of all writing: it is so: its object is truth, not individual and local, but general, and operative; not standing upon external testimony, but carried alive into the heart by passion; truth which is its own testimony, which gives competence and confidence to the tribunal to which it appeals, and receives them from the same tribunal. Poetry is the image of man and nature.
>
> William Wordsworth, *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*

Maclean's endeavor in *Young Men and Fire*, as stated and expressed in the form of the work, implies that there is something to be known about the events of Mann Gulch that cannot be reduced to factual propositions, some knowledge that can only be conveyed in the form of a story—and, moreover, not a straightforward narrative but a complexly structured and densely poetic literary work.

If this is true, it suggests something about the relationship between literature and knowledge, and therefore (since knowledge, by definition, is knowledge *of something*) between literature and some reality—a relationship that has, I think, not yet been fully or adequately theorized.

In the next chapter, I will consider the specific character of what Maclean seeks in his effort to find the tragic form proper to the Mann Gulch catastrophe. But Maclean's conception of his task accords with my own sense that literary works in general educate us to some reality, and the purpose of this chapter is to outline such a theory. The theory will then serve as a warrant for my readings of Maclean, McCarthy, Lowell and Stevens and the presumption that through them we come to know not only these authors' views but something of the reality of our apocalyptic situation.

I believe it is a common experience that we come to know something through reading. I want to argue that what we come to know are not merely empirical facts (say, what it was like to

live in nineteenth-century Russia, or the differences in the ways men and women think about things) but the conditions of judging and making sense of human experience more generally (including our own), conditions which are both material and ideal.[32] My intent here is to more fully conceptualize the objectivity—the reality—of these conditions and to give an account of how it is that we come to know them through the encounter with literature.

The philosophical consideration of art's relation to reality is an ancient one. It begins with Plato's theory of mimesis, and the idea that art imitates or represents reality has been, in its variants, a consistent foundation of the idea that art has something to teach us. I will embark, therefore, from a pointed consideration of major conceptions of mimesis, or literary representation more broadly, drawing on and critiquing them in order to make way for my own theoretical framework. My approach is pragmatic; I am not seeking a single unifying theory of mimesis. As I will show, different theories of mimesis and literary truth emphasize different aspects of art's relation to the world, and each is more suited to certain media, genres, and works than to others. I aim to articulate a theory of mimesis that is appropriate to modern literature and in fact suggested by it, and a theory which culminates in a practice of criticism or reading which is "philosophical" in the classical sense: aimed at knowledge of reality, knowledge which bears upon our understanding of how we ought to live.

This entails not only a reconceptualization of mimesis but a reconceptualization of *reality*, and I will build upon the work of Michael Polanyi for the latter. Indeed, part of what I intend to

[32] The basic conceptions of literature and reading foundational to this chapter, and to the dissertation as a whole, derive in large part from discussions with Charles Thomas Elder and from his unpublished manuscript, tentatively titled *The Normativity of Grammar: The Sense and Sources of the Imperative to Consciousness*. These include: that literature educates us to a reality that transcends our common social world—i.e., to a knowledge, both tacit and explicit, of the normative conditions of human life; that these conditions are not and cannot be directly represented; and that we arrive, at least potentially, at the knowledge of these conditions through the activity of reading and the effort by which we try to understand (or grasp the form of) what we read. The development of these ideas here, in relation to theories of mimesis and to Polanyi, and their application in my readings, are my own.

show is the usefulness of Polanyi's conceptions of knowledge (especially tacit knowledge), discovery, and reality for thinking about our education through literature.

Why Mimesis?

From the Greek *mimesis* derives our words "mimic" and "mime," and this indicates the basic idea behind mimetic theories of art: that art represents or imitates some object—action, event, character, scene, thing, concept, feeling etc.—that is recognizable to us, although realized in a medium other than that of the "original."[33]

Conceptions of artistic mimesis are, therefore, closely bound up with the ideas of reality. "Mimesis" has certainly been used to refer to the imitation or representation of idealized or fantastic worlds, but since my interest is in the kind of truth we seek, and sometimes find, through art, I will restrict my consideration to conceptions of mimesis in which the term connotes a relationship between the work of art and the truth of the world, which is the more common connotation[34]—though these theories are often bound up with anxieties and suspicions that what the work of art puts forth as "real" is in fact an idealization or fantasy.

Stephen Halliwell argues that aesthetic theories of mimesis fall into two broad categories: those which see art as imitating an external material world, and those which see art as imitating a hypothetical world which nonetheless follows certain rules we recognize as those of our world.[35]

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[33] As Stephen Halliwell puts it, what connects the widely varied uses of *mimesis* is "an idea of correspondence or equivalence—correspondence between mimetic works, activities, or performances and their putative real-world equivalents" (*The Aesthetics of Mimesis*, 15). Two qualifications: first, drama of course represents characters with real people, but it is of the essence of the art form that the two are not identical (and the actor playing Medea does not really slay those playing her children). Second, the "original," as I will discuss, may be hypothetical; it may never have existed in the world—as in, say, the Cyclops in the *Odyssey*—but if it did, it would be a creature of flesh and bone and not, as in Homer's poem, of words.

[34] As suggested by, for instance, the title of Erich Auerbach's famous work: *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*.

[35] First of all, mimesis as "committed to depicting and illuminating a world that is (partly) accessible and knowable outside art, and by whose norms art can therefore, within limits, be tested and judged," and second, "as the creator of an independent artistic heterocosm, a world of its own, though one that...may still purport to contain some kind of 'truth' about, or grasp of, reality as a whole." Or as Potolsky puts it "art reflects the world as it is," "copies a

I will argue for a version of the second—specifically, that we can conceive of the work of art as generally reflecting the conditions for *making sense* of experience.

I will begin by considering how art has been characterized as representing or reflecting reality before turning to a consideration of how art might be *revealing* of reality.

The following theories of literature are, for the most part, well known, and I will only briefly rehearse them in order to draw out the relevant implications for my task.

Platonic Mimesis: The Imitation of Appearances (the Sensible World)

The seminal account of artistic mimesis is found in Plato's dialogues. In the *Republic*, Socrates famously—or infamously—characterizes (and maligns) painting as an imitation of an imitation: the original being the ideal form (e.g. the idea or concept of a bed) and the primary imitation being any of the sensible manifestations of that form (an actual bed), of which the work of art is then a secondary imitation. One might call this the literalist or empiricist paradigm, since art here is considered a copy (for Socrates[36], a generally defective copy) of something that exists independently in the world—the "best" it can achieve is something like the *trompe l'oeil* paintings which come close to *exact* imitation of appearances and can "deceive children and foolish human beings" (598c).

For Plato, therefore, the object of artistic mimesis is the *appearance* of the (sensible) object. Hence its uselessness, or worse, since the virtue of an object in the sensible world is its utilitarian function—it is useful or pleasurable.[37] The user or maker of the object thus has a much better knowledge of it than the artist does (601c). The paradigm here is visual art, but it is

material reality outside the work," or else it "simulates a familiar world, and in effect copies our ways of knowing and understanding things" (*Mimesis*, 3).

[36] I mean, of course, Socrates as the character that appears in the dialogues of Plato; I say "Socrates" and not "Plato" since Plato never speaks in his own voice, and while the dialogues obviously privilege the perspective of the character of Socrates, the perspective of the dialogues is arguably not identical to his.

[37] Why, one wonders, can art not lead one to the good as beautiful bodies do (cf. *Symposium*)?

continuous with Socrates' criticisms of poetry, of narrative art—Homer is not to be trusted because he has never fought a real battle or governed a state; he is only a maker of illusions—the "appearance" of men in battle. In the Platonic conception of mimesis, then, what art imitates is not really "reality" at all—visual art imitates appearances in the sensible world, and poetry imitates the suffering and lament of human beings, which is in turn imitated by the audience who would respond more stoically in response to real suffering.

These illusions are aimed at "the part of us that is far from prudence" (603b)—indeed, the reason that they do *not* imitate what is "really real" is that the success of a work of art seems to depend on its appeal to lower pleasures—the idiot pleasure of beholding (and perhaps being tricked by) an exact resemblance, the dangerous pleasure of letting go of the emotions.

What Plato's theory of mimesis illuminates is the implications of the most intuitive conception of artistic mimesis, that is, the idea that art imitates the world around us, that it *pretends to be* the world around us. First of all, it implies that the best that art can do is to give us the illusion that it *is* the world—something like what Andre Bazin characterizes as the "myth of total cinema." And secondly, that if art just pretends to be the world, it must give us something that we don't ordinarily get from our experience—because as the *bon mot* goes, there's no point in art copying the world exactly; "one of the damn things is enough."[38]

One might say that for Plato what we get from poetry that we don't get from the world is temporary freedom from ordinary moral and social constraints—a freedom which, if unchecked, may habituate us more generally to acting out of the baser parts of the self.

While anyone who loves literature will be exasperated by Socrates' expulsion of the poets from the just city, his account does arguably describe "pulp fiction" and is perhaps even

[38] Attributed variously to Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein, and others. Originally from Rebecca West's essay "The Strange Necessity" in the form: "a copy of the universe is not what is required of art; one of the damned thing is ample."

more apt for the Hollywood blockbuster, at least in terms of creating an immersive world that conforms to fantasy, appealing to our wishes and fears. Thus the Platonic account of mimesis suggests the need to distinguish between *good* poetry (literature proper) and "non-literary" or "non-artistic" fiction if one wants to argue that we learn something about *reality* from literature.[39]

Yet Plato's account also suggests that the power of literature lies in its appeal to something unaccessed and perhaps inaccessible in our ordinary lives, and I submit, for confirmation by my reader's own experience, that this is true of literature as well as entertainment. The appeal of literature is that it represents the world not as we experience it every day but somehow transformed or distilled into an object of greater vividness, intensity, extremity, *interest*.[40] Literature exerts an erotic pull upon us. If this appeal is tied up with *reality,* though, it seems that we need a different conception of art, one that allows that it may imitate appearances not just in accord with our fantasies, not just to gratify our baser impulses, but in accord with the "really real," some truth beyond appearances.

So I join the long line of aesthetic theorists taking up Socrates' challenge to the poets to defend their art.

Aristotelian Mimesis: The Imitation of Human Action According to Laws of Necessity and Probability

Aristotle is the first to give a positive account of art's relationship to reality. He agrees with Plato, his teacher, that successful poetry will provoke strong emotions; indeed, he

[39] A remarkable amount of the analytic philosophy of literature does not make such a distinction, which seems consonant to me with its tendency to ignore aesthetic form and language and to focus on plot.

[40] This is even true, in a muted way, of "slice of life" dramas which take not *any* slice of life but some minor crisis or other event that in real life would be an object of considerable concern.

characterizes the *telos* of tragedy as the arousal and *catharsis* of pity and fear. He does not, however, see this as the kind of threat that Plato does. Aristotle argues that a work can only occasion *catharsis* if the action conforms to laws of probability and necessity, laws which are not restricted to the fictional world of the tragedy but which are the same laws that govern the audience's world, the "real world." Contrasting poetry with history, Aristotle claims that the poet writes not of what happened but of "the kind of thing that *would* happen" and this in fact makes it more philosophical than history is—conducive, that is, to the pursuit of wisdom, of knowledge of a reality relevant to our determination of our own lives.

Aristotle's account of mimesis enables a distinction important for my purposes—between *mimesis* on the one hand, and representation or description in the colloquial sense on the other. The object of mimesis, as I intend to use the concept, is *the reality we recognize or come to know through reading and reflecting on the literary work*. What the work "imitates," in this sense, I distinguish from the characters, objects, actions, events and so on that we recognize in the work. (The latter might be thought of as the foreground and the former as the background.) I realize this departs from Aristotle's own terminology, but it is generally consistent with his account to say that tragedy *represents* human action, but the ultimate object of the mimesis, the reality it imitates, is that of the underlying laws of probability and necessity—laws that determine and are revealed through human action.

The *Poetics* also suggests how narrative can be revealing of what we already know, though we may not know that we know it. The desired effects of pity and fear are achieved "when things come about contrary to expectation but because of one another," implying that we can recognize the plausibility of a turn of a events even when it wasn't what we anticipated.

More generally, we might say that we can come to know something we previously knew only tacitly when a description or sequence of events "rings true" even though it is surprising.

Many modern theories of literary truth are Aristotelian in that the purported truth of the novel lies in its presentation of "the kind of thing that would happen"—truths *about* particular situations, types, historical periods. As Dickens says in his preface to *Oliver Twist*:

> It is useless to discuss whether the conduct and character of the girl seems natural or unnatural, probable or improbable, right or wrong. IT IS TRUE. Every man who has watched these melancholy shades of life knows it to be so.

This can be *revealing* in a way that is morally important, making us face up to difficult truths about ourselves and about human life. As Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen write, "the novel, stripped of the names of these particulars, *does* actually describe such events, etc., and…what it says about them is all too true for comfort."[41]

But in this conception there is no qualitative or categorical difference between the reality we encounter through literature and what we encounter in the real world, except that literature confronts us directly with those uncomfortable or unrecognized truths, as well as allowing us to inhabit and therefore learn from experience that would otherwise be inaccessible to us, the experience of distant locales or historical periods or social roles. This is important, and surely a significant aspect of how we are educated by literature. But it is not yet comprehensive. One thing it does not account for is how formal features or poetic language may have a part in this education, and while there are certainly works whose revelatory power comes from those workings of "probability and necessity" manifested in plot, or from the realistic depiction of character and situation (paradigmatically, the realistic novel of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries), others seem to reveal through figurative language and formal qualities of the work (poetry and much of twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature). If, therefore, such formal

[41] Lamarque and Olsen, *Truth, Fiction, and Literature*, 291.

features are not extrinsic but integral to the overall effect and meaning of the work, and therefore to the way in which it "imitates reality," we need an account of mimesis that conceives the specifically *literary* (or, more generally, formal or aesthetic) qualities of the work—beyond the structure of the plot—as essential dimensions of that imitation.

Auerbach: Literature as the Representation of Social Reality

Erich Auerbach does give such an account in his *Mimesis*, the most famous contemporary treatment of the subject. In the oft-anthologized first chapter of the book, typical of the method of the whole, Auerbach shows how the styles of the *Odyssey* and of the Old Testament reflect very different senses of what is real. Focusing on the passage where Odysseus's old nurse recognizes him by the scar on his foot, Auerbach notes how the story whereby Odysseus got the scar in his childhood is related in the narrative present, just as those events which are happening in the "real present" of the story—"the story of the scar is presented not as Odysseus's recollection, with the 'real present' in the background, but as, for the time it is being related, the true present of the story."[42] This is but one instance of the general style of the poem, which gives an equal weight to all objects and actions within the narrator's purview. Such a style gives the sense that reality consists in these objects and actions; as in the Platonic account of mimesis, Homer weaves a vivid illusion of a faraway and long ago sensible reality which the audience can, for a time, inhabit.

On the other hand, the stories of the Old Testament provide only minimal lineaments of the visible and empirical world necessary to have a sense of what is happening—not even to comprehend it completely—and this is a reflection of the author's belief, or faith, that *reality is elsewhere*, that what is real is invisible, unrepresentable: the presence of the living God.

[42] Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 7.

> Doctrine and promise are incarnate in [the stories] and inseparable from them; for that very reason they are fraught with 'background' and mysterious, containing a second, concealed meaning. In the story of Isaac, it is not only God's intervention...but even the factual and psychological elements...that are mysterious, merely touched upon, fraught with background, and therefore they require subtle investigation and interpretation, they demand them. Since so much in the story is dark and incomplete, and since the reader knows that God is a hidden God, his effort to interpret it constantly finds something new to feed upon. Doctrine and the search for enlightenment are inextricably connected with the physical side of the narrative—the latter being more than simple "reality"…[43]

The idea that the text does not directly represent reality but orients the reader toward it is one I will take up and develop. In Auerbach, however, this is not a general characteristic of literature but belongs to the special nature of the Biblical text, and the reader's engagement in a hermeneutics aimed at that reality depends on the special authority of the Bible (an authority that must come from and be sustained by external factors).

In general, for Auerbach, the text represents reality as it was conceived or experienced by the author and contemporary audience, and his criticism is aimed at—and masterfully achieves—a kind of historical account of how that reality has been transformed over time. Yet it is unclear from his account whether and how historical texts relate to the reality which we current readers inhabit (except contingently, e.g. for the Christian reading the Bible). It will be my contention that the effect of serious literature generally can be analogous to the effect of the Old Testament as Auerbach describes it, referring us to a reality not immediately represented but necessary to make sense of what is going on. But since I will not be appealing to divine revelation in making such a claim, I must still answer the question: how are we to *learn* anything from this reading and not simply be confirmed in our current beliefs?

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[43] Auerbach, 15.

Romanticism: Literature as the Imitation of the Ideal

By now it may appear that the account I seek is a Romantic one, in which the artist is a kind of prophet, and art reveals to us a reality beyond the everyday world. Romantic poetry and poetics are commonly characterized as reflecting a movement *away* from mimesis, in the sense of imitation of the external world, and toward a conception of art as expressive of something inward, but at least for some this corresponds to a sense that the artist imaginatively perceives and responds to a dimension of the world which others do not, or at least not with the same degree of awareness and sensitivity. Romantic and Idealist literary critics and theorists of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century embraced, in various ways, a neo-Platonic view of reality as something ideal, distinct from and "more real" than that of everyday life, the knowledge of which is *essential* to our humanity (to leading a truly human life)—but whereas Plato saw art as copying the sensible world and therefore as removed from the "really real," the Romantics could be said to believe that art could in fact represent the Forms, that art could be a distinctive means of knowledge of that ideal reality. That poetry was felt to be an expression of feeling (passion, sensibility) did not make it purely subjective self-expression; as Wordsworth articulates in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, the poet's feelings and thoughts, both of superior quality, are informed by and bound up with each other, and together they lead him to express in his poetry "the primary laws of our nature."[44]

For Wordsworth, the fusion of passion and thought in poetry works to reveal something of the deep and universal values on which human life is built, the moral and normative fabric of

[44] "…our continued influxes of feeling are modified and directed by our thoughts, which are indeed the representatives of all our past feelings; and, as by contemplating the relation of these general representatives to each other, we discover what is really important to men, so, by the repetition and continuance of this act, our feelings will be connected with important subjects, till at length…we shall describe objects, and utter sentiments, of such a nature, and in such connexion with each other, that the understanding of the Reader must necessarily be in some degree enlightened, and his affections strengthened and purified." (In *Prefaces and Prologues to Famous Books*, ed. James Spedding, 292)

human life: "what is really important to men." For other Romantic poets and theorists, the truth sought through poetry was something more mystical. Albert Gelpi describes Romantic poetry as seeking a kind of transcendent unity, a substitute for God, the "knowledge" of which is experienced as a kind of mystical union, a perception of the "transcendental interrelatedness of the objects of experience."[45]

The belief in the possibility at arriving at such wisdom and such experience, and of communicating it through poetry, rested upon an optimistic belief in the powers of the imagination, and many of the Romantic poets themselves struggled to sustain conviction in their powers and their vision, especially those seeking some encounter with the absolute. Hoxie Neal Fairchild writes of how this struggle entered their poetry:

> …the final impression made upon us by these poets is that they are desperately striving to retain prerogatives which the three preceding centuries had transferred from God to man but which they now feel to be slipping from their grasp….[O]ne of their persistent themes is the impossibility of achieving the romantic experience.[46]

Arguably it is yet more difficult for the twentieth-century reader to sustain conviction in the "objectivity" of the poet's imaginative vision.

The Romantic conception of art (especially painting and poetry) appeals to our experience of literature as orienting us toward a reality that transcends the one we ordinarily inhabit, and as we shall see with Maclean, a constant struggle to sustain conviction in one's vision of such a reality may be intrinsic to modern consciousness, without wholly undermining the belief in or need for that vision. Romantic criticism also suggests a way of thinking about what it is that we come to know and why art is distinctively suited to educate us to it—something of what ultimately matters and determines value in human life, which is bound up with our deepest passions and our sense of beauty. But the ambivalence with which we speak today of

[45] Albert Gelpi, *Wallace Stevens: The Poetics of Modernism,* 5.
[46] Fairchild, p. 214.

"Romanticism" suggests that we need a more substantive and persuasive—and perhaps a chastened—account of the reality seen and the reorientation toward it.

Neo-Platonic and Neo-Aristotelian Theories: Literature as the Representation of Normative Truths

I end my survey with two twentieth-century moral philosophers who, like the Romantics, see art as capable of revealing some essential truth or reality. Iris Murdoch and Martha Nussbaum focus on fiction rather than poetry and illuminate how narrative can "imitate" ethical truths.

For Nussbaum, ethics begins with question of "How should human beings live?" and her Aristotelian approach to this question is to seek a "perceptive equilibrium" that examines the various views on human life and compares them to one another and to one's own experience; this procedure holds up ethical systems against participants' "active sense of life" and seeks for the "best overall fit between a[n ethical systematic] view and what is deepest in human lives."

Literary works, Nussbaum argues, are important and perhaps essential to this inquiry in providing a sufficiently wide and deep comprehension of human experience against which to match our ethical ideas, and it also models this very matching process as we see characters themselves engage in the struggle to negotiate the tensions between how they think they ought to live and the actual conditions, internal and external, of their lives. For Nussbaum, literature can, through its detailed articulation of the niceties of human experience, show us what cannot be proven discursively, particularly the ways in which emotions or particularity ought to figure into our judgment—for instance that (as for Proust) "the most important truths about human psychology cannot be communicated or grasped by intellectual activity alone: powerful emotions

have an irreducibly important cognitive role to play," or (as for Henry James) "that fine attention and good deliberation require a highly complex, nuanced perception of, and emotional response to, the concrete features of one's own context, including particular persons and relationships."[47] On the whole, Nussbaum argues, literary fiction educates us to an Aristotelian ethical view, which acknowledges the role played in human ethical life by one's particular character and circumstances, the incommensurability between things we value such that we may be faced with tragic choices between these things, and the significance for our lives of "what just happens,"—as opposed to an "antitragic," "philosophical" view that (as she characterizes it) takes ethics as a matter of abstract rules, sees ethical conflicts as resolvable with reference to one ultimate good, and holds with Socrates that "a good man cannot be harmed."

For Murdoch, the fundamental ethical challenge for human beings is to extricate ourselves from our natural narcissism which for her (Platonically) is a matter of *vision*, of seeing things as they really are rather than as we would wish them to be. Correspondingly, the key feature of literature is its "objectivity," its capacity to wrench us out of our ordinary, self-centered perspective:

> Good art reveals what we are usually too selfish and too timid to recognize, the minute and absolutely random detail of the world, and reveals it together with a sense of unity and form….Good art shows us how difficult it is to be objective by showing us how differently the world looks to an objective vision. We are presented with a truthful image of the human condition in a form which can be steadily contemplated; and indeed this is the only context in which many of us are capable of contemplating it at all. Art transcends selfish and obsessive limitations of personality and can enlarge the sensibility of its consumer. It is a kind of goodness by proxy. Most of all it exhibits to us the connection, in *human* beings, of clear realistic vision with compassion. The realism of a great artist is not a photographic realism, it is essentially both pity and justice.[48]

Much of this is in agreement with what Nussbaum says, though Murdoch would, I think, argue that beyond the "incommensurable goods" we see characters torn between in fiction (and feel

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[47] Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, 7.
[48] Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 371.

ourselves torn between in our lives) there remains some transcendent standard of judgment, "the good," which, if we attend to it, will allow us to know what we must do when the time comes, because we will be seeing not selfishly but objectively.[49]

I think it is not accidental that Nussbaum and Murdoch give us two of the more fully articulated theories of literature as the source of normative knowledge, and I believe this is due to their commitment to moral philosophies that encompass the whole of human life. Nussbaum's and Murdoch's discussions begin to flesh out the intrinsic connections between the problem of literary truth and that of the normative foundations of human life. They suggest that our judgment of literature and its effect on us depends on its realism, which is a moral realism, not in the sense that the characters act well, but that the work somehow allows us to see the moral significance and implications of their actions.

While I would not claim to synthesize Plato and Aristotle, I see both Nussbaum's and Murdoch's arguments confirming a phenomenological fact about moral judgment which may be basically Platonic, namely, that the ultimate standard of judgment would seem to be transcendent. Moral theories may be supremely clarifying (after reading Kant, one will always be suspicious of one's own moral self-satisfaction) but there will never be a rule, a calculus, that we can apply in order to determine what we must do in any given situation; some decisions will always call for our judgment, and the ground of these decisions will rest on something not fully articulable. Analogous to G.E. Moore's demonstration that moral facts can never be reduced to empirical facts—because any claim such as "x will make so-and-so happy" or "x will bring the greatest good to the greatest number" can still be countered by the question, "but is such a consequence

[49] Though at times Murdoch makes it sound as if it is always possible to do the right thing (that there is a right answer to the question of whether "to put auntie in a home"), I think ultimately her position can be reconciled with a kind of "tragic Platonism": that we may in fact be faced with tragic contradictions, but there is still a light according to which we can comprehend the choices we must make—they are not sheerly incommensurable; it is not, as for the existentialists, just a matter of "committing" to one camp or another.

good?"—one might similarly ask of any given moral rule whether it is the right rule or whether it is properly applied in any given situation. The philosophical literature reveals that moral philosophies always implicitly appeal to a ground that transcends any moral principle or rule, a ground that we know largely tacitly. Principles like utilitarianism or the categorical imperative are derived by abstracting from our knowledge and experience of innumerable moral situations, and then they are challenged, refined, corrected out of consideration of situations they don't seem to adequately cover. This is not to say that it is not worthwhile to formulate such principles, nor that they might not act back upon and alter our intuitions. But there appears to always be some further ground, at least when we reason morally in our own lives. And for Nussbaum and Murdoch, it would seem, this ground is the object of literary mimesis—what we are educated to in reading.

Nussbaum would likely resist the idea of a transcendent standard, which she aims to evade through characterizing the standard as a "match" between our experience of life and our ideas about the good life, but I think even this depends on a sense of a standard that cannot be formalized (how do we know what a "match" looks like?). Yet this brings us back yet again to the question of how we can conceive this transcendent ground of judgment as a potential object of *knowledge*.

Unanswered Questions

To sum up thus far: my consideration of theories of literary representation has suggested how literature might educate us to human realities, namely to the "laws of probability and necessity" of human life, which are not just laws of causality but something like the background

of value according to which we must make sense of human experience. None of the theories, however, secures our conviction that this is knowledge and not just belief.

To clarify this issue: in his overview of mimetic theories of art, Matthew Potolsky elaborates on how the Platonic and Aristotelian ways of conceiving mimesis (implicitly) conceive the object imitated and the kind of veracity, therefore, that the imitation might have. Of the Platonic, he says:

> According to the first idea, mimesis gives a more or less accurate rendering of what is, and thus depends for its production and reception on the reality of the material world and the unchanging operations of the human eye or ear. So long as we can perceive the world as it really is, we should be able to discern whether a work accurately imitates reality.[50]

This emphasizes what I have already noted about this conception of mimesis—that according to it we have nothing to learn from art that we could not learn from close attention to the external world or experience; hence from this perspective we judge the veracity of the work of art by comparing it to what we know of the world independently of art. Of the Aristotelian conception Potolsky says:

> According to the second idea, however, mimesis need not reproduce what actually is, only give a persuasive, or "lifelike," simulation of it. Because the effectiveness of this simulation depends in large part upon our particular beliefs about and ways of knowing the world, it is inextricably bound up with mind and culture. If the first idea is true, art is like a mirror turned to the world. If the second idea is true, art is like a mirror implicitly turned to the spectator and his or her beliefs.[51]

That is, what we might think of as the imitation of laws of probability and necessity is actually only the imitation of our own beliefs of what is probable and necessary, what is plausible. This would apply to the Romantic account and Auerbach's as well—if art shows us an ideal world, distinct from the empirical reality around us, it can in fact only be reflecting *our* ideals—or ideology.

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[50] *Mimesis*, 3-4.
[51] *Ibid.*, 4.

Potolsky's account, I observe, implicitly draws on a theory of reality in which the universe is composed of the subject and the external empirical world. Stated crudely, what is real is what is there for all to literally see, and everything else is subjective prejudice, whether individual or collective.

Underlying this account is the fact-value distinction that has become common sense in the twentieth century. Through this lens, the first conception of mimesis (Plato), which takes for its paradigm the visual arts, associates "reality" with the appearance of material objects; this is how we think of the world that is "objective," independent of our beliefs, wishes, and fears (of course, for Plato this sensible world is precisely *not* reality). Aristotle would also have it that his conception of mimesis is a reflection of the world, but since it refers not to factual reality but to "the kind of thing that would happen," Potolsky, reflecting the modern prejudice, must reduce it to what we *believe* would happen.[52]

There is something importantly true about the idea that art can only reflect back to us our own beliefs. The plausibility of fiction is something that we have to judge, and that judgment is surely based on our present understanding about the way things are. But I want to articulate a way of understanding it such that the "mirror" does not merely reinforce our current understanding of ourselves and the world we inhabit, but creates the potential for a fundamentally different kind of knowledge. Essentially, I want to suggest that what literature (at its best) is capable of indirectly revealing to us (at our best) is what underlies or transcends the everyday reality of the social world—and is, to some extent, necessarily obscured, simplified, and distorted by that reality. That is, rather than mimesis as the imitation of social convention (as is implied by Potolsky's characterization of the second conception of mimesis), what

[52] Along the lines of Philip Rieff's claim that after Freud there is no guilt but only the sense of guilt.

distinguishes literary art from mere entertainment is that it imitates—or evokes our knowledge of—a reality that is not comprehended by conventional modes of understanding.

Potolsky's account of mimesis and other similar treatments suggest that Socrates' challenge to the poets is no longer the most urgent challenge for modern defenders of art as a source of knowledge. The threat to poetry is not that it be censored or banned but that it be ignored or considered irrelevant to knowing reality. Indeed, the defense needed is as much a defense of reality as of art, at least of reality as understood as more and other than the reality of the physical world. Therefore my argument, or any argument that seeks to give an account of how art can be understood as imitating reality, must mount a defense not only of art but of the idea of a normatively structured reality.

Polanyi: Reality as the Condition and Object of Inquiry

Potolsky's account indicates the essential problems that must be addressed if we are to have a compelling account of how we come to know reality through literature. The idea that art appeals to our own sense of what is real is obviously problematic if one wants to argue, as I do, not only that art can represent reality but that art offers a distinctive way of coming to *know* reality; that art is revealing. The first major potential objection is a kind of inverse of the paradox Meno poses in Plato's dialogue—how can we look for something when we don't know what it is we are looking for? In this case—how can art teach us something if, in order to recognize it as true, we must in some sense already know it? The second is: even if we can answer Meno's challenge as Socrates did*, mutatis mutandis*—that art midwifes our "rememoration" of knowledge that had previously been unconscious—why should we trust this "knowledge"? How

do we know that the work is not simply confirming us in our prejudices?[53] And indeed, why should we think there *is* some normative structure to be known that is not merely one or another culture's or individual's prejudice?

To respond to these objections, we need a different—and more adequate—conception of reality than any yet articulated or implied. I submit that both objections can be answered if one conceives of reality and how we come to know it as suggested by the work of Michael Polanyi: that reality is what conditions and responds to our perception and inquiry into problems; that *all* our knowledge of reality has an irreducibly tacit dimension; that our tacit knowledge indicates the direction in which reality or the resolution of a problem lies; and that an increasing grasp of reality is accompanied by an increasing sense of coherence.

I will give a brief account of Polanyi's argument and then articulate a Polanyian conception of mimesis.

Polanyi's philosophical work grew out of a dissatisfaction with precisely the strict "fact-value" distinction that I have claimed underlies Potolsky's account of mimetic theories. He perceived the poverty of logical positivism—that is, the idea that we can only claim to know either purely formal relations (those of logic, mathematics, or semantics) or empirically verifiable facts—and felt the other contemporary philosophical critiques and alternatives to positivism, such as ordinary language philosophy, to be inadequate alternatives. In other words, his work is precisely the attempt to articulate the foundations for a "third kind of knowledge"—the kind of knowledge I wish to argue we acquire through literature—or, as he put it, to develop a "post-critical philosophy" that, after the skepticism of the Enlightenment and post-

[53] cf. Potolsky, *Mimesis*, p. 4; Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative,* p. 154

Enlightenment, could conceive of those matters of utmost importance to human life once again as matters of *knowledge*.[54]

Polanyi began his career as a physical chemist, making significant contributions in his field, and his objections to positivism, or what he called "objectivism," stemmed in large measure from own experience of scientific discovery, the supposed paradigm for the ideal of purely objective knowledge. It was his conviction, born of this experience, that the actual practice of science belies the positivist ideal. Science, he argues, in fact rests on procedures that cannot not be fully formalized, that depend on the trained individual's intuition—an ability to sense the direction in which the answer lies, to intuit the direction of fruitful inquiry, without being able to explicitly state all the reasons for that intuition. Taking scientific discovery as his paradigm, Polanyi argues for the relevance of this paradigm to all fields of knowledge, including art, politics, and morality, contending thereby that knowledge in these humanistic realms is just as much *knowledge* as scientific knowledge, although the methods and standards of verification (or, in the former case, what he calls "validation") are different.

The objectivity of humanistic knowledge may seem to be a much larger question than that of how literature represents reality, but in order to give a satisfying account of the latter I will need to address the former, since my contention is precisely that literature does not only represent the norms of a certain author or certain society (as Auerbach persuasively shows it does) but furthermore evokes and develops the reader's tacit knowledge of a deeper normative structure—one which, one might say, belongs to the grammar of his or her humanity.

What does it mean to know (a) reality? What is involved?

[54] For a succinct account of Polanyi's aim of a "post-critical philosophy" see Mark T. Mitchell, *Michael Polanyi*, Ch. 3. Richard Gelwick's *The Way of Discovery* also provides a summary of Polanyi's stance against "objectivism."

Let us first consider what it means to know something. The answer depends on the context, of course—there is the old distinction between *knowing how* and *knowing that*, for instance between knowing how to read (skill) and knowing the etymology of a word (factual knowledge). And there is a further difference between knowing the etymology of a word (non-evaluative) and knowing that *Moby-Dick* is a better book than *Typee*, or at least a more profound one (evaluative).

Part of Polanyi's originality lies in his insistence that there is a common structure to virtually all knowledge—that there is a continuity between *knowing how* and *knowing that*, and a commonality between the way in which the scientist knows and comes to know the physical world and the way in which the humanist knows and comes to know the human world. As my example ought to indicate, the distinctions between different kinds of knowing are not clear-cut or absolute or independent from one another. Knowing how to read depends on much factual knowledge, and being able to evaluate the relative merits of two books depends on knowing how to read and on an awareness of the richness of language, but beyond these obvious facts it could be argued that one doesn't really know how to read until one becomes capable of recognizing distinctions between "a good read" and "great literature" (as one would say that really knowing how to play the piano entails recognizing better and worse playing). Polanyi provides us with a way of conceiving this commonality and continuity.

The foundation of Polanyi's characterization of knowledge, reality, and discovery is the idea of "personal knowledge"—that all knowledge, including knowledge that we think of as "objective" (our apprehension of the sensible world, scientific discovery), depends on the knower's active—if not conscious—integration of the particulars of experience into coherent wholes which make sense of those particulars.

Knowledge must be "personal" because it has an irreducibly *tacit* dimension: "we know more than we can say." Taking as exemplary the way in which we recognize a face without being able to specify those features by which we know it, Polanyi writes:

> Gestalt psychology has demonstrated that we may know a physiognomy by integrating our awareness of its particulars without being able to identify these particulars…[It] has assumed that perception of a physiognomy takes place through the spontaneous equilibration of its particulars impressed on the retina or on the brain. However, *I am looking at Gestalt, on the contrary, as the outcome of an active shaping of experience performed in the pursuit of knowledge. This shaping or integrating I hold to be the great and indispensable tacit power by which all knowledge is discovered and, once discovered, is held to be true*. (TD 6, emphasis mine)[55]

So Polanyi contends that tacit knowing is involved in *all* knowing, even that which we take to be most "objective" and independent of the knower, and an essential characteristic of this *tacit knowledge* as he conceives it is that it is not a passive knowledge of a given reality but something acquired through *activity*, through our attempts to understand or to accomplish something.

What is involved in this "integration of particulars," and what are its implications?

Tacit knowledge, Polanyi shows, involves a relation between two terms—the object of our focal attention (the face we recognize, the thing we think of as "knowing"), and the particulars that compose the object of our attention or knowledge. Polanyi speaks of the "from-to" structure of this relationship: we attend *from* the particulars *to* the focal object of our awareness. Even in the case of the face, where the particulars "from which" we attend are in the same physical location as the face or expression we recognize, "the fact remains that the two are distinct, since we may know a physiognomy without being able to specify its particulars" (TD 12). We are not consciously aware of the particulars—the shape of the nose, the thickness of the eyebrows—but only tacitly aware of them as they bear upon our identification of the whole. And

[55] I will refer to Polanyi's books by abbreviation: *The Tacit Dimension (TD), Meaning (M),* and *Personal Knowledge (PK).*

this "bearing upon the whole" is what makes them meaningful—the nose or the brow have no meaning in themselves, just as individual letters have no meaning in themselves; it is because they jointly constitute a whole—a whole that is an object of interest—that they become significant, and that they can be (part of) an object of knowledge.

To integrate the particulars with respect to a whole which they constitute is to find them *meaningful*. Thus knowledge is a matter of meaningfulness, and meaning is a matter of unity or coherence—of making sense of particulars in terms of a comprehensive whole. Moreover, they are meaningful only *in* their tacit integration: because their meaning is a product of this integration, the particulars lose their meaning (at least, *this* meaning) when we make them the object of explicit focus. (Polanyi uses the example of how a word loses its meaning when we repeat it over and over again, focusing on its sound—or the appearance of the letters—rather than attending *from* the word's physical attributes to its sense in context [TD 18]). Thus it is not just contingent that we know more than we can say, but necessary: whatever portion of our knowledge we can make explicit (and there is much that we can), the explicit knowledge does not exhaust what we know tacitly. We may learn much by attending to the formal features of a poem, analyzing its meter and rhythm and how these create its effects (another of Polanyi's examples), but our statements about these effects cannot replace what we know in attending *through* them to the poem as a whole.

An essential correlate of this conception of tacit knowledge is that the whole which is to be known is not given, but is rather a product of interest or need. It is not written into nature that these features just *are* constitutive of a face, that this face is their joint meaning; rather, it is our

interest in recognizing the face or reading the expression that constitutes them as such.[56] Thus knowledge is a product of *intention* and *attention*.

To summarize thus far: knowledge entails an integration of particulars into a coherent whole that responds to some interest or need—to do something or to understand something, or to be able to proceed with inquiry. To know how to play the piano is to tacitly integrate muscular movements, the ability to read music, and so on, into the performance of the piece which is the object of attention. To know why the North won the Civil War is to tacitly integrate knowledge of all the historical particulars into a unified comprehension of the war—a comprehension that could be (and has been) thoroughly articulated, but not *exhaustively* so—which is to say, the historian who writes a book on the subject knows more than the book articulates, and this is not just a contingent fact about publishing constraints but a fundamental feature of knowledge. Even if the historian were somehow to write down every fact that went into her understanding, the reader who read and remembered all those facts would not thereby have the historian's knowledge until and unless the reader was able to tacitly integrate those facts similarly, because that knowledge *is* a tacit integration. Of course such a book would be intended to assist the reader in acquiring such a tacit integration, in seeing how a particular construction makes sense of the facts. But as we shall see, it is only through working through his own struggle to make sense of the facts that the reader could really acquire the same knowledge—which is to say, through being trained as an historian.

Polanyi argues that the integration of particulars into a meaningful whole in effect means making the particulars a part of ourselves, of *dwelling in* or *interiorizing* them. This is fairly evident with respect to how we know the physical world through our body, especially in skilled

[56] Even in the case of the poem—we are so accustomed to recognizing a poem as a "whole" that it seems "natural," but it is something that we have constructed as such, at however basic a level.

activity—when we ride a bike, the balance of the bike and the feel of the tires on the pavement becomes part of the bodily, tacit knowledge from which we attend to our purpose of navigating the path and getting where we're going—but Polanyi argues that *all* knowledge has this structure. The historian dwells in the evidence in attending to her question, in working on her theory. The evidence becomes an extension of herself—and conversely, when considering a new piece of evidence, a new phenomenon, the theory takes the proximal, tacit position:[57]

> To rely on a theory for understanding nature is to interiorize it. For we are attending from the theory to things seen in its light, and are aware of the theory, while thus using it, in terms of the spectacle that it serves to explain. This is why…theory can be learned only by practicing its application: its true knowledge lies in our ability to use it. (TD 17)
>
> …if we now regard the integration of particulars as an interiorization [of a belief or theory], it takes on a more positive character. It now becomes a means of making certain things function as the proximal terms of tacit knowing, so that instead of observing them in themselves, we may be aware of them in their bearing on the comprehensive entity which they constitute. It brings home to us that it is not by looking at things, but by dwelling in them, that we understand their joint meaning. (TD 18)

In other words, we know a theory or a moral truth not (only) in directly reflecting on and explicitly stating it, but in attending tacitly *from* it to those things we make sense of by means of the theory or belief.

This means, crucially, that the world as we inhabit it is a product of our learned capacities, both our skills and our knowledge of the way things are. As Polanyi articulates it, using "our body" to refer not only to our physical being but everything we've already learned and internalized:

> Because our body is involved in the perception of objects, it participates thereby in our knowing of all other things outside. Moreover, we keep expanding our body into the work, by assimilating to it sets of particulars which we integrate into reasonable entities. Thus do we form, intellectually and practically, an interpreted universe populated by

[57] Thus "proximal" and "focal" are fluid; the proximal and distal terms can switch places when it comes to beliefs or theories. Empirical particulars—e.g. historical events or natural phenomena—might be proximal terms from which one attends to a theory, or the theory might be the tacit background from which one attends to the particulars.

> entities, the particulars of which we have interiorized for the sake of comprehending their meaning in the shape of coherent entities. (TD 29)

Or, more briefly, "we interiorize bits of the universe, and thus populate it with comprehensive entities" (TD 35)—we "take in" pieces of our experience and knowledge and integrate them by "looking out" and seeing them as parts of integrated wholes.

Polanyi's account is consistent with the now commonplace view that we read the world through a set of inherited beliefs, values, and so on into which we are socialized. The latter is often taken to imply that the world we inhabit is merely a subjective construction, to be opposed either to an objective "way things are" obscured by that construction, or to a meaningless chaos. But Polanyi's point is the opposite: that what it *means* to know something is to integrate it in this way, to find it as a constituent of a more comprehensive order. He argues that even scientific knowledge, knowledge of the material or biological world, is the product of our reading of the world, our ability to dwell in the particulars of that world and integrate them into "comprehensive entities"—molecules, forces (e.g. of gravity or momentum), ecological systems—that allow us to make sense of them and to further inquire into the world they compose. These entities, which I would characterize as *structures of sense*, are not given in nature, though of course they must somehow correspond to it; they are the product and condition of scientific inquiry.

With respect to the human world: the example of understanding history brings us in view of the kind of knowledge I want to say we acquire through reading literature, that is, a knowledge of the whole that comprehends the uncountable particulars of human life and human experience, individual and collective—or, proximally, "particular wholes" that comprehend overlapping subsets of these particulars. This is not finally a matter of acquiring a set of abstract laws or generalizations about the way people are or the way they ought to be, although if we

attempt to make explicit what we have learned, we would express some of it in such propositions.[58] But the knowledge we have acquired is also a matter of greater coherence, the way in which formerly disparate, unintegrated or even repressed particulars have acquired a new and more comprehensive meaning.

If knowledge consists of the (largely tacit) integration of particulars into a comprehensive whole that constitutes the meaning of the particulars, then learning or discovery—an increase in knowledge (or skill)—entails a new, more comprehensive integration; the creation of a more comprehensive structure of sense. This new integration might entail a deconstruction or abandonment of the old structure of comprehension—what we call a paradigm shift.

Here we can finally address the question that kept arising in the consideration of theories of mimesis: how can we come to know something that is not a matter (only) of acquiring new information? Polanyi shows how the tacit component of knowledge explains Meno's apparent paradox, which he approaches by considering how the perception of a *problem* guides inquiry culminating, potentially, in discovery.

> It is a commonplace that all research must start from a problem….But how can one see a problem, any problem, let alone a good and original problem? For to see a problem is to see something that is hidden. It is to have an intimation of the coherence of hitherto not comprehended particulars. (TD 21)

That is, to see a problem—and not just a baffling incongruity—entails not only recognizing some phenomenon as not yet integrated into the existing structures of sense, but also having some intuition of a new structure of sense to which it might belong. The scientist (or historian) may

[58] Such as Gary Saul Morson's "One Hundred Sixty-Three Tolstoyan Conclusions" e.g. "True life takes place when we are doing nothing especially dramatic. The more the drama, the worse the life" (*Anna Karenina in Our Time: Seeing More Wisely*, 223).

collect infinite amounts of data, and can test a hypothesis using the existing data,[59] but there is no rule by which she can formulate the hypothesis to begin with—it must come out of her sense of a whole—a *reality*—of which the existing particulars are a part and to which they are clues.

The objection will be raised: why is this *reality*? Why should we consider these meanings, these structures of sense, as objective? Is Polanyi's criterion of the increasing sense of coherence merely coherent*ist*? Is there anything to prevent us thinking that the "comprehensive entities" into which we integrate the particulars of our experience are just part of a closed system with no necessary reference to an external reality?

The essential response to this objection, and the essence of Polanyi's conception of reality, is that reality—something external to our beliefs—must be presupposed in order for the activity of inquiry to have sense. In essence, reality is defined *as* the necessary presupposition of inquiry.

This emerges in Polanyi's discussion of discovery. Noting that scientists recognize the truth—and greatness—of an important scientific discovery in part by the fruitfulness of that discovery, Polanyi argues that this implies that we must have some "tacit foreknowledge of yet undiscovered things" because of course we cannot yet know the further discoveries that will be enabled by the current advance.

> ...as we can know a problem, and feel sure that it is pointing to something hidden behind it, we can be aware also of the hidden implications of a scientific discovery….We feel sure of this, because *in contemplating the discovery we are looking at it not only in itself but, more significantly, as a clue to a reality of which it is a manifestation. The pursuit of discovery is conducted from the start in these terms; all the time we are guided by sensing the presence of a hidden reality toward which our clues are pointing*; and the discovery which terminates and satisfies this pursuit is still sustained by the same vision. It claims to have made contact with reality: *a reality which, being real, may yet reveal*

[59] Although Polanyi argues that even this involves an unformalizable element of judgment—to be able to tell what counts as "data," to distinguish an aberration from significant variation, and so on.

> *itself to future eyes in an indefinite range of unexpected manifestations*. (TD 24, emphasis mine)

So reality is, on the one hand, that which justifies inquiry—the whole endeavor of science makes sense only if one supposes that there is a unified reality there to be known—and is at the same time that which makes sense of the experience of discovery, and our experience generally. Polanyi's conception is continuous with that implied by Freud's "reality principle"—reality is that which is independent of what we wish it to be—or as Philip K. Dick puts it, "Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away."[60]

The criterion of increasing coherence cannot be further grounded, and so there is a certain circularity in Polanyi's argument, as he admits. But this is essentially the necessary assumption of science—that there is a unified order to the natural world, and that it is possible to attain a better grasp of this unity through theories (constructions) more adequate to it. The assumption of a knowable reality is simply the condition for inquiry.

One may question whether this is the case in the human world, and of course if it is, it's not the same kind of order, the same kind of unity—nor do the foundational constructs according to which human beings make sense of their experience have the same kind of natural, empirical referent as the concepts of science do.

So let us now consider in more detail what it means to acquire greater knowledge of "human reality."

In living our lives we recurrently encounter problems, dilemmas regarding what to do, how to judge, how to make sense. In fact, all of these could ultimately be seen as problems of sense: is this an act of selfishness or of independence? Is the meaning of my life to be found in

[60] "How To Build A Universe That Doesn't Fall Apart Two Days Later"

my relationships or in my work? In our everyday lives we have the resources of our language and our institutions—conventional social reality as we inhabit it—to respond to these problems of sense-making. But often an event or experience will challenge the adequacy of these given frameworks, and in the process of determining how to respond to the challenge, the framework itself—the interiorized network of beliefs through which we make sense of things, which as discussed above constitutes the world as we find it—is transformed, made more adequate (e.g. our experience within an intimate relationship causes us to revise our inherited notions about the "rules" of relationships). Some events—divorce, the death of a child, war or political upheaval—might be so catastrophic that no alteration of our current framework of sense can accommodate them, and so those frameworks are at least temporarily shattered and we find ourselves in a fragmented world in need of a radically new principle of integration, which we may or may not find. If we do find a new way of making sense, this would be analogous to Kuhn's paradigm shift in science or to a religious conversion (and the paradigm shift may indeed take the form of a religious conversion).

The example of conversion points back to the obvious potential objection to the criterion of coherence—that the coherence may be false, that the framework of sense may be distorting. (I do not argue that the religious sense of coherence *is* necessarily false, but many of course would.) Clearly the criterion only works if accompanied by an insistence on comprehensiveness, on the recognition of disturbing elements and the effort to confront them. But that additional criterion is not really external to the standard of coherence—or, more commonsensically, to the standard of truth.

In the end, Polanyi essentially appeals to our experience—it is simply the case that in order to make sense of our lives we must understand what happens to us as *contact with reality*,

and therefore as long as the new framework encompasses and integrates new knowledge and experience, it must be conceived as being more adequate to reality than the previous—allowing for greater knowledge of reality. "We ought," as he puts it, "to adopt the kind of general views about the nature of things that and the nature of knowledge that will not prevent our belief in the reality of those coherences that we do, in fact, see" (M 67).

Polanyi distinguishes reality from "mere appearance" by the fact that the former "has a 'life' of its own," while the latter is "made up of the coincidental effects of many heterogeneous causes and subject entirely to the independent future manifestations of these separate causes" (M 66).[61] For the past century and a half or more, theorists have argued that our ways of making sense and particularly our normative beliefs are "mere appearances," surface manifestations of underlying causes—material conditions, structures of power, unconscious wishes, and so on. Yet our norms and ideals continue to exert their force upon us. As Polanyi writes, "whenever we utter moral condemnation or approval, or else seek guidance in a moral dilemma, we always refer to moral standards assumed to be generally valid" (M 27), and he points out that positivists and materialists (including the more scientistic Marxians, Freudians and so on) do these things no less than other people, though with reference to somewhat different standards. Moreover, when we disagree about these standards we *argue* about them, appealing to some common ground that can presumably encompass and resolve the disagreement. This points to the deep contradiction in the denial of normative standards—we cannot make sense of our experience without them.

[61] Another criterion is unpredictability: "This capacity of a thing to reveal itself in unexpected ways in the future I attribute to the fact that the thing observed is an aspect of a reality, possessing a significance that is not exhausted by our conception of any single aspect of it. To trust that a thing we know is real is, in this sense, to feel that it has the independence and power for manifesting itself in yet unthought of ways in the future." (TD 32-33)

Extending Polanyi: A Polanyian Theory of Mimesis

Now to the question of how literature educates us to these normative conditions. Polanyi in fact articulated a theory of art, and it makes sense to begin with there, though ultimately I will want to move beyond his own emphasis on how art creates *meaning* to articulate how our encounter with it can give rise to *knowledge*.

Polanyi's theory of art rests on a general theory of symbols, which he puts forth in his lectures on "Meaning," edited into a book of the same name by Harry Prosch. In the lectures, Polanyi develops his general anti-positivistic ontology and epistemology to more explicitly articulate an account of those "coherences that are thought by us to be artificial, not natural"—including those of art, religion, and morality—which allows us to believe in the reality they in fact appear to us to have, a reality which in modernity has fallen under suspicion because "they seem to be creations of our own, not subject to the external checks of nature—and therefore to be wholly creatures of our own subjective whims and desires" (M 67). Polanyi sets out to offer "a theory of these meanings that explains how their coherence is no less real than the perceptual and scientific coherences [we] so readily [accept]" (M 68), a theory which will uphold the legitimacy of the substantial role played by "personal knowledge" in our apprehension of those realities mediated or constituted by culture.

While (as discussed above) Polanyi argues that all knowledge, even perception, depends on active tacit integration, he recognizes that the integrations involved in perception, skillful action, and scientific theorizing seem subject to external constraints—the constraints of "nature"—while those involved in moral judgment, aesthetic experience and interpretation, and religious belief seem to be "in our heads," individual or collective.

The essential problem as Polanyi seems to see it is to characterize the reality of the referent of symbols, broadly understood. He begins his analysis with the distinction between *indicators* and *symbols*, and his understanding of symbols and the reality to which they refer forms the basis for his understanding of art—and my own, with some elaboration and modification.

In general, our apprehension of meaning entails a tacit integration of various subsidiaries [S] to a focal meaning [F], which Polanyi schematizes as follows:

$$S \longrightarrow F$$

With an indicator, the subsidiaries (the appearance of a word on the page or the word's sound, our knowledge of the English language, etc.) are not of intrinsic interest but only conditions for our apprehension of the meaning; we "look through" them to the meaning (so that, for instance, a bilingual reader may not even remember the language in which she read something but only the information acquired). Polanyi represents this relationship as:

$$\overset{-ii}{S} \longrightarrow \overset{+ii}{F}$$

indicating that our intrinsic interest [ii] is in the focal meaning rather than the subsidiaries. This is because the subsidiaries are not integral to the meaning itself but only to conveying it. In the case of the indicator, the message is at least analytically separable from the medium.

In a symbol, however, we do attend to the medium—the piece of cloth that is the flag, the hunk of stone that is the tombstone—we don't just "see through" it; the medium *is* in fact the object of our focus. But the focal object—Polanyi uses the example of the flag of one's own country—"is of interest to us only because of its symbolic connection with the subsidiary clues

through which it becomes a focal object. What bears upon the flag, as a word bears upon its meaning, is the integration of our whole existence as lived in our country" (M 72). That is, we only attend to the flag because this attention effects an integration of our experience and gives it a new (or renewed) meaning.

> In the surrender of ourselves to the flag, the medal, the tombstone—to whatever turns our focal object into a symbol for our country, for a great deed, or for a loved person—we accomplish the integration of those diffuse parts of ourselves that are related to these persons or things….It is a wholistic imaginative achievement of meaning…. (M 73)

So when we look at our country's flag in an attitude of openness or "surrender," then "the nation's existence, our diffuse and boundless memories of it and of our life in it, become embodied in the flag" (M 72); it "reflects back upon its subsidiaries, fusing our diffuse memories" (M 73), creating the new coherence of, for instance, *America* and myself as an *American*. It would be reasonable to say that America would lack a certain reality without the flag to symbolize it. The flag, therefore, functions both to constitute the reality of America and to allow one to come to know that reality.[62]

Thus in the case of a symbol, Polanyi argues, the location of our interest shifts: the focal object (the starred-and-striped piece of cloth) is only of interest because, and insofar as, it effects this integration of the various subsidiaries. He schematizes this first as:

$$\overset{+\ddot{ii}}{S} \longrightarrow \overset{-\ddot{ii}}{F}$$

—and then, because of the transformative character of this integration, the way in which it reflects back on our understanding of ourselves, our experience, and the world we inhabit:

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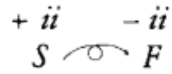
[62] The idea of "surrender" may set off alarms. If the symbol of the flag functions in service of chauvinism, couldn't one say that the coherence it creates is not reality but fantasy? This is a perennial danger with human creations, and as mentioned above, coherence can only be an adequate criterion of reality when paired with comprehensiveness.

To the extent that the flag is a symbol and not just a piece of propaganda, it can arguably bear and even evoke the discrepancy between America as it is and America as an ideal—which is the "reality" it brings into being and represents.



As with the indicator, the perceptible object, the flag, is uninteresting in itself, but in the former case, what we perceive (say, a printed word) belongs to the subsidiaries, whereas with a symbol we *are* focusing on what we physically see, and yet this physical object is only of interest because of the subsidiary ideas, experiences, feelings that are tacitly integrated in our attending to it. In both cases there is a perceptible sign and an imperceptible referent, but Polanyi's analysis suggests an important distinction in the character of the referent in the two cases. Polanyi discusses this difference in terms of the beholder's involvement in the meaning of the symbol, and later, in terms of the artist's involvement in the new coherence she apprehends and expresses in her work. The symbol's meaning—its referent—is bound up with and depends upon the subjectivity of the beholder or creator, whereas the referent of an indicator is more or less independent of the beholder. Polanyi does not, however, develop his characterization of the *reality* to which the artistic symbol refers, and why the apprehension of this reality seems necessarily to involve attention to an object of little or no intrinsic interest—as he characterizes it.

In fact it seems rare to me that a symbol has no intrinsic interest. (This is certainly not the case, for instance, with that central symbol of Christianity, the cross or crucifix.) To the extent that the symbol is not utterly arbitrary, it has the potential for interest due to its internal connections to what it symbolizes. The flag and tombstone lie at the extreme end of the spectrum in this regard, being almost arbitrary, and even they will often be designed or decorated in a way that conveys something about the country or person they represent or memorialize.

I would say that the more essential distinguishing feature of the symbol is, rather, that its meaning—the referent, the ultimate object of interest—is not exhaustively *determined* (indicated) by the features of the sign. And, correlate to this, that the importance of our

individual ("personal") involvement is not that the reality we apprehend is subjective, or a reality of our subjectivity, but rather that it is a reality that cannot be fully known explicitly or conveyed propositionally.

One might formulate this by saying that the referent of an indicator is a *fact*, while the referent of a symbol is a *reality.* I use "fact" in the general analytic philosophical sense—"what is the case," a state of affairs to which propositions may or may not conform. To return to the example of America and the flag: America is, in John Searle's sense, an institutional or social fact, dependent upon common (mostly tacit) "agreement" (to be distinguished from "brute facts" such as physical objects and laws which exist independently of human recognition), its existence and characteristics constituted by the country's own political institutions as well as those of the rest of the world which recognizes the United States as an entity, "a federal republic composed of 50 states, the federal district of Washington, D.C., five major self-governing territories, and various possessions."[63]

The fact of America is determinate, even if certain details may be contested (for instance, whether it encompasses certain territories). But we might also speak of the *reality* of America, which encompasses but exceeds its institutional factual existence as well as any and all facts *about* the country; it is, rather, the background condition of these facts (just as one might think of the *reality of a person*, as the basis upon which one can make claims about that person but which cannot be finally and exhaustively articulated).

The fact of America is something that we can know and refer to explicitly, even if, like all knowledge, it rests on tacit knowledge. The reality of America, on the other hand, is something that we know largely tacitly—we need a symbol, or symbols, to be able to know it, to evoke and focus the tacit component of that knowledge—the "personal" component, as Polanyi

[63] "The United States of America," Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States, retrieved 8/1/2016.

would have it, that which cannot be detached from our subjective, active, embodied knowing, which is not only a condition for knowledge of that reality but an indispensible part of that knowledge. My knowledge of the fact of America does not depend on my experience of America, or of other countries; my knowledge of the reality of America does. Indeed, the reality of America is partly constituted by the experience of those who inhabit it. The flag will mean something different to someone who has studied the Constitution, served in the armed forces or public office, lived abroad for a long time. (This is not by any means intended to imply that our experience is infallible.)

In general, I would argue that the referent of a symbol has an inextricably tacit component—that what the flag or the cross stands for cannot be made fully explicit, and that knowledge of that referent and even its existence depends upon certain experience, education, cultivated sensibility, and effort of attention. The physical fact of America—the land—exists independently of what anyone knows or thinks. The social or institutional reality of America depends on human recognition, but its institutionalization gives it an objectivity independent of any particular individual's knowledge or recognition. (My ignorance of the US-Canadian border will not stop the border patrol from trying to prevent my crossing it without a passport.) But the America that one apprehends through attention to the flag is dependent on one's knowledge and sensibilities—and not only on our familiarity with the country (our experience and memories, as Polanyi would have it) but on our grasp of its history and its ideals. I might add (in this case) to the list of subsidiaries the American ideals of liberty and equality and say that the coherence one achieves—ideally—is a normative reality in which we are implicated.

Symbols therefore allow for the integration of diffuse aspects of our memory and experience, knowledge and belief, value and attachment. While Polanyi characterizes this

integration as “self-giving” (as opposed to the “self-centered” integrations involved in apprehending the meaning of indicators), I think this is misleading, making it sound as if the function of a symbol is essentially therapeutic, that what is integrated in our attention to a symbol is *ourselves*. But I would propose that the integration of our memory and experience is not only an integration of ourselves but of things external to ourselves as well—of that which our diverse and fragmented bits of consciousness are intimations. The symbol allows for the tacit apprehension of connections—of the relation, for instance, between our life as lived in our country and the ideals of that country. It is *this* which accounts for the symbol’s power to “move” us or “carry us away,” a quality to which Polanyi frequently recurs. The idea of being *carried away* or *moved* implies the apprehension of something of existential significance—something to be feared or desired, preserved or striven for, something threatened or threatening. We are moved by what matters to us, by what we believe (rightly or wrongly) to be important.

The integration enabled by a symbol thus creates—or makes us aware of—a previously or otherwise ungrasped coherence, which changes the significance of the various fragments that are integrated in that coherence—altering or deepening the meaning and implications of a belief or experience, or showing as meaningful or significant what had previously seemed unconnected or random. Such coherence is not merely an artificial imposition on what is “really” chaos; it is the kind of reality that human realities—those realities which make up the distinctively human world—have. That is, such coherences are conditions for making judgments or decisions at all, on the assumption that there is something at stake in acting or thinking one way versus another. These cannot be proved or finally established but only validated through one’s ongoing efforts to make sense of and integrate one’s experience, perceptions, and beliefs.

Works of art and literature are, of course, not identical with symbols as we commonly understand the term. But they can be understood as symbolic in Polanyi's sense—that is, the work of art is not an indicator that refers to an object that stands apart from it or from the reader or hearer—as might be implied by Plato's theory of mimesis (the meaning of a painting is the real-world object whose appearance it imitates) or one of the all-too-common interpretations which reduce a poem to its prose content (the meaning of the poem is its translation into literal speech). Rather, *the meaning of the work of art is the novel integration it occasions, the coherence it allows us to apprehend or achieve* (partly or largely tacitly) through its suggestion of previously unthought-of (though perhaps not unfelt) connections. The meaning of a poem is not its prose translation but the coherence that emerges in our reading of it, a coherence of the ideas and imagery and our own knowledge, experience and associations. The meaning of a work of literary fiction is not reducible to its story or a moral that might be extracted from it, but is rather the integration of plot, character, language, historical situation relative to our own historical situation, and again our own knowledge and experience, into a compelling narrative of some particular human endeavor or experience which at the same time resonates broadly and penetratingly.

But I want now to distinguish between the meaning of a work and the *reality* we come to know through that work. If the meaning is the coherence or integration, I propose that the reality we come to know, tacitly and explicitly, is not the coherence or integration itself but the conditions of that coherence or integration, which are the conditions of sense. I will argue that the coherence suggested by narrative and poetic art suggests different conditions of sense than those of our everyday world, conditions which can be made partially but not fully conscious and explicit. While the immediate experience of reading may be enough to occasion a new

integration, it is only with reflection and articulation that this experience can be translated into knowledge.

By Polanyi's account, an advance in our knowledge of reality results from perceiving problems and following those problems out. Earlier I discussed how events in our lives could pose problems for us that are problems of *sense*, and lead to a restructuring of our ways of making sense. Literature can be and has been conceived as posing such problems vicariously, and surely this is one of the ways in which it can be educative. Anna Karenina's suicide, for instance, might force us to recognize certain constraints on the pursuit of personal happiness (as well as the oppressiveness and sexism of nineteenth-century Russian society)—we recognize the plausibility of her being destroyed by the costs of her affair with Vronsky and the failure of that affair to conform to her fantasies of it. But as previously indicated, what we encounter in literature is not just a set of vicarious experiences that are "broadening" (and challenging) simply in the way that real life experiences might be, allowing us to "travel" through other lives and times and places. Literature, I will argue, necessarily—by definition—refers us to a reality in excess of everyday reality. It promises a further coherence than that which we ordinarily inhabit, and its form—its plot, imagery, and formal features—orients us toward this further coherence.[64]

How does it do this?

To begin with, even the realist novel and other genres that aim to represent or imitate "real life" differ from life minimally in that they have an intentional form: they are narrated; they have a plot with a beginning, middle and end; certain details and events are included and described in a particular way, implying some principle of unity.

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[64] I acknowledge that this coherence is not necessarily "higher," that the sense of coherence we have in the experience of reading may well be the coherence of fantasy and may be a false coherence; it must be tested through further reflection, as I will argue.

One could argue that this kind of narrative coherence belongs precisely to art and therefore has no implications for our understanding of life outside of art—that art is art because it has *artificial* form. Real life, as it is currently popular to say, is "messy," full of loose ends and unintegrated fragments and lacking neat resolution. But if human beings are teleological creatures, always oriented consciously and unconsciously toward ends both immediate and more distant, then we are continually trying to make narrative sense of our own life. The conditions of making sense of our lives are narratological.

Our lives have a minimal narrative coherence provided by the social, but—as I will develop further on—the social narratives we inherit are necessarily inadequate to our experience, typified and distorting. Narratives make their claim to literary merit in part by offering more adequate conceptions of human ends and the constraints upon and complexities and ambiguities of pursuing those ends within a given situation.

But literature's capacity to suggest a different ground of sense and judgment does not just arise from its superior treatment of the complexities and nuances of human experience. More fundamentally, literary narratives and images are rarely immediately and fully comprehensible. The motives of the characters and the significance of the actions and events are not obvious or unambiguous, nor are the meanings and referents of images and descriptions, or the intention of the literary form. I want to say this is part of what is entailed by the distinction we make between "literature" and entertainment—that if everything about a work appears utterly transparent, if it leaves no uncertainty or question in the mind of the reader, if it seems to suggest nothing beyond what can be immediately understood, either the work is not art or the reader lacks a certain sensitivity.

In reading literature we are therefore compelled to try to *make sense* of what we read. At the same time, even what is unclear or ambiguous in a work of literature has to strike us with a certain rightness for us to accept it as art and not dismiss it.[65] Wallace Stevens writes: “The poem should resist the intelligence *almost* successfully.” That is, “but not quite.” Our sense of rightness relates to the tacit coherence or integration occasioned by the work: something about *this* way of representing things allows for the apprehension of new and significant connections. The reality we come to know through the work is the condition of that sense of rightness, the condition of these connections.

It is this ambiguous-yet-evocative character of literature, its representation of human realities through narrative and image, rather than its statement of facts through propositions, that makes it so that literature can direct us to a different ground of sense.

Consider the following passage, from Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*, describing the passage of the filibusters[66] through the Mexican desert:

> That night they rode through a region electric and wild where strange shapes of soft blue fire ran over the metal of the horses' trappings and the wagonwheels rolled in hoops of fire and little shapes of pale blue light came to perch in the ears of the horses and in the beards of the men. All night sheetlightning quaked sourceless to the west beyond the midnight thunder-heads, making a bluish day of the distant desert, the mountains on the sudden skyline stark and black and livid like a land of some other order out there whose true geology was not stone but fear. The thunder moved up from the southwest and lightning lit the desert all about them, blue and barren, great clanging reaches ordered out of the absolute night like some demon kingdom summoned up or changeling land that come the day would leave them neither trace nor smoke nor ruin more than any troubling dream. (50)

[65] This sense of rightness may be rooted in innate dispositions, but it will also depend on a certain education and cultivated sensibility, especially for modernist works.

[66] Members of a militia who sought to take land in Mexico after the official conclusion of the Mexican-American war.

As we attend from the text to what it describes, we dwell tacitly in our knowledge of the English language and of literature from the Bible to Melville and Faulkner, the meanings and connotations of words, the workings of figurative speech, as well as our knowledge of horseriding and Mexico and weather and so on, and we integrate all these tacit or subsidiary particulars into some comprehensive unified (joint) meaning. If we were reading the passage in context, what had come before (and, if we'd read it before, what came after as well) would also figure in; it would be part of the implicit background out of which we read, and part of the comprehensive whole we were working to construct—the "meaning" of the work as a whole. (I put *meaning* in quotation marks because, as I will argue below, the whole to which the work refers is not best understood as its meaning in the sense that traditional interpretive criticism aims at explicating the meaning of a work.)

With respect to this passage, one might think that the comprehensive meaning that integrates its particulars is, essentially, an action: horsemen riding through a particular landscape. But it is not hard to see that there is much that such a construction leaves out. The explicit object of the description—what it represents—is men riding their horses through the desert, but the passage is *about* something more and other than this.

We sense that in part because of the strangeness of the language, even the peculiarity of the syntax—if the passage were just about the action and landscape it describes, then "electric, wild region" would do just as well as "region electric and wild," and so on. Even more obviously unintegrated in the literal reading would be the figurative references to "absolute night" and "some demon kingdom."

A more sophisticated reading might say that the passage represents men riding through an *eerie and threatening* landscape, and the language "imitates" that sense of dark enchantment that

perhaps the men feel, or perhaps the author just wants the reader to feel. The rhythm of the parataxis ("stark and black and livid," "trace nor stone nor ruin") has a hypnotic effect, while "absolute night" and "demon kingdom" evoke an infernal otherworld.

Few, I think, would disagree that McCarthy here weaves a vivid image, however characterized, but the question then is: where does *reality* come into it? If, following Polanyi, we are to see the ambiguities of the passage as clues, to see the passage as "an aspect of reality," what is the whole, the "comprehensive entity," of which it is an aspect?

One answer would be *the work*, and it is certainly true that we attend from the particulars of one passage to an understanding of the work as a whole. But it is important to see that "the work" is not equivalent and limited to the text and its meaning; we might call the comprehensive whole the *form* of the work.[67] The form, in this sense, would be what we know—*all* that we know—when we claim to know a work. It includes the text and its meanings, but goes beyond them. One might say it is not empirical but ideal, as long as this is not understood to mean that the form is some metaphysical object. It is what we refer to when we judge Captain Ahab to be a tragic hero or an embodiment of evil—and the possibility of argument about such judgments indicates that the form is not given but something arrived at through the reader's work of integration of the elements of the work into a whole.

As this implies, the form itself refers not just to the objects of description within the story but to broader human realities: everything to which we refer when we make sense of a story and judge its importance and quality, including the literary tradition and those realities of human history and experience which literature thematizes (in McCarthy, one might say: colonialism, violence, enormity, apocalypse, etc.). Determining whether Ahab is a modern tragic hero or what kind of tragic hero he is requires that we refer not only to the tradition of tragedy but also to

[67] I borrow this usage of "form" from Elder.

whether or what kind of tragedy is possible in modernity, which is a question about (among other things) the possibilities for extremity and greatness, and the character of the constraints on human agency in modernity.

The work is a work of *literature* and not just entertainment in part because it seems to be about something important, because it has, as Lamarque and Olson put it, "something to say about the 'human condition.'"[68] Both parts of this phrase are potentially misleading—"something to say" because the work is not an encoded message from author to audience, the work of reading aimed at getting back to some original intention of the author, and "the human condition" because there is no singular human condition, and literature does not (usually or only) educate us to universals. But the point is that the work, if it is literature and not just a historical document, is not just an expression of the author's beliefs or those of his time, but seems to be *about* something that still has bearing on our own understanding of what it means to be human, which includes an understanding of the historicity and plurality of humanity as well as what human beings have in common.

We could therefore see the work itself in its entirety as an aspect of some reality or realities. a clue to a further whole which comprehends it. That reality is not what is explicitly described; it is, rather, the indeterminate entity which the work seems to imply, the background implied by the narrative and images, the background against which the narrative and images make sense. I say "indeterminate," following Polanyi, because that "entity" is not something given, something "out there" existing independently of the work and of our reading and reflection, our tacit integration. *It is what we come to know in reading, trying to understand, and*

[68] Lamarque and Olsen: "Literature, unlike fiction, is an evaluative concept and a work is recognized as a literary work partially through the recognition of the intention to present something to the reader that is humanly interesting….The highly valued works of the literary canon are recognized as such because they have something to say about the 'human condition.'" (*Truth, Fiction and Literature,* 276)

judging the work, which can never be exhaustively articulated but which will issue forth in a sense of greater coherence—and, as I will argue, the imperative to develop those capacities that will allow one to achieve a yet greater coherence.

To say that works of literature are those that have "something to say about the 'human condition'" implies that they do not merely pose problems that demand a higher coherence but that they indicate the direction in which the solution lies. We refer to reality in judging the deficiencies of a work of mediocre fiction, but good literature evokes the sense of a different order of coherence. It does this along both its axes, which work together: the horizontal or syntagmatic unfolding of the story, and the vertical or paradigmatic dimension of the meaning of particular images or descriptions.

With respect to narrative, *making sense* means following the story: understanding why A follows B, the significance of each successive action and event and how it reflects back on what came before it—grasping the dramatic problem and understanding whether and how the problem is resolved. Plot is an implied coherence based on a dramatic problem and its resolution. The dramatic problem tends, in literature, to be rooted in a fundamental human problem. In understanding and judging the plot of a work we are educated to the conditions under which real conflict arises and according to which that conflict can be resolved, or not (in which case the story must find a different kind of "resolution"). "Finding the plot in the facts" is a central theme of Maclean's book, and I will discuss plot at length in the next chapter. In a lyric poem, the "drama" could be thought of as a drama of thought—the dialectic of an argument, the struggle to make sense of a perception, the search for the image that brings satisfaction. (Helen Vendler and others have characterized a poem as "the imitation of a thought," analogous to Aristotle's

characterization of drama as "the imitation of action.") The temporal dimension is obviously more important in some poems than in others.

With respect to image and description, *making sense* means grasping what is being depicted or described—understanding its referent, meaning and significance. Image, symbol, figure, and the other "vertical" elements of literature work to evoke the conditions according to which the unfolding of the plot makes sense. This too will be a central consideration in my reading of Maclean, as well as the other works. In a lyric poem, obviously, image and figuration are essential—the whole force of the poem might be to suggest a powerful image for some reality, where the referent is not necessarily even specified—as with a symbol. Metaphors, symbols and other figures suggest new coherences through suggesting a ground of relatedness between two dissimilar things, which cannot be reduced to a list of shared characteristics.

In the McCarthy passage, we inhabit the poetic language and look toward the form, and are forced to seek a whole beyond the objects represented because otherwise we can't make sense of—can't integrate—the strange richness of the language. The language and figuration evoke a terrifyingly unstable world against which the violence and cruelty of the story make a different kind of sense than that which we would initially attribute to it (simply the acts of barbarous, bad men). It provides an image of the true order of the world as mysterious, dark, inhuman. But if we come to *know* something about the conditions and tenuousness of human civilization, it is not because he gives us propositions about it. Rather, it is the tacit integration that brings together image and story along with what we know about human beings and human history in a new (and potentially terrifying) coherence—the conditions of which we then attempt to make conscious in a practice of reading and criticism still to be described and demonstrated.

In sum: literature presents us with problems—practical problems and problems of sense—and the form of the work implies a further coherence in light of which those problems could be resolved or comprehended. The way in which we come to know reality through literature is distinctive, different from (though not necessarily radically discontinuous with) how we might come to know reality through trying to make sense of events in our own life, both because of this implied coherence and because it is through the *activity* of reading, of struggling to make sense of plot and imagery, that we achieve a new tacit integration, not only of the particulars of the text but of the knowledge of human life, experience, and history that we bring to bear in that effort of understanding.

We might therefore think of reading not as passive absorption as a *skilled practice* such as Matthew Crawford describes—a practice whereby we gain certain capacities through the effort to achieve some end:

> When we become competent in some particular field of practice, our perception is disciplined by that practice; we become attuned to pertinent features of a situation that would be invisible to a bystander. Through the exercise of a skill, the self that acts in the world takes on a definite shape. It comes to be in a relation of *fit* to the world it has *grasped.*[69]

Crawford draws on Polanyi in his argument, and as the Polanyian model of knowledge and reality would emphasize, it is not just we who are transformed but the world that we inhabit, as we develop the capacity to tacitly integrate the particulars of the world around us into new coherences. Just as the socialized adult recognizes and responds to realities that are "invisible" to the toddler—the value of money, the injustice of an unprovoked attack, the meaning of words printed on a page—the practitioner of a specialized skill or expert in a discipline of knowledge not only knows more *facts* than the uninitiated but sees and inhabits a different world: the basketball player sees not just a chaotic movement of bodies on the court but threats and

[69] *The World Beyond Your Head*, p. 25.

possibilities; the biologist sees not just a mass of plants and animals but species intertwined into a living ecosystem. These coherences are *real* and not just projections because they "push back" against the will and desire of the player or the scientist and condition the achievement of the ends of each: to score or win, to comprehend the environment.[70]

My argument so far would imply that what "pushes back" in literature are the conditions of sense, and it is these conditions to which we are attuned as we improve our skill at reading literature—at least if literature is conceived as having the relation to human realities I have suggested.

Skilled practices are directed toward some end, and it is the effort to achieve this end that makes us aware of the relevant features of reality—as constraints upon our efforts or enablers of them—and, as we become more skilled, better able to respond to and out of our understanding of that reality. The intrinsic end of reading literature is, arguably, to *understand* it—and, one might add, to properly respond to it, but I want to propose that this could be subsumed under "understanding." (If one is not disturbed by the infamous tree of dead babies in McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, arguably one hasn't understood it—which is not to say that the "proper" response is singular, simple, or obvious; one might also legitimately feel the scene to be comical or absurd.)[71] And the view of literature articulated in this chapter would suggest that to understand the work means not to be able to translate it into a literal paraphrase, or explain it with reference to its historical or biographical context, but in being able to grasp the work as

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[70] This is why Crawford promotes skilled practices as essential to our "retrieving the real" in a society ever more transformed by capitalism to sell us the gratification of our immediate desires: "it is when we are engaged in a skilled practice that the world shows up for us as having a reality of its own, independent of the self."

[71] Some might say the end of reading literature is enjoyment, but I would argue that this too is conditional on understanding—that is, one might read Beckett's *Molloy* and enjoy it simply for the musicality of the words, but this would seem to miss something essential having to do with the meaning or referent, as well as the intention, of the work.

referring to something which is part of human experience, universal or historically specific—seeing its form as reflecting certain human realities, problems, or conditions of sense.

This means, crucially, that ambiguities are not to be decisively resolved; rather, understanding means discerning the ambiguity in the work as reflective of realities that cannot be resolved into facts that can be expressed propositionally. It is not necessarily that "reality is ambiguous," but it is aspectual[72]—in the Polanyian understanding, not given and independent of our seeing, but dependent on our "reading" of it and on the kind of sense we are able to make of it. And grasping reality means, therefore, grasping it in its various aspects, and furthermore grasping its aspectual character.

A Different Kind of Sense: Emergence and Social Constructivism

I have suggested something about the character of the reality, or realities, to which literature educates us—those aspects of "human reality" to which we do not ordinarily attend, and which may be distorted or denied in our everyday world and everyday lives. But I want now to argue that it makes sense to think of the reality to which we must make reference when we read as *sui generis*—that is, not just as neglected or repressed pieces of (what would otherwise be) our everyday world, but as a "different level" of reality.[73] I will develop this using Polanyi's conception of "emergence."

Polanyi's argument against reductionism—the Laplacean ideal of explaining everything according to the motion of atoms—rests on the observation that our knowledge of particulars depends on our construal of those particulars *as* parts of a comprehensive and "higher level"

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[72] In the sense explored by Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations*.
[73] At least when we are reading a work as *literature* rather than historical document or psychological symptom, etc.

entity which gives them their meaning.[74] That is, whatever it is that we are trying to understand—for instance, a baseball game—we understand it as an entity, so it only has its meaning and therefore its *reality* as an entity, not just as an aggregate of all the "lower level" things of which it is composed. Questions about why a baseball player tried to steal a base and whether this was a wise decision will not be answered with reference to physical forces, nor even simply with reference to the rules of the game, but only with reference to strategy and standards of what makes a good play within the game of baseball. The laws of physics and the rules of baseball describe *limiting* but not *determinant* conditions for how the game plays out and how we make sense of and judge a given play.[75]

The need to integrate the particulars into a higher-level entity in order to make sense in effect creates, or reflects, a new *level* of reality.[76] Polanyi refers to this as the *emergence* of a higher level of reality from a lower, which he claims has both an ontological and an epistemological meaning. For example, ontologically (and evolutionarily), the interaction of molecules governed by the laws of chemistry gives rise at some point to living organisms, which have their own governing principles irreducible to those laws; epistemologically, while the action of molecules can be understood by appeal to the laws of chemistry (and this is the object of the discipline of chemistry), the study and understanding of living beings as coherent entities of their own—that is, biology—must avail itself of principles beyond those of chemistry.[77] In

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[74] As he puts it, "the structure of comprehension" corresponds to "the structure of the comprehensive entity which is its object" (TD 33-34).
[75] In Polanyi's formulation, "the principles controlling a comprehensive entity would be found to rely on their operation on laws governing the particulars of the entity in themselves…the laws governing the particulars in themselves would never account for the organizing principles of a higher entity which they form" (TD 34).
[76] The ambiguity about whether this is a matter of creation or discovery should not be troubling. In the Polanyian model, all knowledge is "created" in the sense that the individual must actively, if not consciously, integrate the particulars of knowledge and experience into a meaningful entity; however, this is not a free and arbitrary creation but constrained by the standards of sense and by the world which the individual is trying to understand or manipulate.
[77] cf. TD Ch. 2 and PK pp. 393-397

effect, then, "the relation of a comprehensive entity [e.g. a living organism] to its particulars [e.g. chemical compounds]" is "the relation between two levels of reality, the higher one controlling the marginal conditions left indeterminate by the principles governing the lower one" (TD 55). In this case, then, biology seeks to supply those principles governing life which are "left indeterminate" by the laws of chemistry.

Likewise, Polanyi argues, at some point from animal life emerges a human form of life which is not fully explicable with reference to instinctual behavior and the demands of self- and species preservation; understanding human behavior requires an appeal to normative standards, to human beings' "moral sense."[78] Explaining our moral sense according to the principles of evolutionary biology is, of course, highly popular at the moment, and it is beyond my scope here to further critique such reductionism or to respond to the possible objections to the theory of emergence. But I think the theory can illuminate the human reality we come to know through literature if we extend Polanyi's argument to propose a final distinctive level of reality within the human domain.

I alluded earlier to the way in which our habitual ways of making sense of our experience depend upon the conventions into which we are socialized, and that these conventional understandings often prove to be inadequate to our experience, sometimes radically so. I would propose that we can understand these conventions to belong to a certain "level" of reality which I would call "socially constructed reality," with particular reference to Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's book *The Social Construction of Reality*. Berger and Luckmann describe how the necessarily reductive typificatory schemes according to which we construe the world—from "marriage" and "justice" down to basic categories of gender—are *functional*, that while they are

[78] "…both this moral sense and our respect for it presuppose an obedience to commands accepted in defiance of the immemorial scheme of self-preservation which had dominated the evolutionary process up to this point." (TD 52)

constrained by material and psychological realities (e.g. aging and death, a mother's attachment to her children, etc.), they develop so as to support the stability of a particular society and the reproduction of its institutions.

From the constructivist perspective, the "moral sense" which Polanyi identifies as the emergent property of properly human life is distinct from animal instincts, but it is still not necessarily the "highest level" of human reality. For the very idea of social constructivism (especially the idea that ideals work to justify existing institutions, which means that they work to justify existing structures of power) suggests the possibility of—and generates the desire for—norms and standards which would not merely be functional for a given society but would but would be "really normative." From Polanyi's perspective, we could see the theory of social construction as posing a problem which, to be solved, would have to find a higher level of coherence which would encompass, among other things, our capacity to recognize the social construction of reality, as well as our ability to critique the given norms. And that higher level of coherence would be, in Polanyi's terms, a new level of reality which transcended the functional and conventional level.

It is this level of reality to which, I would argue, literature refers us—the reality that does not merely consist of the conventions that sustain the functioning of society, but which reaches back into history, forward into the human future, and "upward" or "downward" into those aspects of human experience that are ignored, distorted or denied in the everyday social world: including the normative constraints and demands we feel which are not adequately explained by and may even contradict conventional notions of goodness, and realities such as death, catastrophe, unpredictable eros, inevitable dispossession.

The conventions of every hitherto existing human society have consisted in the kind of necessarily simplifying typification I have described. But I would make a more specific claim about the distortions of modern social reality, and the nature of the alternative that we apprehend through good literature. Numerous social theorists and critics of the past century and a half have commented upon the modern reframing of problems in terms of utilitarianism and self-interest—what Max Weber referred to as the increasing dominance of instrumental rationality over value rationality. It may be that "rationalization," as Weber terms it, has *flattened* the conventional ways of making sense of things—by which I mean, many things that were once considered holy or valuable in themselves now are increasingly evaluated based on their contributions to individual needs and wants and/or standards of productivity and efficiency, and eliminated or radically altered if found wanting in this regard (marriage, various religious rituals, dress code, social hierarchies); many things once considered simply real in themselves are explained, or explained away, with reference to evolution, psychology, arbitrary environmental or cultural factors. What remains widely recognized as real is the individual person and her intentions, desires, and passions; what remains widely recognized as good is the pursuit and attainment of those goals and helping others to do the same; what is agreed upon as bad is harming other persons and hindering them from pursuing and attaining their own ends.

I would suggest, then, that making sense of serious literature requires a kind of cognitive shift from this framework—in the first instance, that it requires the recognition of and appeal to a *depth dimension* to human life—recognizing that reality exceeds our conventional constructions of it, and that it exceeds and sometimes radically opposes the wants and needs of persons. And as the reality of the physical world places a demand on the scientist to know it insofar as he is committed to the ideals of science, literature places a demand upon us human beings to know

that deeper human reality. Therefore this conception of mimesis issues forth, essentially, in a practice of reading aimed at apprehending the problems that works of literature reveal to us and the higher coherences such works evoke.

Blood Meridian, which I will discuss in Ch. 3, is, one could say, about enormity, and moreover that it *is* enormity—that is, what we find in the book is an aspect of what we mean by "enormity," and our conception of enormity would not be what it is without McCarthy's appalling vision.

This is because "enormity" is not an object in the world which exists independently of our conceptions of it. This is not to deny that human beings commit enormities independently of whether they are represented or not in literature, nor that there is a social and conventional concept of enormity that is generally sufficient to recognize enormities as such. But *enormity* as a foundational human reality is not simply the facts of appalling massacres—it is an "ideal" reality in the sense that it depends upon our integration of the facts along with what we understand of human history and human being into a comprehensive whole through which we can make sense of those facts. This is precisely what Polanyi means by reality.

Blood Meridian, through the character of its narration and description, through the perverse but not wholly dismissable philosophical reflections of the judge, could be said not just to represent but to constitute the reality of enormity at least in one or some of its foundational aspects. What we *mean* by enormity is what the book shows us—along with, of course, what we learn from other works of fiction, history, contemporary events and our own experience. But enormity as we find it through literature is distinctive because of the narrative and poetic character of literature, through which it can imply the unstatable and never fully comprehensible bedrock of human comprehension and judgment, which I will eventually characterize as myth.

Toward a Practice of Reading—"Post-Critical Literary Criticism"

If one comes to know some human reality through the inquiry provoked by a work of literature, how should we conceive this practice of inquiry or reading?

Our coming to know reality through the encounter with literature may be to some degree automatic; it may, in the first instance, simply look like *recognition*, the immediate and intuitive grasp of some reality or truth that had not previously penetrated to consciousness or was not part of the reader's ordinary consciousness. Tolstoy's "The Death of Ivan Ilyich" might be a paradigmatic case of this. The story presents few difficulties in terms of understanding what is going on, but it provokes, demands even, some recognition of the reality of death, of one's own death, a reality we know but do not generally inhabit.

From the Polanyian perspective, what happens when we read Tolstoy's story, insofar as it "moves" us, is that in focally attending to what is happening in the story, we integrate our own fear of death and knowledge of all those conditions of human life which allow us to make sense of the story (in some measure) and to find it persuasive. We attend from the events described to some gradually emerging comprehensive whole, which allows us to understand what is being narrated: we follow the story. That whole is not merely the whole of the work, but of the realities to which the work refers. We grasp a coherence—a reality—that allows us to integrate all the subsidiaries of our reading—or rather, we experience those subsidiaries *as* integrated and thereby, for the duration of reading the story and perhaps beyond, inhabit a world populated by the new coherences created by our reading. What allows us to feel an identification with Ivan and his situation, despite the fact that he is a nineteenth-century Russian bureaucrat with a terminal disease, and we are (or may be) twenty-first-century Americans in perfectly good health, is, one might say, the shared human reality of death.

Such "discoveries" may not be made once and for all, but may rather have to be continually relearned. This is not because we "forget" as one might forget a state capital or how to do long division, but because we settle back into the shrunken reality of the everyday, immediate world—the institutional and personal reality of the social world. We assent, intellectually, to the *fact* of death, but when we are not directly confronted with it we too easily cease to inhabit a world in which death is a *reality* and slip back into an easy half-denial—an acceptance of death only as construed, as Heidegger would say, by the "they": "One of these days one will die too, in the end; but right now it has nothing to do with us."[79] Literature can tear away our blinders for a moment or longer, and I would certainly include such shocks of recognition among the ways in which it educates us to human realities.

But often we gain little knowledge from our initial experience of the work of art. This is particularly true when the work is difficult or obscure, as with modernist or post-modern poetry or fiction, such as the McCarthy passage above or even more formally challenging works. Here too inquiry must begin with some initial recognition—at least the intuition that there is something there to be known, that the effort will be worthwhile.[80] Given that recognition, how would inquiry proceed?

The common response to a "difficult" work, or difficulty in a work, is interpretation or paraphrase, that is, the attempt to say what the work means, the translation of figurative meaning (broadly understood) into literal meaning.

Interpretation is one attempt to know the reality that the poem represents, but if treated as the end of reading poetry it is—as has been extensively if not exhaustively argued—

[79] *Being and Time*, trans. Macquarrie and Robinson, 297.
[80] This may also come from institutional authority or the authority of the tradition. I may not immediately be able to make *any* sense of an Eliot poem or a Beckett play, but will make the attempt based on my trust in those who claim that the effort will be repaid.

misconceived, for this assumes that the formal and figurative features of the work (diction, syntax, meter, rhyme, metaphor, etc.) are all either decorative or part of a code to be broken in order to get at the underlying “message” of the work. In “Against Interpretation,” Susan Sontag argues vehemently against this kind of “translation” on the grounds that it strips art of the distinctive depth and reality that it has, and therefore strips the world of this depth and reality as well:

> To interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world—in order to set up a shadow world of ‘meanings.’ It is to turn the world into this world…The world, our world, is depleted, impoverished enough. Away with all duplicates of it, until we again experience more immediately what we have.[81]

She proposes that “[w]hat we need instead of a hermeneutics is an erotics of art,” which would involve attention to and description of the formal features and the sensuous experience of art without trying to extract its “content,” that is, story elements or ideas which could be grasped independently of our experience of the work.

Sontag’s critique of interpretation is important as a corrective to those who would reduce a work to its meaning, yet “erotics” as she characterizes it is also, I think, inadequate as a method of fully (or as fully as possible) grasping those human realities to which works of art refer. When Sontag insists that the “right” kind of criticism “dissolves considerations of content into those of form” or “reveal[s] the sensuous surface of art without mucking about in it” she seems to want to deny *reference*—to deny that the works are not just independent objects to be sensuously experienced but are in fact *about* something, that they invite a kind of inquiry, that they present themselves as facets of a reality that demands to be known. (Her own criticism would seem to contradict this in brilliantly illuminating what the work is “about,” the human realities to which it refers.)

[81] *Against Interpretation*, p. 7.

Polanyi shows that our knowledge depends on our *efforts to know*—on attending to problems, dwelling in all of those domains of experience and knowledge that seem relevant to the problem, and trying to make conscious that intuited coherence which would solve the problem, or at least illuminate its character and contours. Thus the aim of criticism is not just to allow us to experience the work of art more fully; it is a complementary endeavor to the work aimed at apprehending and articulating those problems which the work dramatizes and the realities which it evokes.

As an alternative to "hermeneutics" or "erotics," I propose a practice of Polanyian reading that would involve, first, attention to problems raised by the work—to places where the work disrupts our ordinary way of making sense of things through the character of the language, the use of figuration, and by forcing us to confront realities outside our ordinary experience. Such problems will generally take the form of what seems evocative, surprising, or troubling, yet right—those aspects of plot, descriptions, or formal features of the work that depart from our expectations or wishes, or do not make immediate or conventional sense, but nonetheless seem in accord with a deeper ground of sense. In other words, Polanyian reading begins with attending to the ways in which the work points to some reality of which we have a tacit and partial—but only tacit and partial—intimation.

The next and logical step, then, is the effort to make sense, to resolve or clarify these problems—seeking the coherence of the work that makes sense of the particulars (of the work and of our perception and judgment), and the broader coherence of the human realities to which the work refers—through dwelling in the work and also in those felt relations between the work and other objects of our experience and knowledge. If there is something evocative or mysteriously, disturbingly *right* about McCarthy's description of the filibusters riding through

the desert, the image of a place "whose true geology is not stone by fear"—what does that rightness suggest about issues of fundamental human concern? This entails dwelling in the work and also in those felt relations between the work and other objects of our experience and knowledge. It also entails reflection on the *grounds* of our perceptions and judgments about the work. This is to say, again, that the ultimate object of this kind of reading is not an interpretation of the work but knowledge of those human realities to which the work refers—or, perhaps better, to which it refers *us* in our attempts to understand it.

(I do not deny that our interest in and enjoyment of literature may have other sources—sheer escape from the everyday world, aesthetic delight—but my interest is, again, in reading as a mode of discovery and a source of knowledge.)

As will become clear as I attempt this kind of reading in the remainder of the dissertation, this is not a formalist approach. The attempt to follow out the problems raised by a given work, and to apprehend the realities to which the work refers, leads, necessarily I think, beyond the work itself—on the one hand, to the historical context of the work; on the other to the literary and cultural tradition. With respect to the first: context is essential for grasping the referent of the work, since "human realities" are not eternally and universally fixed but historically and culturally mutable.[82] What one comes to grasp through reading the *Iliad* is not just timeless truths about war but something of one's own historical situation and the transformation of the conditions of human life in the millennia since Homer. With respect to the second: the effort to make sense of a particular work leads naturally and necessarily outward to the rest of the author's oeuvre, to the literary tradition of which that oeuvre is a part, and ultimately to the whole of the cultural tradition, including those other humanistic and social theoretical disciplines

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[82] As Rosanna Warren has commented to me, biographical information is important for interpretation because "it keeps you from making mistakes."

through which human beings have sought to make deeper and more encompassing sense of human experience, human reality, and human history.

The coherence one finds and articulates is not fixed or given. A given work may lead in many different ways to different encompassing coherences, depending on the background of the reader and the paths of association she follows. This is one way of reformulating the (controversial) commonplace that "there is no one right interpretation," though it is not to say either that interpretation is "free," that works are like Rorschach tests, which merely stimulate our associations. This distances my argument from certain varieties of "reader-response" criticism. Because the integrations we achieve in reading the work depend on our own knowledge, experience, and interests, I would agree that the meaning of a work and therefore the realities a reader finds in and through it will differ to some degree from reader to reader. But that does not mean that our readings are not constrained. Both the work and the realities to which it refers circumscribe the possibilities of legitimate interpretation, and it is this resistance that makes the reading of and reflection on literature productive of some knowledge we did not previously have, not just knowledge of our psyche but of the conditions of making sense of human experience. My own readings will be conditioned by my particular background, but part of what is demanded of the critic in making sense of a work is to distinguish the personal and the parochial from what ought to be generally compelling, at least as one aspect or possible reading of the work in question—which is not to deny that she (I) may sometimes fail to do so.

The final and crucial component of the method of reading I propose—reading toward reality—is the attempt to describe—make explicit—what we perceive, as an indispensible complement to the *experience* of reading. This explicit propositional knowledge does not and cannot replace what we come to know through the experience of the work—it is inextricably

dependent on the tacit knowledge embodied our initial response to the work, and thus inextricably dependent on the work of art itself and our experience of it. But Polanyi's theories suggest that only through the attempt to make that experience and its implications conscious can we integrate what we intuitively glimpse in works of literature into the world as we ongoingly inhabit it, rather than letting it pass away as a transient experience. If what I have suggested about the deficient character of the everyday socially constructed world is correct, this means that the practice of reading is an ongoing labor to inhabit a world imbued not only with greater meaning and depth, but with more stringent constraints and imperatives, including, in Elder's phrase, the imperative to consciousness, the continuing effort to know these realities.

Much good literary criticism largely conforms to the practice I have described, enhancing our sense that through literature we apprehend the deep conditions of sense of human life and helping us to make those conditions conscious so as to live and judge more often in response to them. Thus I do not mean to be proposing an entirely new method of reading or criticism. Nor do I mean to propose that this is the only valid method or aim of criticism. But I have tried to present a conception of reading that, perhaps uniquely (perhaps not), provides the basis for defending literature as a mode and medium of knowledge of the conditions of human life, and to make explicit the practice by which we can, and sometimes do, realize that knowledge.

Central to Polanyi's theory is the idea that there is no independent, external justification of the truths of scientific discovery, and this is true of the reality we come to know through literature as well. I have implicitly appealed throughout my paper to my reader's own experience of literature, and gestured, in my discussion of McCarthy, at the kind of reading entailed. But the

validation of the theory must lie in the productivity of an ongoing practice of reading in this way, and in what it allows one to find through reading particular works.

In what follows, I will try to demonstrate the kind of reading I propose, both to show the productivity of thinking about literature in this way, and to inquire into the specific characteristics of modern human reality that I find to be intimated by several works of twentieth-century American tragic—or apocalyptic—fiction, works which could be said to exemplify the (American) "apocalyptic sublime."

Chapter 2: Norman Maclean and the Search for Modern Tragic Form

> To join a hovering excellence, to escape
> From fire and be part only of that which
> Fire is the symbol: the celestial possible.
> Wallace Stevens, "To an Old Philosopher in Rome"

Now that we have a basis for understanding how literature can "represent" reality and how we as readers may come to know reality through a practice of reading and criticism, I return to the original question as posed in the Introduction: what was Maclean ultimately seeking at Mann Gulch, and seeking to represent in *Young Men and Fire*? We may now understand this as closely related, if not identical, to the question of what we come to know in reading the work. I do not mean to suggest that what we come to know through reading the work is identical with the author's conscious intention in writing it, that the author "encodes" something into the work which the reader tries in her reading to decode. Nor must we judge the vision of the work to be wholly true—we may ultimately judge it to be deficient in various ways. But it is almost grammatical to say that if we have the sense that the work represents or reflects some reality, then the author was guided, more or less consciously, by an apprehension of this reality, which may have simply manifested itself as partially or largely tacit sense of "rightness." I will speak, therefore, of the work's intention, where this may be distinct from the conscious aim of the biographical author.

My reading of *Fire* and of the works to follow will exemplify, clarify, and make plausible the theory and practice articulated in the first chapter. I intend to be *doing* the kind of Polanyian reading I have outlined. While I believe that this kind of reading ought to be applicable to any serious work of literature, Maclean's work should be doubly clarifying, because, as I will argue, part of what *Fire* thematizes is precisely the difficulty in determining and representing reality.

This is the case in many (perhaps all) modern works of literature, but Maclean makes this difficulty an explicit theme of the book.

Trying to discern and articulate the reality that comes through in the work will eventually take us beyond *Fire* and into a consideration of several other works that seem to share something of both the aim of transforming catastrophe into artistic form, and of the character of the form they find, performatively suggesting something about the inadequacy to their purposes of traditional tragic form. They depart from realistic or traditional representation and conventional narrative to evoke some ultimate basis for making sense of and judging human action, a basis to which we can no longer refer directly since we lack a common (mythical, religious, or traditional) conception of it. These works suggest at once the always-provisional character of our knowledge of that background and the imperative to develop the capacities that would allow us to know it better.

But I begin with Maclean.

The Problem Posed by Young Men and Fire

To briefly reiterate: Norman Maclean's *Young Men and Fire* tells the true story or, as the book's subtitle puts it, "*A* True Story of the Mann Gulch Fire"—the story of a crew of Smokejumpers who parachuted into the gulch in August 1949 to fight a fire that would kill all but three of them. It also tells of Maclean's investigations into the event decades later. Throughout *Fire*, Maclean explicitly characterizes what he is doing as attempting to translate a catastrophic event into artistic form: a poem, a story, a tragedy. What, then, does it mean for Maclean to be "transforming catastrophe into tragedy," and what is the significance of the fact that his efforts to do so take the form that they do, an odd hybrid of history and memoir,

journalism and prose poem?

The following quotes give a sense of the dimensions of the task as Maclean conceived it:

> Although young men died like squirrels in Mann Gulch, the Mann Gulch fire should not end there, smoke drifting away and leaving terror without consolation of explanation, and controversy without lasting settlement. Probably most catastrophes end this way without an ending, the dead not even knowing how they died….*This is a catastrophe that we hope will not end where it began; it might go on and become a story*. It will not have to be made up—that is all-important to us—but we do have to know in what odd places to look for missing parts of a story about a wildfire and of course have to know a story and a wildfire when we see one. *So this story is a test of its own belief—that in this cockeyed world there are shapes and designs*, if only we have some curiosity, training, and compassion and take care not to lie or be sentimental. It would be a start to a story if this catastrophe were found to have circled around out there somewhere until it could return to itself with explanations of its own mysteries and with the grief it left behind, not removed, because grief has its own place at or near the end of things, but altered somewhat by the addition of something like wonder—wonder, for example, because we can now say that the fire whirl which destroyed was caused by three winds on a river. If we could say something like this and be speaking both accurately and somewhat like Shelley when he spoke of clouds and winds, then *what we would be talking about would start to change from catastrophe without a filled-in story to what could be called the story of a tragedy, but tragedy would be only a part of it, as it is of life*.[83]

> There are also missing parts to the story of the lonely crosses ahead of us….What if…we should find enough of them to see catastrophe change into the shape of remembered tragedy? (46)

> As a mystery story, it left unexplained what dramatic and devastating forces coincided to make the best of young men into bodies, how the bodies got to their crosses and what it was like on the way, and why this catastrophe has been allowed to pass without a search for *the carefully measured grains of consolation needed to transform catastrophe into tragedy*. (143, emphasis mine)

Thus the general conception is that the catastrophe needs to be given a *form*; or that its form needs to be discovered. This includes explaining why the catastrophe happened, and this explanation is a kind of consolation: the austere consolation of understanding. But causal explanation is not all that is required, as Maclean implies with his reference to Shelley. In an earlier version of the manuscript, Maclean characterizes poems like “The Cloud” and “Ode to the

[83] Maclean, *Young Men and Fire*, 37-8, emphases mine. From here on I will just provide page references.

West Wind" as "mixtures of the poetic and the scientific imaginations."[84] The form Maclean seeks is one that will make what has happened *intelligible*, that will show the events to conform to some "shape" or "design" which is not imposed but belongs to their reality,[85] and this intelligibility is not just a matter of knowing why things happened in the sense of causality (the "scientific imagination") but their significance (the "poetic imagination").

Maclean alternately refers to this form as the form of *tragedy* and the form of a *story* of which tragedy is "only a part, as it is of life." This apparent discrepancy could easily be reconciled if we take him to be using "tragedy" unrigorously, at times meaning it in the sense of the literary genre and at times in the colloquial sense of a terrible event, but it could also be that there is a real ambiguity in *Fire*'s relation to the genre of tragedy. Is the literary (or dramatic) form of tragedy indeed the form that Maclean is seeking, the form that will reflect or reveal the sense or meaning of the events of Mann Gulch, their reality? Or will he require some new form that deviates enough from previous tragedies that it constitutes some new genre? (Perhaps, to look forward, "apocalyptic" form.)

The form that Maclean finds is, of course, the book *Young Men and Fire*, and the question then is, what does the character of this form reflect about the kind of understanding he seeks—and, if we find it persuasive, the reality it reflects? Answering this question involves not only looking at how Maclean represents the events he depicts, but also judging the work with respect to its aims, both explicit and implicit.

Ultimately I will argue that Maclean's effort to transform catastrophe into tragedy is best

[84] Borroff, "The Achievement of Norman Maclean," 127.

[85] This is, I would argue, like Hegel's assumption of and search for reason in history—not a matter of asserting a supernatural intelligence that directs events according to some preconceived plan, but simply the recognition that the *condition* of making sense is to see history as the manifestation of a logic that can be grasped, and if history is to have a reality of its own and is not simply reducible to nature, that logic must not be causal, the logic of matter, but have reference to "spirit," to human ends and purposes.

understood as an attempt to make sense of the disastrous events according to a different and in some sense “higher” order of meaning than common sense, and representing—imitating, in the sense of *mimesis* developed in the previous chapter—those events such that this sense is manifest. This amounts not just to explaining why things went terribly wrong, but also seeing in the catastrophe an intimation of certain hidden or unacknowledged conditions of human life, not only material but ideal. The meaning of the events is to be found not merely horizontally, so to speak—in their outcomes, good or bad—but vertically, as manifestations of a background order encompassing both heroism and enormity. In other words, the events of Mann Gulch seem at once to radically disrupt the everyday order according to which we make sense of things, and to indicate the possibility, indeed the necessity, of a different ground of sense. What makes *Fire* tragic literature, then, is that it represents this disruption in a way that implies this different and more comprehensive kind of sense, one which sees human life as subject to hostile forces and conditions that can never be finally and fully comprehended but still affirms a normatively structured order. What makes it *modern* tragic literature is its recognition that that the sense that one finds cannot be other than fraught, tenuous, provisional—and perhaps radically threatened, if the work finally moves beyond the tragic to the apocalyptic.

The Story of the Struggle to Tell the Story

First: an overview of the form Maclean finds and the specific questions raised by its peculiarity.

The distinctiveness of *Young Men and Fire* lies not only in the actual stuff and structure of the book but also in the circumstances of its writing and publication (which themselves partially come through in the text itself), and this too is foundational to grasping the work’s

intention. As noted in the publisher's introduction to the book, Maclean began work on what was to become *Young Men and Fire* (his working title was "The Great Blow-Up") at age seventy-three, after publishing his first and only other full-length literary work, *A River Runs Through It and Other Stories*. The original intention was both to memorialize the men who had died fighting the 1949 fire in Mann Gulch in Maclean's home state of Montana, and to resolve certain long-unanswered and troubling questions about how and why they had died.

In particular, the investigation centers on the question of whether it had been the "escape fire" lit by foreman Wag Dodge, and not the fire they were fighting, that had killed the men. As the fire threatened to overtake them, Dodge had lit another fire in the grass, burning away the fuel in his immediate vicinity; he tried to get the rest of the men to lie down with him in the ashes of his fire, a safe lee around which the inferno would burn, but they failed to understand or trust him and kept heading to the ridge. All but two were eventually overtaken by the flames. The father of one of the deceased charged that it had in fact been Dodge's fire that had overtaken the others, and the issue had never been satisfactorily resolved.

Answering this question is clearly imperative for Maclean. But the poetry of the work shows that it is not just about settling the facts, and its dual structure shows that it is not just about the Smokejumpers but about Maclean himself: it tells the story not only of the events of Mann Gulch but of Maclean's investigation, beginning almost four decades later, into those events, and the work is permeated with his reflections on nearing the end of his life. So it is the story of an old man as well as of young men: an old man coming to terms with his own aging, the deaths of those he has lost, and his own lives not lived. And it is not just dual but multiple: tragedy and mystery story, history and memoir; it contains scientific graphs and nineteenth-century poetry, geological history and comic anecdote. This multidimensionality is at times

bemusing but certainly contributes to the book's distinctiveness and arguably to its power, and it seems intrinsic to the book's endeavor, whether or not fully successful. The work seems to grope toward something that cannot be cleanly and directly expressed.

Related to this genre ambiguity (not to say confusion) is the fact that Maclean was unable to finish the work before he died. It was the driving passion of the final decade of his life, and University of Chicago Press editor Alan Thomas, who was responsible for the book's final form, has suggested that one reason Maclean did not finish the book before he died was that the work itself was sustaining him, but Thomas and others have also suggested that something about the task itself resisted completion—that it was too big, too complex, too "protean."[86] Maclean originally meant *Fire* to be a lean, straightforward narrative,[87] but it kept expanding and he could never finally circumscribe it, and certainly not contract it to the slim, tight work he originally envisioned.

Young Men and Fire is split into three parts, which Alan O. Weltzien characterizes as follows:

> Roughly speaking, part 1 narrates the minute-by-minute story of the blowup, part 2 narrates the story of Maclean's research and eventual understanding of the fire, and part 3 serves as an imaginative funeral service and benediction, as the men meet their death.

The first part is a narrative and constitutes the kind of explanation or understanding that narratives constitute, to which I will return. It is an understanding of the way in which things unfold according to certain conditions,[88] and, through showing human action against an implicit or explicit background of human purposes and ends, it reveals something of the significance of

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[86] In the editor's introduction to *Fire* and in a personal interview. Thomas later revised his view and more recently has argued that Maclean did in fact want to finish the book but was stymied by the mathematics and the need to find an adequate representation of 'inevitability.' (Source?)

[87] Conversation with John Maclean, July 10th, 2015.

[88] As opposed to causes—a narrative shows us not that A caused B, not 'if A, then B,' but that A *conditioned* B—'no B without A' (Charles Thomas Elder). See also Gallie, *Explanation and the Historical Understanding*.

the actions and events related.[89]

Yet the narrative of Part One is somehow incomplete: first, with respect to the conditions of the disaster, and secondly with respect to the significance of the disaster. These two gaps come together for Maclean, as they did for many trying to make sense of the catastrophe, in the question of whether it was Dodge's escape fire which burned the men. To know this is, for Maclean, essential not only to giving a complete account of what happened, but to knowing its significance. If the men were burned not by the main fire but by Dodge's fire, their deaths would, he seems to believe, no longer be *inevitable* but contingent, the product of a terrible mistake or accident. Dodge, in trying to save himself and his men, would have killed them unnecessarily. One wants to say that even if Dodge's fire *had* been the one to catch the men, this would not make it impossible to tell the story as tragedy, since there was also a certain inevitability to Dodge doing what seemed to him necessary. On the other hand, there were arguably a series of previous errors involved in the men being in the position of having to run from the fire in the first place. And by the end of the book, as we shall see, Maclean too recognizes that his ultimate task goes beyond settling the question of the "guilt" or "innocence" of Dodge's fire. Yet it is true that the answer to that questions affects the "feel" of the story, which is to say, its deeper significance.

The second part, then, is aimed at solving the mystery, in the form of a narrative of its own, a "quest story" (285). As Maclean puts it, "For a time, our story becomes the story of trying to find it" (164). Part Two relates Maclean's treks into Mann Gulch with Forest Ranger Laird Robinson and the two remaining survivors, Robert Sallee and Walter Rumsey, searching out the exact locations of Dodge's fire and the crevice through which Sallee and Rumsey escaped, and

[89] And as Gallie says, a story relates not just *any* sequence of actions and events but those which are "story-worthy," not run of the mill but revealing of the limits of human possibility, both positive and negative (Gallie, *Philosophy and the Historical Understanding*.

then Maclean's grappling with fire science and mathematics to literally plot out the course and speed of the fire vis-à-vis the course and speed of the men to see whether it was "inevitable"—and therefore "tragic"—that the main fire, the fire they went to fight, should catch them. Unlike the Smokejumper's tragedy, the quest story "end[s] happily" (285): by the end of Part Two, Maclean has answered the major questions he felt to be essential to telling the story, to understanding why the young men and the fire behaved as they did, so as to lead to their terrible convergence—why the rest of the men did not run straight up to the ridge like Rumsey and Sallee; how it was that Dodge's fire could burn at a right angle to the main fire (if it did). He has "exonerated" Dodge and his escape fire. He has to his own satisfaction shown the catastrophe to be "inevitable"—or, rather, located or accounted for its inevitability, the moment when the tragedy was inevitable (cf. p. 273).

This is not yet the end, though. The book concludes with a third part, which is very short—less than ten pages—and consists of an imagistic, at times almost hallucinatory, rendering of the conflagration, and an empathetic imagining of the final moments of the Smokejumpers.

Maclean himself suggests a way to understand the book's structure in his description of a graph that culminates the scientific investigation of Part Two. The graph shows the fire closing the distance to the men as they ran upgulch:

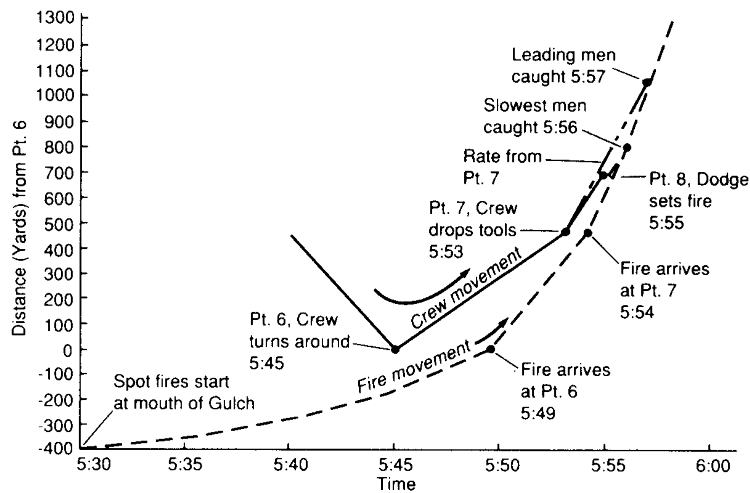

Figure 1 Time and position of fire and crew at Mann Gulch on August 5, 1949. Graph by Richard C. Rothermel (in *Young Men and Fire*, p. 269)

Maclean characterizes the convergence of the lines as "the tragic conclusion of the Mann Gulch story; the two lines converging to this conclusion constitute the plot." He then suggestively says: "Along each line are numbers which are turning points in the race….if they also have religious significance they are stations of the cross, and if they have literary significance they mark off acts of a drama" (269). One might say that the conclusion of Part Two fills in the missing pieces of the drama—the action—so as to show its literary significance, and Part Three redescribes the final conflagration to evoke some kind of "religious" significance—but it remains to be seen what each of these means.

Like *War and Peace* as characterized by Henry James, *Young Men and Fire* could be described as a "loose baggy monster,"[90] if not quite so large. Also like *War and Peace* (or, perhaps more relevantly, *Moby-Dick*), its bagginess is arguably appropriate, if not perfect. But what is it about the story or about the reality that the work means to convey that cannot be contained within a lean, linear narrative? More foundationally, what are the conditions of our judgment of its appropriateness, its rightness?

[90] James, *The Tragic Muse*, 4.

From Catastrophe to Story: The Search for Sense

I will begin with a closer analysis of what it means for Maclean to transform a catastrophe into a story before going on to consider what it means for him to transform it into a tragic story or tragedy.

Classical narratologists distinguished between the *fabula*, the plot as it is conveyed through narrative discourse, and the *sjužet*, the story or the events as they occurred or, in fiction, are imagined to have occurred. In nonfiction, such as *Fire*, the author's task is to take "what happened"—the *sjužet*—and *emplot* it—transform it into *fabula*—which is both a matter of ordering (how to reveal to the reader what occurred) and selection (of the infinite number of facts, what is relevant to the telling of the story). The question is, what is the principle of this transformation—what makes a plot a plot, that is to say a good plot? Or as we might say colloquially, what makes a story a story?[91]

Commonsensically, we all know a story when we hear it, so that it is hard not to say, a story is, well, *a story!* Much of our common sense was originally and acutely articulated in Aristotle's *Poetics*: a story (or a plot, *mythos*) is an account of events with a beginning, a middle, and an end. A story starts from a state of affairs which needs no prior explanation to be intelligible, which "doesn't necessarily follow from anything else, but something naturally exists or occurs after it," then follows out the consequences of that beginning to their resolution, the state of affairs which "naturally follows from something else, either necessarily or in general, but there is nothing else after it."[92] In other words, a story is "an imitation of an action,"[93] a telling of

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[91] This is potentially confusing because some narratologists use "story" to refer to the events that are represented by the narrative discourse or plot.
[92] Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Heath, 13.
[93] Aristotle., 12.

a series of events that have a certain unity. For Aristotle, the unity is that of a chain of events linked, in his terms, by relations of necessity and probability. For instance, he praises Homer for not including in the *Odyssey* two events which, according to tradition, happened to Odysseus but neither of which "[made] the occurrence of the other necessary or probable."[94] Some initial event sets off a cascade of consequences, and the story consists in following out those consequences to the end, the point at which all the major consequences have played out. Or, some event disrupts an apparent stability and the story is the account of the progression to a new stability.

We typically think of our interest in a story from the perspective of the beginning, from the "inciting event": the characters find themselves in some kind of predicament and we want to know how it turns out. But if we know out it turns out, as in the case of *Fire,* we can also think of our interest from the perspective of the ending. That is, we want to know how the ending came about, what led to it. A story, or, more broadly, narrative, has thus been characterized as a form of understanding or explanation because of its relation to causality—or, better, conditionality, since human action is not *caused* as events in the physical world are caused; rather, it is *conditioned* by various social, psychological, and other external and internal factors. Nothing *caused* Anna Karenina to commit suicide as my pushing this book off the table will cause it, with physical necessity, to fall, but numerous factors conditioned her action, and Tolstoy's novel could be said to perspicuously present those conditions. The historian and philosopher of history W.B. Gallie claims that the story is "a form of human understanding *sui generis* and…the basis of all historical thought and knowledge."[95] A story constitutes a kind of explanation—and this is especially pertinent to stories that relate historical events, as *Fire* does. It shows how things came about, why they turned out the way they did.

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[94] Aristotle., 15.
[95] Gallie, *Philosophy and the Historical Understanding*. 1.

Thus first of all to turn the catastrophe of Mann Gulch, the death of thirteen men, into the story of Mann Gulch means to show how and why things came out the way they did, to answer the questions remaining after the Forest Service's investigation decades before. This is how Maclean most consistently characterizes his task, as in the following passage:

> After the autumn rains changed into mud slides, the story seems to have been buried in incompleteness, pieces of it altogether missing. As a mystery story, it left unexplained what dramatic and devastating forces coincided to make the best of young men into bodies, how the bodies got to their crosses and what it was like on the way, and why this catastrophe has been allowed to pass without a search for the carefully measured grains of consolation needed to transform catastrophe into tragedy. (143)

But this passage itself points to the fact that the kind of "explanation" a storyteller must give is not merely a matter of giving a causal account of one thing leading to another. The questions Maclean wants to answer through his narrative are not identical with the questions the Forest Service attempted to answer (or not) in its investigation. Even if Maclean sometimes seems to treat his task as a kind of causal explanation, he is ultimately concerned with a broader kind of understanding: not just with explanation but with "consolation," not just how it happened but with "what it was like on the way." (I will deal later with the question of why this should be "consoling.")

This brings up another aspect which we implicitly feel to be a criterion of a story, or at least a good story, namely that it enables a kind of *experience*. A story worth the name is more than just a sequence of events, one causing or conditioning the next—it is structured in such a way as to engage our interest in the unfolding itself, not just to explain the final outcome, and I take this engagement not to be a statement just about our psychology (e.g. we like to be held in suspense) but about the kind of understanding a story represents, an understanding that is irreducibly temporal, that depends fundamentally on its unfolding in time. That is to say: in literature or literary nonfiction, somehow the experience of the narrative is integral to the kind of

understanding (or "explanation") that the narrative represents or occasions.

In a trivial sense the reading of any work constitutes an experience, which could be defined as an encounter with something external of which one is subjectively aware. But in reading expository prose—an argument, a newspaper article—the experience, our subjective response and our awareness of that response, is secondary, insofar as the text means to convey information or ideas through explicit propositions. On the other hand, in reading or hearing a story (or watching a film), the experience is arguably essential to grasping the meaning or referent of the story, to understanding or "getting" it. This seems particularly obvious in the case of suspense or mystery: appreciating the protagonist's narrow escape or the revelation of the perpetrator of the crime depends upon having followed the antecedent events. This is not just a matter of being moved, although clearly one's emotional response is often a crucial dimension of our apprehension—but the experience of the temporal unfolding is necessary to grasping the *significance* of an event, to grasping its reality.

To the extent that a story depicts the experience or situation of a character, the experience of reading can be thought of as vicarious experience—imitating an experience we (or someone) might have in the world. Not *replicating*—it does not take much reflection to register the difference between experience as conveyed narratively and what we directly experience in the world—but *imitating* with words, conveying certain of the essential features and the significance of the experience. Rather than just reporting, works of fiction place us within a situation so that we may inhabit it, so that we may "feel" tensions and anticipate their resolution, anticipations which may be confirmed or thwarted, to our satisfaction or distress (emotional or cognitive); so that we have a context within which to imagine how someone in such a situation might respond. As Maclean characterizes his task as he conceives it:

> A storyteller…must follow compassion wherever it leads him. He must be able to accompany his characters, even into smoke and fire, and bear witness to what they thought and felt even when they themselves no longer knew. This story of the Mann Gulch fire will not end until it feels able to walk the final distance to the crosses with those who for the time being are blotted out by smoke. They were young and did not leave much behind them and need someone to remember them. (102)

Maclean attempts to capture and convey, as far as possible, the experience of the Smokejumpers, and in particular of those who perished. He recognizes that merely in putting their experience, or his imaginative reconstruction of it, into words, he will already be transforming it, since in the end their consciousness would have likely been reduced to the drive and desire for survival—as he puts it, "courage struggling for oxygen" (301). But this transformation will be true to their spirit and to their actions, and thus will help to redeem their deaths by memorializing them.

Much of the book, however, does not represent a character's experience. There are the tracts on fire science, Maclean's reflections on storytelling, the phantasmagoric descriptions of the final conflagration "from above." But the book could still be said to constitute an experience for the *reader*, which could be said to be based in an identification with the narrative consciousness—with Maclean as narrator, or with the perspective he is trying to achieve. Essential to this experience is some kind of *catharsis*, which for Maclean comes through the process of his inquiry and discovery, and the structure and substance of the book indeed seems intended not merely meant to convey information but to effect an analogous catharsis. That catharsis, I will argue below, is for Maclean (who uses the term "purgation") a dispossessing and searingly illuminating encounter with the structuring laws of the universe, laws indifferent and sometimes inimical to human happiness—a dramatically different order of sense than the everyday.

The experience of reading a narrative is essential to the narrative form of explanation because the temporal unfolding of narrative creates or implies a certain kind of *sense*—a

background order of intelligibility that is revealed only *as* the background of a sequence of events and actions that we follow with identification and interest, with expectation and desire for a resolution that is both plausible and adequate. As Peter Brooks puts it, citing Roland Barthes:

> …what animates us as readers of narrative is *la passion du sens*, which I would want to translate as both the passion *for* meaning and the passion *of* meaning: the active quest of the reader for those shaping ends that, terminating the dynamic process of reading, promise to bestow meaning and significance on the beginning and the middle.[96]

Narrative itself is, as Brooks would put it, a form of meaning or a way of creating meaning—a particular kind of meaning that develops in time. As he characterizes it, *plot* is

> the design and intention of narrative, a structure for those meanings that are developed through temporal succession, or perhaps better: a structuring operation elicited by, and made necessary by, those meanings that develop through succession and time.[97]

So the experience of reading, whatever else it may be, is an experience of the development of meaning.

To say that plot structures meanings that develop in time means first of all that the meaning of any one part of the narrative cannot be understood except in relation to the other parts. So the opening lines of a work, while we must have some understanding of them in themselves, the very first time we read them, only have their full significance *as* a beginning, as setting up what will be developed in what follows. Complementarily, the end of the work does not refer merely to whatever it directly recounts or describes, but has its significance *as* an ending and in light of (as a resolution of) all that has preceded it.

The connections between any two parts of the narrative, which constitute some relation of meaning, can be of one of several kinds: the earlier part may provoke the question "what will happen?" (as when a character is in a precarious situation) or "what does that mean?" (as when something mysterious is described); the later part answers or casts some light on the question.

[96] Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, 19.
[97] Brooks., 12.

Roland Barthes calls these two kinds of relation, respectively, the proairetic and hermeneutic codes,[98] and they fundamentally structure the forward drive of the narrative, the desire that propels our reading.[99] I would add the question of "how will it happen?" which is essential to the forward drive of *Fire*: as when in the first paragraph Maclean writes that the Smokejumpers "were still so young they hadn't learned to count the odds and to sense they might owe the universe a tragedy" (19). What is this tragedy and how will it come about? This may be a variant of "what does it mean?" but one distinctive and analytically separable from the kind of mystery that arises in a detective story, the clue or enigma (something in the diegetic world) whose significance only becomes clear later on.

In a narrative that strives to be more than just entertainment, and which also strives not just to be consoling but true, or truthful (which I submit applies not just to nonfiction like Maclean's but to serious fiction generally) there must be some connection between this desire and meaning on the one hand and truth or reality—in some sense of the word—on the other. As Frank Kermode claims, the *peripeteia* of a good story functions not just to prolong the action or create suspense but to reveal something along the way; peripeteia "is a disconfirmation followed by a consonance; the interest of having our expectations falsified is obviously related to our wish to reach the discovery or recognition by an unexpected and instructive route."[100] Instructive *because* unexpected, yet persuasive.

The connection between desire and meaning can, I submit, be found at the level of the *conditions of sense*. A narrative will only satisfy our desire if in its unfolding it conforms to what we find plausible and right, not necessarily with respect to what we expect in "the real world"—

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[98] *S/Z*, discussed in Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, p. 18.
[99] Barthes also describes three other codes—the semantic, the symbolic, and the referential—which are bidirectional (earlier parts of the text may illuminate later ones as well as vice versa), whereas the hermeneutic and proairetic codes are sequential (earlier ambiguities are answered by later revelations).
[100] Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, 18.

we don't expect a story to proceed just as ordinary life proceeds (and would generally not be satisfied if it did)—but with respect to those conditions of the sense and significance of human life and experience which are often obscured, distorted or denied in our everyday experience, as I discussed in Chapter 1 above.

The conditions of sense of a story are not identical with those of everyday life—we recognize that stories are not just chunks of life presented for observation; they are crafted fictions that, moreover, conform to certain conventions which are part of what we appeal to in order to make sense of them. Nothing in "real life" would, for example, explain why the characters in *King Lear* speak—or don't speak—in iambic pentameter. But I will try to show throughout the dissertation that these "unnatural" aspects of artistic form still have reference to the conditions by which the audience or readers would properly make sense of their own lives, and by which we make sense of ours, to the extent that the work still resonates with us—to the extent that it refers to abiding and not merely historically particular conditions. Regular meter or rhyme in Shakespeare, for instance, might serve as an image of a kind of inevitability, rightness, or conformity to law.

To briefly restate from the previous chapter: in general and on the whole we make sense of our everyday experience and orient our actions with reference to largely instrumental ends (ours and others' needs and wants) and largely conventional moral constraints and demands (to respect other persons, to fulfill our obligations, to act civilly and justly). And the background of our needs and wants and felt duties is a largely tacit and often confused and conflicting tapestry of notions of the way things are and the way they ought to be, images and ideas of goodness, happiness, responsibility, love and so on—all that we have internalized from our upbringing, experience and popular culture. Serious literature challenges this background. It presents

characters and situations which, through their very nature or the way in which they are presented, cannot be adequately made sense of with reference to this background and imply a more comprehensive and, in some measure, conflicting ground of sense—a ground which defies our wishes or ideology.

Thus to turn catastrophe into a story—the kind of story Maclean wants to tell—fundamentally means to represent events so that their unfolding seems surprising and yet right, in accord with conditions that we ordinarily fail to recognize.

We might finally ask how this is related to the "carefully measured grains of consolation" Maclean sees as essential to transforming catastrophe into a story, into tragedy. There seems to be a tension between the idea of consolation and the idea of truth—what if the truth is *not* consoling?

The idea of *mourning* illuminates the intrinsic connections between loss, narrative, consolation, and reality.

"The shape of remembered tragedy": Memory and Mourning

At the center of *Fire* are the young men of the title. For Maclean, an essential motivation for and meaning of "turning catastrophe into tragedy" is finding a way to memorialize these men—to show their lives to have been significant even though they died so young. We might also, therefore, think of *Fire* as an act of mourning, the story as consolation for loss, but also as an enactment of relinquishment—not only of the men but also of something more personal to Maclean, which he sees figured in them.

Mourning is the typical response to the loss of a beloved object—paradigmatically, the death of a loved one, but also potentially something ideal or abstract, anything to which one is

deeply attached. In Freud's classic account, "[r]eality-testing has shown that the loved object no longer exists, and it proceeds to demand that all libido shall be withdrawn from its attachments to that object"; after lengthy and difficult effort, the demand is fulfilled.[101] To the extent that it is not, the individual remains mired in melancholia, unable to relinquish the attachment and move forward with life.

For Freud, as Peter Homans argues, "mourning…was essentially conservative, only consolidating, repairing, and rescuing lost parts of the ego from the wreckage inflicted upon it by the commands of reality," but subsequent psychoanalytic theorists saw successful mourning as having a "progressive" character, culminating in "new values and new psychological structure."[102] In the case of the death of someone close, that structure may take the form of adopting certain characteristics, values, or interests of the person, or simply internalizing their memory. But often the loss is, as Freud notes, more "ideal." Such cases are perhaps more difficult to mourn, more prone to give rise to melancholia, given the increased difficulty of coming to terms with a loss that is more abstract:

> The object has not perhaps actually died, but has been lost as an object of love (e.g. in the case of a betrothed girl who has been jilted). In yet other cases…one cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost….This, indeed, might be so even if the patient is aware of the loss which has given rise to his melancholia, but only in the sense that he knows *whom* he has lost but not *what* he has lost in him.[103]

In this case—which I propose is the case with Maclean and the losses with which he deals in *Fire*—it is not just the individual who must be mourned but whatever it is that the individual embodied or represented for the mourner. *Fire* could be read as not only an act of mourning, but a process of coming to understand what has been lost and is being mourned.

The obvious loss is the deaths of the young men, and I will focus first on how they are

[101] Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 243.
[102] Homans, *The Ability to Mourn*, 26.
[103] Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 245.

mourned in *Fire*. But from the beginning, the men are clearly representative of further losses: Maclean's personal losses, including that of his own youth the world of his youth, and finally his impending death. As he says of the stories of *A River Runs Through It*, which share the loving and at times nostalgic relation to the early-to-mid-twentieth century life in the American West:

> I meant these stories in part to be a record of how certain things were done just before the world of most of history ended—most of history being a world of hand and horse and hand tools and horse tools. I meant to record not only how we did certain this well in that world now almost beyond recall, but how it felt to do those things well that are now slipping from our hands and memory.[104]

The losses mourned in *Fire*, I will finally argue, amount to the threatened disappearance of a human world altogether. These losses are universal or at least general, and the work makes this manifest. *Fire* does not just represent Maclean's mourning but can be seen as effecting mourning in the reader, first evoking the attachments before playing out the loss. Through the work the losses are shown as losses for the reader as well, and we come to feel and perceive them as such.

Loss is an encounter with reality, and mourning involves coming to terms with that reality: both accepting it *as* reality, and making sense of it. Gene Ray describes the process from trauma (sudden, violent and destabilizing loss) to the beginnings of mourning in a way that suggests the centrality of finding a *form*—a narrative form, perhaps an artistic form—to this process:

> From the outside, something breaks through and in: an intervention into the stabilized form of psychic life….Then, maybe, a reach, a throw. In a potlatch of words and images, something like an approach. Out of which, maybe, a capture, a first remembering-forgetting of representation, the work of emplotment…a passage back, from the disturbed body to the shared word.[105]

The "shared word," though, must acknowledge the new reality—not just as a moral imperative (that we live in reality as opposed to fantasy) but in order to free ourselves. As Ray states the

[104] McFarland, Nichols, and Maclean, "Montana Memories," 81.
[105] Ray, *Terror and the Sublime in Art and Critical Theory*, 1.

alternatives:

> So we refuse our traumas and thereby remain in their power. Or we succumb to their pathos and make a home in melancholy. Or we mourn them and learn to accept that we must now be different. Finally that's what mourning means: accepting the burden of change.[106]

It is not just that we find some new and consoling structure of significance—coincident with a new way of being in the world—that happens to accord with the loss, a kind of compromise between what we would want (to have back what we lost) and what the reality principle demands (that we face up to the loss). It is the understanding of the reality *of* the loss, the reality underlying the loss, the reality responsible for the loss and that makes the loss the kind of loss (to us) that it is, that *is* what allows us to come to terms with it. Reality *is* the consolation for loss—the austere satisfaction of consciousness.

Reality in this sense is not just the facts, but the totality within which the facts make sense. Tragedy, then—or, more accurately, tragic narrative, the particular kind of tragic narrative that *Fire* is—is the form that mourning takes—its structures of significance as the "consolation" for the loss—at least when the loss results from the transgression of some law. (Elegy would be the other, perhaps more obvious, literary form of mourning, and *Fire* also has a strong elegiac element.[107]) The structures of sense and significance revealed by Maclean's representation of the loss—the "shapes and designs" of the universe—are the reality we come to know through that loss.

Making sense of the events of Mann Gulch, then, means first of all for Maclean determining how it happened, filling in the "missing pieces," showing all the decisions and contingencies that led to men's deaths. But it also means finding full expression for the significance of what has happened. The significance of a catastrophe like that of Mann Gulch is

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[106] Ray., 2.
[107] Thanks to David Wellbery for this observation. I consider elegy in Ch. 4.

at first inchoate: it just makes us feel terrible. And perhaps it also elicits a strange and disturbing kind of awe—both of which we may just try to bury, the grief because it is unbearable, the awe because it seems inappropriate, even obscene. Making sense of the events means giving form to those impressions, to which journalistic reports and conventional expressions of sorrow are inadequate.

Let us now look at the particular kind of sense Maclean seeks in *Fire* and the form he finds.

From Catastrophe to Tragedy: The Search for Tragic Sense

The very first lines of *Fire* set up the story as one of tragic conflict and tragic inevitability:

> In 1949 the Smokejumpers were not far from their origins as parachute jumpers turned stunt performers dropping from the wings of planes at county fairs just for the hell of it plus a few dollars, less hospital expenses. By this time they were also sure they were the best firefighters in the United States Forest Service, and although by now they were very good, especially against certain kinds of fires, they should have stopped to realize that they were newcomers in this ancient business of fighting forest fires. It was 1940 when the first parachute jump on a forest fire was made and a year later that the Smokejumpers were organized, so only for nine years had there been a profession with the aim of taking on at the same time three of the four elements of the universe—air, earth, and fire—and in a simple continuous act dropping out of the sky and landing in a treetop or on the face of a cliff in order to make good their boast of digging a trench around every fire they landed on by ten o'clock the next morning. In 1949 the Smokejumpers were still so young that they referred affectionately to all fires they jumped on as 'ten o'clock fires.' They were still so young they hadn't learned to count the odds and to sense they might owe the universe a tragedy. (19)

This opening paragraph and the development of its themes through the opening chapter raise the questions and the desire for resolution that will shape the narrative, stir the expectations which will be satisfied or thwarted in the progression toward the conclusion—including expectations, tacit or explicit, of what would constitute a (proper or adequate) conclusion.

The expectation that the opening provokes is that this story is headed toward "tragedy"—

toward a collision with forces which would overwhelm all human skill, bravery, ingenuity, and technology—and the strong foreshadowing of the first paragraph is confirmed and concretized in the last line of the first section[108]: "It is hard to realize that these young men would be dead within two hours after they landed from parachutes no longer made of silk but of nylon, so they would not be eaten by grasshoppers" (31). With this revelation of the ending comes the question of how the narrative will arrive there, both in terms of the unfolding of events and in terms of the telling of the story.

Naming "tragedy" in the beginning lines, acknowledging the end toward which the narrative is headed, already suggests something about the form of sense to which the narrative will conform, or which it will reveal. The expectation of "tragedy" is more specific than merely the expectation that things will end badly (which most readers, knowing the subject of the book would have in any case). Maclean means "tragedy" not just in the broad, colloquial sense of a lamentable event, but in the narrower sense characterizing those events that are the proper subjects for dramatic or literary tragedy; this is implicit in the opening and becomes explicit later in, for instance, the phrase "transforming catastrophe into tragedy." The precise meaning of this latter, narrower sense of tragedy has been the subject of a century or more of inconclusive debate,[109] but certain elements or aspects appear in some form or another in most accounts, and these are, more or less, what unite and distinguish those paradigmatic tragedies of the Western tradition: *Oedipus the King*, *Antigone*, Shakespeare's major tragedies.

Northrop Frye's account of tragedy is characteristic of those humanist or philosophical accounts which see tragedy as illuminating certain fundamental conditions of human life, and it

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[108] The manuscript was broken into short "chapters" (as Maclean referred to them) which in the published work are not numbered but marked by tree icons; I will refer to these as "sections."

[109] Including assertions such as that of Terry Eagleton that in fact there *is* no reasonable way to distinguish properly literary tragedy from the broad sense—but this is in response to myriad conflicting attempts to do so (see Eagleton, *Sweet Violence*, Ch. 1).

is this kind of account that is most relevant both to my overall project and to Maclean's own understanding of tragedy. Tragedy, Frye writes, "seems to lead up to an epiphany of law, of that which is and must be."[110] He continues:

> ...we see the tragic hero as disturbing a balance in nature, nature being conceived as an order stretching over the two kingdoms of the visible and the invisible, a balance which sooner or later *must* right itself. The righting of the balance is what the Greeks called *nemesis*…[111]

This accords with what we see in the first paragraph of *Fire*. First: the deaths of the men at Mann Gulch are not sheer, senseless accident. They can be explained. They conform to some order. And this order, the opening suggests, is not just that of nature but of human action, and it is normative if not quite "moral": the men at Mann Gulch died (the story will show us) because of what one might call hubris—the overconfident and mistaken belief that they could triumph over the forces of nature, that they could indefinitely win against the odds.

At the same time, and this is fundamental too to tragedy, this is no mere cautionary or morality tale. The young men are beautiful and compelling in their youth, their recklessness, and they are not simply foolish to think that this is a fight they might win. They have in them a touch of the divine; they are large enough to confront the elements; and it is this largeness that brings down the wrath of the universe upon them. Again, this is classically tragic. As Frye puts it:

> The tragic hero is typically on top of the wheel of fortune, halfway between human society on the ground and the something greater in the sky….Tragic heroes are so much the highest points in their human landscape that they seem the inevitable conductors of power about them, great trees more likely to be struck by lightning than a clump of grass. Conductors may of course be instruments as well as victims of the divine lightning…[112]

It is essential that these two sides of tragedy are in an irreconcilable tension. As Frye goes on to develop, there are two "reductive" ways in which the fatedness of tragedy can be understood: either "that all tragedy exhibits the omnipotence of an external fate," that the hero's destruction

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[110] Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 208.
[111] Frye, 209.
[112] Frye, 207.

is the carrying out of some preordained malevolent plan in which the hero has no agency, or contrarily that “the act which sets the tragic process going must be primarily a violation of *moral* law”[113] and thus that the hero *deserves* their fate. Neither of these, Frye argues, adequately describes what happens in great tragedies. On the one hand, what destroys the tragic hero does not emerge *ex nihilo* but in response to something that the hero has done. On the other, the destruction and suffering are out of all proportion to the hero’s actions, which may not even be moral transgressions; furthermore the hero is compelling in the extremity that has brought them up against the destructive force.

In these dimensions Maclean clearly finds, or wants to find, in the events of Mann Gulch the significance of classical and Shakespearean tragedy. Yet it quickly becomes clear that not only does Maclean (for reasons to be discussed) require a narrative rather than dramatic form for his tragedy, but he must depart from classical tragedy in other ways. This, I will argue, is due to the difficulty, perhaps impossibility, of finding a *meaningful* inevitability in the events of Mann Gulch.

Tragic Inevitability

If Maclean wants to memorialize the fallen as tragic heroes, his approach may seem odd on the face of it. We get hardly any sense of the individual personalities of the Smokejumpers, the substance of their lives, except for a few poignant facts—for instance, that Eldon Diettert was a “fine research student who was called from his [nineteenth] birthday dinner to make this flight and told some of the crew that he almost said no” (29). Only foreman Wag Dodge appears as a notably distinct personality (taciturn, solitary) set off from the general character of the rest of the men, who are young and unformed—each remembered, Maclean notes, as simply a “great guy”

[113] Frye, 210.

or a “wonderful boy”—“which,” he adds, “is undoubtedly true” (29), but not much to go on for character development.

One can easily imagine a work that tried to memorialize the men by attempting to bring them vividly to life as individuals. The men were hardly without distinction; David Navon, for instance, “was…something of a four dimensional adventurer; he had been first lieutenant in the 101st Airborne Division and had parachuted into Bastogne” (29). But Maclean singles out the men only in brief, if piercing, snapshots: Hellman “was handsome and important and only a month before had made a parachute landing on the Ellipse between the White House and the Washington Monument. At the end he wished he had been a better Catholic, and men wept when they saw him still alive” (29).

As even this passage suggests, Maclean portrays the men from the very beginning as defined by their end—by their deaths, which Maclean sees and wants to show as being their fate, their tragic destiny. It is in the events leading up to their deaths that they become something more than their finite lives, that their lives attain a form that can become a story and therefore a memory. As Maclean writes in “USFS 1919,” a fictionalized account of an episode from his own childhood:

> I had no notion yet that life every now and then becomes literature—not long, of course, but long enough to be what we best remember, and often enough so that what we eventually come to mean by life are those moments when life, instead of going sideways, backwards, forward, or nowhere at all, lines out straight, tense, and inevitable, with a complication, climax, and, given some luck, a purgation, as if life had been made and not happened.[114]

For the adolescent narrator of that story, its form turns out more comic than tragic, though not without its poignant losses. But for the young men who died in Mann Gulch, the form is the form of tragedy, and what counts within the form of tragedy is not the full and complex personality

[114] “USFS 1919: The Ranger, The Cook, and a Hole in the Sky,” in *A River Runs Through It*, p. 127.

per se but only those aspects of character which lead to the protagonist's tragic fate: a fate which is not just his destruction but a kind of realization, if not the realization one would wish for. Tragedy makes catastrophe intelligible not just by showing how it came about but by showing it to be in accord with some deeper sense or mythological basis. The protagonist's fate is not the realization of a personal desire nor of mere unfortunate contingency but of "law"—the nature of this law as yet to be examined. There is something, therefore, fundamentally *impersonal* about tragedy[115]—at least classical tragedy, which is the tradition of tragedy which Maclean seems to be trying to claim.

In *Fire*, what makes the men extraordinary, and therefore is the condition of their being tragic heroes—and in turn the condition for properly mourning them, recognizing the fullness of what their loss represents—is something they all share; it is their "collective character." As Maclean says, "this tragedy is not a classical tragedy of a monumental individual crossing the sword of his will with the sword of destiny. It is a tragedy of a crew, its flaws and grandeurs largely those of Smokejumpers near the beginning of their history" (28-29).

As a crew, the Smokejumpers share with classical tragic heroes their extremity and exceptionality; they quite literally embody Frye's description of the tragic hero as "halfway between human society on the ground and the something greater in the sky" (207), and this is a reflection of their character as well.

> Most people have a touch of the Icarus complex and, like Smokejumpers wish to appear on earth from the sky….From the start, Smokejumpers had to have a lot of what we have a little of, and one way all men are born equal is in being born at least a little bit crazy, some being more equal than others. (21)

It is not just craziness that drives the Smokejumpers to do what they do, but the desire to confront themselves and "the universe." For the Smokejumpers, smokejumping is a way "to

[115] This is not to deny that characters in tragedies may be strong personalities and that these personalities may be well developed in their presentation, especially when the tragic conflict is essentially a conflict of character or moral decision, as in *Hamlet*.

make unmistakably clear to themselves and to the universe that they love the universe but are not intimidated by it and will not be shaken by it, no matter what it has in store" (28). It is

> something that is necessary for them to pass through and not around and, once it is unmistakably done, does not have to be done again. The 'it' is within, and is the need to settle some things with the universe and ourselves before taking on the 'business of the world,' which isn't all that special or hard but takes time. This 'it' is the something special within that demands we do something special, and 'it' could be within a lot of us. (28)

The references to "all men" and "a lot of us" illuminates part of what makes *Young Men and Fire* a modern tragedy—the Smokejumpers are special but in a way that many people might be special, and so *Fire* could be called a democratic tragedy. But it is not a story of an everyman ground down by everyday injustice (as, for example, Miller's *Death of a Salesman*) or destroyed by baseness and contingency (as in the Coen brothers' *Fargo*), at the mercy of which any of us might, if unlucky, find ourselves. It is the story of an "elite," a word Maclean uses several times throughout the book to describe the men, who only encounter disaster *because* they are elite. It might better be called a meritocratic tragedy, and in this aspect Maclean departs from the general trajectory of Western tragic drama and seeks to recover the mythical or larger-than-life character of classical tragedy.

Perhaps the greatest challenge for Maclean in transforming catastrophe into a modern tragedy that is nonetheless large is to make convincing, after the departure of the gods and the Protestant sublimation of God to the harsh light of interior conscience, the idea of "something greater." For the men to be tragic heroes, for catastrophe to be tragedy, Maclean must also show what destroyed them to have been a worthy foe, and a foe of mythical proportion.

Maclean's term for that "something greater" is "the universe," which appears throughout *Fire* and is Maclean's equivalent of or substitute for fate and divine law. "The universe" is the cosmos as active agent, encompassing not only natural force—the Smokejumpers' task was to

put out a fire "before suddenly the universe tried to reduce its own frame of things to ashes and charred grouse" (33)—but also spiritual condition—as in "the need to settle some things with the universe," "they might owe the universe a tragedy." Its character becomes clearer as Maclean moves from the historical background of the Mann Gulch fire to the scientific and geological—though as we will see, fire and earth are mythical images and not merely material conditions.

Images of Magnitude

Maclean devotes the first few sections of *Fire* to conveying the conditions of the tragedy—the historical, characterological, and scientific background that will allow the reader to understand what transpires. After sketching the character of the Smokejumpers he highlights the "few apparent weaknesses" that he sees as leading to the disaster—noting in particular that "[o]ne danger of making almost a sole specialty of dropping on fires as soon as possible is that nearly all such fires will be small fires, and a tragic corollary is that not much about fighting big fires can be learned by fighting small ones" (31-2). This is continuous with what we would expect from classical tragedy, in which, as traditionally understood, the unfolding of the plot is the realization of character and the working out of unresolved tensions.

What follows, though, is a novel kind of background and begins to reveal the nature of "the universe" as it operates in Maclean's modern tragedy.

Having dropped various firefighting terms—"ground fire," "crowned," "spot fires"—Maclean says "we had better be sure of the meaning of these key words…so that when the tragic race between the firefighters and the fire begins it won't have to be stopped for definitions" (33).[116] Maclean goes on:

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[116] This in itself is striking—that Maclean wants to prepare us so that we as readers can ourselves be caught up in the "tragic race," can experience a certain immediacy and urgency as the story hurtles toward its conclusion.

> It is not enough to know the word for this or that kind of fire; to know one fire is to see how what was dropping live ashes from a dead tree at the end of one afternoon by next afternoon had become one kind of fire after another kind of fire until it had become a monster in flames from which there was no escape. (34)

From this evocation of a "monster in flames" he immediately shifts back to a straightforward exposition of the different kinds of fires, their behavior, and methods used to control them. At the same time, he is describing what will unfold in the story of Mann Gulch: what starts out as a ground fire (which "most often…is just a lot of hard work to get under control" (34)) gets into the branches of the trees (it "crowns"), and can then throw spot fires out ahead of it. "The separate spot fires soon burn together, and life is trapped between the main fire coming from behind and the new line of fire now burning back toward it. Then something terrible can happen": a "blow-up," where "the convection effect or a change in the wind blows fresh oxygen between the two fires, suddenly replenishing the burned-out air" (35), which has become hotter than the point of ignition, so that the air itself ignites.

Maclean concludes the passage by quoting fire scientist Harry T. Gisborne's description of the burnt body of a grouse that had been trapped and caught in such a blow-up, "still alertly erect in fear and wonder" (36).

This kind of "mixed discourse," which shifts back and forth between a more or less literal and "flat" description and a figurative or poetic and intense "literary" mode, is characteristic and I think illuminating of the difficulties of Maclean's task and of his achievement, of the special character of modern tragedy, deriving from the special character of "modern reality." One can no longer separate the divine from the mundane, the scientific from the theological. The universe within which human beings live is a *uni*verse, a unity; there are no "supernatural" forces that stand apart from nature and intervene in it, but neither is "nature" simply "nature"—the matrix of human life is human history, biology, psychology; physical force; the laws of morality, beauty,

and narrative. Thus to understand what happened at Mann Gulch we need history, science, poetry, image, story.

There is, however, something hierarchical about this mixture; the poetic and imagistic seem to encompass the other modes of explanation—not to supersede them, but to provide some ultimate ground of understanding—as becomes clearer in a subsequent section in which Maclean describes the setting of the catastrophe, the gulch characterized by its geology and contextualized within geological history:

> The Smokejumpers were on their way to a blowup, a catastrophic collision of fire, clouds, and winds. With almost dramatic fitness, the collision was to occur where vast geological confrontations had occurred millions and millions of years ago—where old ocean beds, the bottoms of inland seas, were hoisted vertically by causes too long ago to be now identified and were then thrust forward by gravity into and over other ocean beds, cracking and crumbling them and creasing them into folds and creating a geological area called in the subdued language of scientists the "Disturbed Belt," a belt that includes in its geological history much of not only northwestern Montana but western Alberta and eastern British Columbia. (44)

Maclean goes on to describe how the "Disturbed Belt" is itself part of an 'overthrust formation' that stretches from Alaska to Mexico. It is tempting to reproduce the whole passage, for its effect is dizzying and not captured by paraphrase, as Maclean progressively expands both the geographical and the temporal context. The passage culminates: "As the western continent was raised, squeezed, and compressed, great slabs of sedimentary layers slid over each other inland or eastward for a distance varying from a few miles to a hundred miles or more" (45). It is as if we were backing up to progressively approximate a God's eye view of time and space, to witness the spasms of the planet itself.

Beyond the basic description of the lay of the land that the firefighters and their would-be rescuers had to navigate, this geographical excursus is unnecessary to explain "how [the Smokejumpers] got to their crosses, and what it was like on the way"—and yet it is somehow

essential to the sense of the events' significance—of their *magnitude*. The Smokejumpers' encounter with the Mann Gulch fire occurs against a backdrop of almost incomprehensible temporal and spatial immensity and violence.

Maclean furthermore links the mystery of what happened to the Smokejumpers to the mystery of what shaped the landscape:

> …anyone can see that the laminations of ocean beds compressed in the cliffs on one side of the river match the laminations in the opposite cliffs, and, looking up, can see that an arch, now disappeared into the sky, originally joined both cliffs. There are also missing parts to the story of the lonely crosses ahead of us, almost invisible in deep grass near the top of the mountain. What if, by searching the earth and even the sky for these missing parts, we should find enough of them to see catastrophe change into the shape of remembered tragedy? Unless we are willing to escape into sentimentality or fantasy, often the best we can do with catastrophes, even our own, is to find out exactly what happened and restore some of the missing parts—hopefully, even the arch to the sky. (46-7)

While the association to the missing arch may be a bit contrived, on the whole I find Maclean's description of the geological background of the tragedy is evocative and compelling. But what in the end is the *significance* of this evocation? What, if anything, does it reveal about the actual character of the events of Mann Gulch?

Maclean's use of natural landscape and natural history as spiritual backdrop is continuous with that of the nineteenth century Romantics, and he could therefore be subject to the criticisms of Romanticism as ungrounded, sentimental, confused, indulging in the pathetic fallacy. As Robert Hughes describes it, the Romantics

> learn[ed] to see nature as the fingerprint of God's creation and thus as a direct clue to his intentions. Nature, without the "awful presence of an unseen Power" that William Wordsworth sensed in it, would be just a heap of matter…shorn of real meaning. But seen as an intermediate term between the muffled consciousness of humankind and the supreme mind of the Creator, it became a medium of endless wonder, edification, and joy. And of muddle, too: for extreme nature lovers passed from trying to find God in Nature to conflating Nature with God.[117]

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[117] Hughes, *American Visions*, 138.

Parts of *Fire* such as the missing keystone may be unpersuasively fanciful, but what saves Maclean from falling into a hopeless "muddle" is that he does not go so far as to claim a specific or explicit "meaning" of the grandeur of the setting of his story or its resonance with the events. He allows the image to remain image, and, furthermore, he retains a degree of irony, puncturing his high-flown descriptions with colloquialisms and references to thoroughly un-mythical modern actualities:

> Do not be deceived…by the scenic beauty of the Gates of the Mountains into believing that the confrontations and terrors of nature are obsolescences frozen in stone, like the battles of satyrs in Greek bas-relief, remnants of mythology and witnessed if ever by dinosaurs and now only by seismographs. It is easy for us to assume that as the result of modern science "we have conquered nature," that nature is now confined to beaches for children and to national parks where the few remaining grizzly bears have been shot with tranquilizers and removed to above the timberline, supposedly for their safety and our own.

Still, the power of the images speaks for itself, and that power and its resonance implies some awful reality (in the original sense of "awful," eliciting awe), dimly apprehended. This reality is "the universe"—the matrix within human beings live and it is somehow part of the answer to the challenge to sense presented by the Mann Gulch fire. The passage above continues:

> But we should be prepared for the possibility…that the terror of the universe has not yet fossilized and the universe has not run out of blowups.
>
> Yet we should also go on wondering if there is not some shape, form, design as of artistry in this universe we are entertaining that is composed of catastrophes and missing parts. (46)

If the explicit intent of the work is to explain how the catastrophe happened and to memorialize the fallen, the underlying intent might be to grapple with and convey something of the character of "the universe" as it comes into view in the Smokejumpers' confrontation with it in Mann Gulch. The quote above suggests that terrible as the loss of the young men is, it would be a terrible loss of a different order—about which we must admittedly be ambivalent—if "the terror of the universe" *had* fossilized, if "modern science"—and we might add, rationalization—had

confined or domesticated or banished all the forces that might threaten human welfare. In such a universe, there would be no catastrophe, but therefore no tragic heroes either—and nothing resistant to subordination to the calculations of the human ego.[118]

The attraction of the story of Mann Gulch—for terrible as it is, it compelled Maclean and, as he tells it, compels the reader—is, I think, that in its basic facts it appears as such a confrontation with "the universe"—with "nature" as that whole of reality beyond human institutions and not subject to human control, a reality that includes not only physical laws but the ground of sense and significance—what one might call *myth* insofar as it refers to those ultimate and normative foundations of judgment and action which are inextricably bound up with images and narrative structures, if not necessarily specific stories of divine or supernatural beings. Our grasp of these basic conditions of making sense of human action—good, evil, heroism, justice, love, and so on—cannot be extricated from images and stories of good and evil, of heroism and villainy, of love and vengeance; the stories themselves are not "myth" as I use it here, but myth is at once what we come to know through them and the condition of our comprehension of them.[119]

Thus in *Fire* Maclean seeks, with arguable success, not to impose tragic or mythical sense on a catastrophe in order to give it consoling meaning, but rather to convey the sense that the events seem properly to have. This sense cannot be grasped, represented or evoked except indirectly, though narrative and image, because it is the foundation and condition of this knowledge rather than a fact to be known: myth—as the ground of sense and judgment, the ground of our knowledge, the whole within which the various aspects of our experience have their meaning—always and necessarily remains (in some degree) tacit.

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[118] One thinks of the Underground Man's Crystal Palace.
[119] This idea of myth is further developed in Ch. 4.

Fundamental to the ground of sense as Maclean finds and conveys it in *Fire* is what has been called the *sublime*: that which exceeds human comprehension and may be inimical to human strivings, yet which demands our reconciliation to it.

On the sublime

The word “sublime” does not appear in *Fire,* but Maclean wrote about the sublime in poetry and poetic theory in his scholarly essay “From Action to Image: Theories of the Lyric in the Eighteenth Century,” based on his dissertation, and Marie Borroff proposes that *Fire* embodies the sublime as Maclean discusses it in this essay. I too would argue that “the sublime” names something essential to the form of *Fire* and find Maclean’s characterization of the sublime—as well as the discourse of the sublime beyond Maclean—to be illuminating of the intention of *Fire*.

In the essay Maclean discusses the profound effect on eighteenth century poetic theory and criticism of the rediscovery of Longinus and the development of his concept of *hypsous*, “height” or “greatness”—generally translated as “the sublime,” from the Latin *sub lime*, “up to the lintels.” Maclean argues that eighteenth century criticism evinced three primary interests in the sublime: “the sublime as an effect of the Divine Creator (Addison), the sublime as an effect of natural objects upon the natural mechanism of man (Burke), and the sublime as an effect of language (Lowth)” (418). These three aspects of the sublime merge in eighteenth century lyric poetry:

> When the elements of sublimity are compounded, what emerges is an expression in *language* “elevated from common Language the most that is possible,” reflecting a *soul* transported by the most magnificent of natural *objects*, such a soul and such natural objects being, in turn, creative expressions of the Divine Creator.[120]

[120] *Ibid.*, p. 418; the internal quotation is from Joseph Trapp, *Lectures on Poetry* (London, 1742), p. 204.

So Maclean's conception of the sublime is that of a spiritual quality belonging to the objective world (that is, not merely human fancy) but generally only accessible through representation in language. This aptly characterizes Maclean's own work as well—modified by a degree of modernist self-consciousness and irony. Maclean cannot uncritically accept the grandeur and terror he conveys as "expressions of the Divine Creator," and yet what impresses itself upon him as "great" in nature is an image of an order that is not merely natural.

To understand what it would mean for Maclean to be trying to evoke the sublime, in a peculiarly modern way, as the background for the events of Mann Gulch—and this being a way of *making sense* of those events—it is illuminating to look briefly at how "the sublime" has developed historically as a way of making sense of human experience, and particularly of aspects of our experience that most resist comprehension.

Longinus's essay, the origin of the concept as it figures into modern discourse, focuses on style—on the features of writing or oratory that are characteristic of greatness, features that do not merely persuade the audience but carry them away:

> …the Sublime, wherever it occurs, consists in a certain loftiness and excellence of language….A lofty passage does not convince the reason of the reader, but takes him out of himself. That which is admirable ever confounds our judgment, and eclipses that which is merely reasonable or agreeable. To believe or not is usually in our own power; but the Sublime, acting with an imperious and irresistible force, sways every reader whether he will or no.[121]

That is, Longinus's primary interest is what has come to be called the "rhetorical sublime," as opposed to the "natural sublime," the sublime as a characteristic of those objects or aspects of the world (including, perhaps paradigmatically, the supernatural or divine) that awe and astonish. His concern is with the art of rhetoric, how to move one's readers or listeners, rather than with the ultimate source of this power or the nature of that source.

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[121] Longinus, *On the Sublime*, trans. Havell, I.3-4.

The sublime in writing is not, however, *purely* rhetorical, but rooted in "greatness of soul" (IX.2). This is to say that the rhetorical sublime, to be truly sublime, must express something beyond language, in "lofty ideas" and images of what is truly great. Thus one might say that the rhetorical sublime must be rooted in the "natural" sublime, except that what is truly great for Longinus is not, generally speaking, nature, but rather the noble and the divine—perhaps most paradigmatically, "divine nature in its true light, as something spotless, great, and pure," which he sees represented, for instance, in Homer's description of the mortals and mortal world shaking with the passage of striding Poseidon, or in the opening of Genesis: "God said let there be light, and there was…" (IX.8-9).[122]

A number of commentators have pointed out that Longinus's sublime is ultimately indefinable (and therefore perhaps cannot be taught, despite his claims). No rhetorical technique will necessarily produce sublimity, and can therefore be "soulless" if the mysterious element of sublimity is subtracted (XI.2). Similarly, a figure will fail to persuade, will even spark the resistance of the hearer who feels as if his reason is being insulted, unless the figure has the quality of the sublime—but this is practically tautological: the sublime, then, *is* that which infuses a figure with the power to overcome or evade the resistance of reason. It is significant and related that Longinus's five sources of the sublime jumble together the linguistic and non-linguistic—respectively, the sublimity created or conveyed by the manner of representation (figuration, elements of style) and the sublimity of what is represented (noble thoughts, the divine)—and Longinus does not make a point of distinguishing "form" and "content." His account implies that the two cannot be sharply differentiated. What we know of the gods is

[122] Maclean makes this point: "Even though Longinus is interested primarily in analyzing literary qualities, he makes clear…that sublimity is a quality reflected by certain natural objects and that, in turn, sublime objects reflect the presence of a Divine Creator and his intentions in respect to man" (*Ibid.,* 415).

conveyed through those literary works or passages that strike us as adequate to them, which is to say, adequately sublime.

All of this is to say that there is no general rule for the sublime. It is, in language, "simply" what indicates to us the sublime in the world (or beyond it). Longinus seems to be groping toward that deep source of eros which moves and "persuades" people beyond their reason, toward something which belongs to the ground of perception and judgment rather than the object of judgment. "Greatness" is, therefore, a or even *the* fundamental condition of humanity, that which gives ultimate meaning to human life and experience—that which dwarfs the individual and as such is both terrible and inspiring. Greatness in language expresses and directs us toward this condition. This sense of the aesthetic experience of greatness, as conveyed through literature, as constituting contact with an essential condition of human being (the inhuman or suprahuman condition of human being) is, I believe, what compelled later theorists to take up the question of the sublime—and clarifies Maclean's aim in *Fire*.

Peri hypsous was preserved by medieval monks without arousing any significant interest until the late seventeenth century, when it was translated into French, and in the eighteenth century the concept of the sublime was taken up from Longinus and became arguably the foundational problematic for eighteenth century aesthetics. Eighteenth century critics were preoccupied with the "real" sources of the sublime, which, they generally agreed, Longinus had not adequately treated. These later critics focused not on sublime language but on its source or its object, on the non-linguistic correlate which accounted for the sublimity of sublime language. This source, generally speaking, could be categorized as grandeur in nature (the vast starry sky, craggy mountains, the endless ocean) as an expression or manifestation of divine grandeur.

The timing of the resurgent interest in the sublime is not coincidental, and this too is

illuminating of what Maclean is looking for in *Fire*. As Andrew Ashfield and Peter de Bolla argue, the eighteenth century interest in the sublime emerges with the "change from an epistemology based in theological belief and debate to one in which man must find from within himself the grounds of knowledge, which…distinguishes the enlightenment as the single most important moment in the history of the concept of the aesthetic."[123] For the eighteenth century theorists "the aesthetic is not *primarily* about art but about how we are formed as subjects, and how *as subjects* we go about making sense of our experience,"[124] and the extremity of experience that defines an encounter with the sublime is therefore of foundational interest. If the question is, as Ashfield and de Bolla put it, "What is that moves me?" then the sublime is that which moves me most profoundly and as such is central as a source of my own being. With Protestantism and the emergence of Enlightenment rationalism and empiricism, this source, formerly to be found in religious doctrine, now becomes something that the individual must seek in and through their own experience, even if they still find it ultimately to be a manifestation of God's power on earth, which, on the whole, the British aesthetic theorists did. One can see the sublime as the necessary correlate to Protestant individualism: the sublime is the object in relation to which the individual defines himself, the direct experience of God's majesty—which, with Romanticism, would become progressively divorced from Christianity, especially doctrinal Christianity.

Subjectively, then, the sublime is what moves me, what elicits my awe, admiration, eros; objectively, it is what is supremely "great," and definitions of the sublime have tended to characterize this greatness in terms of its divine provenance or of its ungraspable or unrepresentable character. These two qualities can be seen as correlate—God is that which is beyond human grasp. As Joseph Addison puts it:

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[123] Ashfield and de Bolla, *The Sublime*, 1.
[124] Ashfield and Bolla., 2.

> The Supreme Author of our Being has so formed the Soul of Man, that nothing but himself can be its last, adequate, and proper Happiness. Because, therefore, a great Part of our Happiness must arise from the contemplation of his Being, that he might give our Souls a just Relish of such a Contemplation, he has made them naturally delight in the Apprehension of what is Great or Unlimited.[125]

For the eighteenth century critics, the question is: why do we take pleasure in the terrifying? Or: why are we moved and compelled by sensible impressions in ways other than we might expect, based on utilitarian rationality? And the answer is, for the British theorists, that what so moves us is a manifestation of the divine.[126] The apprehension of the sublime for these Enlightenment-era theorists is therefore ultimately affirmative of a normatively ordered universe, a universe whose order accords with the human need for significance, even if it does not always respond to our desire for happiness.

But the reality, the ontological status, of this order beyond what we can grasp is a matter for skepticism—a skepticism which Shaw argues is present from (at least) the eighteenth century, when Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* indirectly exposed the "fault line in the history of the sublime," the divide between the aspects of the sublime as a quality of the world and a quality of language:

> Words have a power, Burke argues, to raise the idea of the sublime, such that the distinction between the sublime object and its description no longer applies; it is language, in other words, that brings about the transformation of the world, enabling us to hymn the vastness of the cathedral or the depths of the ravine.[127]

Thus we are left wondering whether "the sublime [has] its cause in the objects of nature or in the ideas of the mind."[128] Shaw notes that the "Platonic solution" to this problem is to see our ideas as themselves conforming to the "really real," that "matter does not matter unless it is informed

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[125] Addison, "On the Pleasures of the Imagination," quoted in Shaw, *The Sublime*, 36 (and, partially, in Maclean, "From Action to Image", 415).
[126] The Kantian answer—that through the apprehension of the limits of reason, reason affirms its own powers—may be compatible with the British answer, but it deemphasizes and effectively denies any significant status to the object of awe.
[127] Shaw, *The Sublime*, 6.
[128] Shaw., 47.

by human capacities, the cognizance of beauty, truth, and virtue, which are a manifestation of the divine"[129]—which is to say, the sensible or material is significant only insofar as it reflects the intelligible, the ideal forms according to which we judge and make sense of our experience—the good, the beautiful, the just, etc. The beautiful boy isn't himself divine, but his beauty can lead his lover to the *idea* of beauty; we may find the mountain grand because it is described that way (or we describe it that way to ourselves), or because it is an image of ideal or divine grandeur, but that that doesn't (according to the Platonic view) make it illegitimate for us to find grandeur through that object or image—what Simone Weil would call *metaxu*.

As rationalization progressively marginalizes religion from everyday life and the world is progressively interpreted in secular rather than religious terms, the sublime becomes decoupled from the divine, and the emphasis shifts from sublimity as the manifestation of God's power to sublimity as the experience of what is beyond our grasp. Accompanying this is growing skepticism as to the existence or objectivity of any transcendent meaning or ground of human life, and suspicion about any pretense to know such a ground. The trajectory culminates in the "postmodern sublime," the representation or apprehension of the sheer fact or existence of the nonrepresentable, the unlimited:

> The canonical definition of the sublime: the sublime is the presentation of the nonpresentable or, more rigorously, to take up the formula of Lyotard, the presentation (of this): that there is the nonpresentable.[130]
>
> The sublime is: *that* there is an image, hence a limit, along whose edge unlimitation makes itself felt.[131]

And whatever is beyond that edge may or (more probably, according to the current temper) may not underwrite a humanly meaningful order. (As in the vision—misconceived as it may be—of

[129] Shaw., 47.
[130] Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, "Sublime Truth," in *Of the Sublime: Presence in Question*, ed. Librett., 74.
[131] Jean-Luc Nancy, "The Sublime Offering, in *Of the Sublime: Presence in Question*, 38.

the universe governed by sheerly physical forces, or a world determined by vast humanly created economic or technological systems become terrifyingly independent of human purposes.)

Maclean, then, is looking for a sublime that is neither merely an empty cipher for whatever is beyond our ken, nor divine in the traditional sense, that is, the manifestation of a supernatural being or beings, of a creator concerned with human welfare. Through image and figuration, he evokes a sense of the awesome power of nature as more than natural. Natural immensities become an image of the pervasive power of the universe as it governs human life and therefore demands to be faced up to—confronted, respected, and comprehended to the limits of our power. The work may be conceived as an attempt to demonstrate that just because the sublime is something we summon in language doesn't make it unreal. Maclean can't *prove* this; he can only show it to be more compelling than the alternative, which would be to deny any validity to the sense that the Smokejumpers' confrontation with the Mann Gulch fire reveals something transcending the full grasp of human reason—that our awe and terror are, or at least may be, a response to the apprehension of something truly awesome or terrible,[132] and something, therefore, an encounter with which cannot be senseless or meaningless, cannot but be significant—and therefore not just catastrophic but tragic. Maclean wants to show the fire as representative of something ultimate that demands confrontation: for the men, in the form of the catastrophe they could not escape; for Maclean, in the form of the catastrophic event that demands understanding.

[132] One might say that Maclean wants to show that not only our ordinary passions, defined by Dennis as those "whose cause is clearly comprehended by him who feels it," but our "enthusiasms," passions whose "cause is not clearly comprehended by him who feels them" (*The Grounds of Criticism*, 1704, cited in Shaw, p. 31), have reference.

Sublimity and Catharsis

Borroff notes that Maclean makes the connection from Burke's analysis of the sublime—as related to our instincts of self-preservation—to Aristotelian terror, and from Burke's analysis of the beautiful—as related to our social instincts of love and attachment—to Aristotelian pity. Borroff notes how throughout *Fire*, "images of nature as its darkest, its most violent, its most threatening terrify us and arouse our anxieties in ways characteristic of the Burkean sublime,"[133] citing as just one of many possible examples the description of the Smokejumpers' flight from the fire: "the world roared at them—there was no safe place inside and there was almost no outside….A world was coming where no organ of the body had consciousness but the lungs" (72).

Terror and pity are, of course, the emotions of tragic catharsis for Aristotle. If the sublime is that which terrifies, then, the sublime should then be that which is responsible, at least in part, for the "purgation" or "purification" occasioned by tragedy. What this means—and what catharsis might look like in modern tragedy, if *Fire* achieves its goal—can be clarified by an examination of the denouement and conclusion of the book.

Near the end of Part Two, Maclean gives an explicit account of his conception of "purgation":

> Near the end of many tragedies it seems right that there should be moments when the story stops and looks back for something it left behind and finds it because of things it learned, as it were, by having lived through the story. The things found can be relatively small things, such as this thing, but also they can be big; but usually they are announced by minor characters, and generally they are about nature. We are so often wrong about nature that it comes as a relief of some kind to be right about it, especially after there has been some great disruption in it. Such moments of relief near the end of tragedy must be important parts of what from classical times has been called the purgation of tragedy. At times it seems as if tragedy tries at the end to take away some of its own tragedy, and if some tragedies never restore our stability, at least most of them allow some success in struggling to attain some stability on our own. In my family, some meaning was attached

[133] "The Achievement of Norman Maclean," p. 125-6.

> to the phrase 'saved by grace.' The remaining pages of this tragedy are its purgation and they come by grace. In my family, what happens on Sundays is foreordained. What comes on weekdays comes from something within us and for which we are responsible, and if it is from something deep within us it is called "grace," and it is. (281-2)

If what follows is, as Maclean forecasts, the tragedy's "purgation"—which is to say, the revelation or attainment of some knowledge of "nature"—then there are two or perhaps three successive moments to this purgation—the purgation of explanation, and then the purgation of terror and pity.

The first of these, and the obvious and immediate referent of the quote, is a tour de force explication of one of the final remaining mysteries—how Dodge's escape fire could burn straight up toward the top of the ridge (so Sallee and Rumsey, the other two survivors, could more or less run alongside it up to the ridge and to safety), while the main fire could burn in a perpendicular direction, toward the head of the gulch (forcing the rest of the men to run upgulch and eventually overtaking them). The explanation is essentially that the heat of the main fire created a sucking wind pulling in the opposite direction of the wind blowing the fire upgulch; when Dodge lit his match the two winds momentarily neutralized each other such that Dodge's fire simply burned upslope, as fire will do absent other forces.

This sense of "purgation"—the discovery of laws of nature—has already arisen earlier in the book, when Maclean writes of how he has been changed through investigating the Mann Gulch fire:

> Now I carry inside me part of the purgation of its tragedy. It is the part of me and the tragedy that knows more about forests and fires because of this forest fire. If now the dead of this fire should awaken and I should be stopped beside a cross, I would no longer be nervous if asked the first and last question of life, How did it happen? (87)

And the cathartic exhilaration of discovery is manifested when Maclean and his companions finally locate the crevice through which Sallee and Rumsey passed:

> Looking down on the world of the Mann Gulch fire for probably the last time, I said to myself, "Now we know, now we know." I kept repeating this line until I recognized that, in the wide world anywhere, "Now we know, now we know" is one of its most beautiful poems….
>
> There was no water until we reached Willow Creek. I was sorry for the horses, but I was no longer sorry for us. Such can be the effect of the beauty of a very short poem. (207-8)

For Maclean, therefore, purgation is a kind of knowledge. The consolation of tragedy, the release from pity and fear, comes with and through understanding—in this case, understanding the (material and efficient) causes of things.

But knowledge of nature (in this case, literally knowledge of the natural world) is not sufficient. Certainly its utilitarian consequences are not adequate consolation. Maclean does include an excursus on what fire science and fire safety have gained from study of the Mann Gulch fire, but follows it with: "After saying what I had been building up to about the influence the Mann Gulch fire had on future firefighting, I went back to work. I felt better, though, for the interlude" (223). This kind of knowledge can only be a marginal and temporary consolation. Nor does "pure knowledge," the sheer fact of understanding the *how* and the *why*, seem to be enough. It is, first, unattainable in its entirety, at least in this case. At the very end of Part Two, after the account of how the two fires could have behaved as they did, Maclean considers the final question of what kept the other Smokejumpers from following Rumsey and Sallee straight up the ridge—why they headed upgulch, eventually to be overtaken by the fire:

> The fire burning along the top of the ridge may have kept pace with the angling crew below and forced them farther and farther upgulch. It may have been the front of Dodge's fire…More likely it was the upper branch of the main fire or…both fires combined. When the survivors and Laird and I were in Mann Gulch in 1978, we split our four votes among these three alternatives, with each of us willing to admit he might be wrong and could never be sure that he was right. (289)

Dodge's fire may, then, have been responsible for the men's deaths after all, if it had prevented them from going up to the ridge. The exact truth will never be known. Though understated, this

is rather shocking coming after the pages of detailed account, reflecting years of painstaking work, of investigation aimed at determining precisely what had happened and in particular whether Dodge's fire had had any part in the other Smokejumpers' deaths.

In Aristotle's theory of tragedy, catharsis is of course something undergone not by the characters but by the audience as they see events unfold. The final uncertainty of what happened at Mann Gulch indicates one reason for Maclean's use of narrative rather than dramatic form in *Fire*—a traditional dramatic presentation would indicate a definiteness that the 1949 events cannot have. The true story that can be told is Maclean's story.

If purgation is a matter of knowledge, the impossibility of knowing with certainty what had happened would seem to be fatal to the task of finding tragic form for the Mann Gulch catastrophe. What follows, however, indicates that "the facts," while vital, are not the ultimate determinant of sense Maclean is seeking. It is not only because of this final indeterminacy that Maclean turns to a different kind of sensemaking beyond "explanation" in the final pages of the work; rather, the second moment of purgation brings to the forefront what has been the backdrop of the whole work: some inhuman magnitude, on the one hand, and on the other hand some consummation of Maclean's own personal struggle with his identity and acceptance of his own approaching death.

Part Two concludes:

> …in the conflagration that was about to occur, no component any longer had any individual responsibility for the simple reason that in a moment there were no individual components. Just conflagration. What was happening was passing beyond legality and morality and seemingly beyond the laws of nature, blown into a world where human values and seemingly natural laws no longer apply. Such moments can occur the world over, sometimes even at home as well as on hillsides.
>
> The Mann Gulch fire was passing beyond issues and settlements into a world of pictures—perhaps more exactly into thoughts that pictorialize and feel and cannot reduce themselves to numbers. (289)

At the end of the book, after all the “missing pieces” that can be found have been found, Maclean turns to a series of images through which he tries to convey what I would call the *reality* of the blowup—not just as it might have been experienced by the Smokejumpers, but as a manifestation of the terror and sublime power of the universe.

Total Conflagration (The Elevation of Retrospect)

This final part begins after Maclean reaches the limits of what can be gleaned from the testimony of the survivors, the evidence left behind, and scientific and mathematical modeling about what happened in Mann Gulch from 5:55 to 5:57 pm on August 5, 1949—from when the men passed Dodge and his fire, from when they disappeared from the view of Rumsey and Sallee who had reached the ridge, until the fire caught them.[134]

> No one who survived saw what happened to those who became crosses on the hillside…. Rumsey and Sallee were later to testify that, as they escaped up the side of the hill after leaving Dodge, there were long flames and engulfing smoke most of the way but that two or tree times the smoke lifted for a moment. Something like this is probably how it will be with us to the end of our Mann Gulch story. Outcroppings of reality will come to us only in glimpses, as they came to Rumsey and Sallee, but I know what all along I have been waiting to see….The last Sallee can recall seeing them, ‘They were angling up the slope in the unburned grass and fairly close to the edge of the fire Dodge had set.’ Then the smoke and the Great Ambiguity settle in. But I expect to see more. I have long expected to catch glimpses of them as far as they went. Could you expect less from a boy who grew up in the woods and grew old as a schoolteacher and so spent most of his life staying close to the young who are elite and select and, by definition, often in trouble? I came to Mann Gulch expecting to catch glimpses of them as far as they go. That’s why I came. (277)

There is something terribly evocative about the image of the young men disappearing into the smoke, never to be seen again alive, as if they have left this world for another.[135] What that

[134] The passage I discuss in what follows is actually in Part Two, *before* the final reckoning about the escape fire. But I would make the editorial argument that it might well have been moved to Part Three and at least is of a kind with the passages in Part Three, in working through “image” rather than scientific explanation.
[135] Peter Weir’s film *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, about three girls who disappear without a trace on a school outing into the Australian outback, has a haunting power that seems to derive from a similar source.

image evokes is, I think, the ultimate object of *Fire*, the object Maclean sought in Mann Gulch and seeks to represent in the work: he identifies with these young men who lived the life he once lived, but lived it to the extreme limit, and beyond. He pities them for the terror they faced, for their untimely end, but he also finds in their story the image of an encounter with something absolute, terrible but compelling in its very absoluteness. This is what he tries to convey in the final descriptions.

Maclean describes the final conflagration in three different ways. In the first, he begins:

> We would not have started to follow the course of wildfire if we had not assumed that all of us, when called upon, could view an earthly scene from imaginative perspectives, something like the Sky Spirits in Thomas Hardy's poetical drama, *The Dynasts*, who comment upon tragedies of man from distant horizons. (279)

At the most basic level, Maclean is saying that the storyteller needs to be able to imagine all that is essential to the story, even (in a true story) what he has no record of. The allusion to the Sky Spirits, however, implies that he means something more: the possibility of and need for an objective perspective which only the storyteller, not the characters, can provide. Maclean then evokes Hardy's poem "The Convergence of the Twain," on the sinking of the *Titanic,* excerpting from the poem:

> Alien they seemed to be:
> No mortal eye could see
> The intimate welding of their later history,
>
> Or sign that they were bent
> By paths coincident
> On being anon twin halves of one august event,
>
> Till the Spinner of the Years
> Said "Now!"

Maclean summarizes the analogy between the collision of ship and iceberg and the convergence of men and fire: "Hardy's convergence is between the elite, brightly lit, and fastest ship of its time, the *Titanic*, with an iceberg moving inexorably out of 'a solitude of the sea/Deep from

human vanity'" (279).

The poem describes the disaster of the *Titanic* as fated—foreseen and decreed by some consciousness and power outside and beyond the human actors involved—and through the allusion and the analogy—ship and men, iceberg and fire—Maclean invites us to see the Mann Gulch fire similarly. But what does this mean? Not, surely, that either disaster was the product of some sort of supernatural intervention; the actions of human beings and the forces of nature are perfectly sufficient to explain each "convergence." And it is notable that Hardy refers not to God or gods but to "[the] Immanent Will that stirs and urges everything" and "the Spinner of the Years"—not a personal deity interested in human affairs, but some impersonal force.

What the poem seems to dramatize, rather, is the event from a distant perspective, in both time and space: a perspective that, looking backward, traces the history of ship and iceberg to see them as *destined* for collision—a perspective "from a distant horizon" that can therefore make sense of what, from "the view from the ground" (279), must seem to come out of nowhere.

To describe the events as Hardy's poem does is to see them as necessary, as the product of some order—and that order is not just that of physical laws. The poem does not simply assert the facts as foreordained; it suggests that the *Titanic*'s fate was seeded in the hubris of its creation. It begins with references to vanity and pride and proceeds by picturing in sequence the ship's powerful engine, its luxurious features, now dark and silent and sludge-covered at the bottom of the ocean ("Steel chambers, late the pyres/ Of her salamandrine fires,/ Cold currents thrid, and turn to rhythmic tidal lyres")—an almost Ecclesiastical vision, redeemed only by the strange beauty of Hardy's mannered and baroque language. The poem arguably conveys a sense of all human life and striving as a kind of hubris, beautiful but doomed. The sunk ship becomes a *memento mori*, a universal image of death; the Immanent Will and the Spinner of the Years

images of the implacable force that thwarts human reachings and overreachings.

Hardy's vision is bleaker than Maclean's, devoid of the humanity of *Fire* (literally devoid of any reference to *people*), but through the allusion Maclean suggests that, like the sinking of the *Titanic* in the poem, the catastrophe of Mann Gulch must both be made sense of from some hovering perspective that can see the events as unfolding according to some order beyond human intentionality but not mere random chance. Maclean pictures this order here as "Geometry":

> From the ground, our approaching tragedy, like the *Titanic's,* had been linear, arithmetic, and two-dimensional. From the ground, it had occurred on one line as Behind caught up to Ahead, but the Spinner of the Years, viewing wildfire and young men from an even more distant horizon than our own, would see Geometry as well as Arithmetic in what was occurring at lower elevations. Not just Geometry but Solid Geometry—lines becoming curves and curves closing into circles and circles blowing up in to spherical monsters whirling burning branches into the sky….
>
> …In between these geometries for something like four minutes was a painfully moving line with pieces of it dropping out until there came an end to biology. Then it was pure geometry, and later still the solid geometry of concrete crosses. (280-1)

Literally, of course, Maclean is just referring to the fact that after the blow-up, the fire would be burning at the men from all sides, until it overcomes them. But the nominalization and abstraction—"Behind," "Ahead," "Geometry," and, later, "biology"—makes the Smokejumpers' lost race for their lives into a clash between human life and something enormous and inhuman. The capitalization of "Geometry" suggests a divine being, but this divinity is wholly impersonal: mathematical, even if monstrous.

It is notable that Maclean identifies himself—or the storyteller—with Hardy's Sky Spirits, and even with the Spinner of the Years, who is the one who sees what Maclean describes. Obviously the storyteller is not the one who determines ahead of time what happens. For Maclean and Hardy, there is (on a literal level) no one determining events according to some divine plan. In Maclean's account, even the Spinner of the Years is described not as causing or decreeing events but as *seeing* what happens according to the determining forces of Geometry

and Arithmetic. But the storyteller occupies the position of the hovering spirit who sees, though only retrospectively, the sense and significance of things.

This passage suggests an order of significance that is not precisely a moral order, meting out "poetic justice"; nor a divine one, proceeding according to some providential plan; nor merely a scientific one, reflecting nothing but the blind laws of physics, chemistry, biology. This is the order of myth as defined earlier; the events seem to reflect the foundational and finally unknowable determinants of the significance of human action that encompass and the moral and the scientific but ultimately transcend them. This is the consolation of tragedy—to find the events as reflective of a larger meaning or order, imagining the death of the Smokejumpers as an encounter with what, in the final section, will appear as the ultimate destructive force of the universe, with the end of the world; there is something heroic in that very confrontation.

Again the question arises of what all this has to do with reality. One can say that this is all fantastical—there aren't "really" Sky Spirits; the fire is just fire, physical process. There is nothing external to which one can point to say that this isn't just Maclean's fantasy, a consoling invention of meaning for an event that is actually meaningless. But as I argued in the first chapter, the criterion is increasing coherence, which is not just a matter of coherence between the parts of our account of things but also between that account and the world and our perception of it. If the account *works*, if it is compelling and plausible—if it seems not merely invented but to refer to something "really there"—it is because the events themselves seem images of deeper structures of meaning, which demand to be represented, inhabited, and, to the extent possible, understood. These structures of meaning can, however, only be known through the *description* of the events, and our attempt to understand that description.

Describing events in this way does not prove that they are "fated," and Maclean does not

intend to do so. But to see the catastrophe not just as a senseless accident but as having tragic form is to see what it means for a human life to make sense. Crucially, this sense transcends that life and does not end with it, for what premature death makes devastatingly clear is that if the sense of my life depends on my own enjoyment or fulfillment, the universe will often make nonsense of my life. To find such a sense is not simply consoling: it demands a kind of dispossession, an identification with a perspective outside oneself, a decentering of consciousness to the position of the Sky Spirits, seeing one's own life as "a thin line moving among these expanding solids" of an order that encompasses and will outlast it.

We are socialized and instinctually disposed to inhabit the world from the perspective of our own egos—to make sense of things with reference to how they impact us, how they further or hinder our own needs and desires. One might say that tragedy reflects and educates us to a perspective that is decentered, displaced from that of our own egos—that is, a perspective outside of oneself, even if one cannot precisely locate that "outside" except as a kind of relative objectivity—and dispossesses us of the sense that our lives are ours to freely determine in accordance with our wishes.

From Tragedy to Apocalypse

For Borroff, the Geometry passage is the proper end of the book as Maclean left it. She argues that none of what follows, "[n]either the analogy of the atomic bombs, nor the analogy of Christ on the cross, nor the final analogy, much as I am moved by it, of the lonely suffering of his wife in terminal cancer, really works."[136] I would suggest that this "not really working" may be intrinsic to the task Maclean has set for himself, and that in his final attempts we see the movement from a tragic sense to one I would call "apocalyptic." To see this we need to proceed

[136] Longinus, *On the Sublime*. 131.

to the next moment of Maclean's "purgation."

Part Three begins with another attempt to visualize the "total conflagration," after the final and not-quite-conclusive reckoning about the responsibility Dodge's escape fire should bear:

> It would be natural near the end to try to divest the fire of any personal liability to those who died in it and to become for a moment a distant and detached spectator. It might be possible then, if ever, to see fire in something like total perspective as it became total conflagration. (293)

What is Maclean doing here that he has not already done in the Geometry passage, which already took the perspective of a "distant and detached spectator"?

If the metaphor of Geometry implies a single encompassing order, Maclean's next and final attempt to "picture" the blow-up (as opposed to explaining it) represents it as a grotesque and confusing—perhaps inassimilable—multiplicity:

> Pictures, then, of a big fire are pictures of many realities, designed so they change into each other and fit ultimately into a single picture of one monster becoming another monster. The pictures and the monsters are untroubled by mathematics. The monster becomes one as it extends itself simultaneously as a monster and a real animal or more likely just as part of a real animal—after it disgorges itself, all that can be seen of it from afar are its fried gray intestines. Oddly, as destruction comes close to being total, destruction erects for brief moments into the sexual and quickly sinks back again into destruction. The two don't look much different, and they aren't and they are.
>
> Thus, pictures which wildfire creates of itself are at least bi-visual, part of the fire's process of procreating its meanings….
>
> Because of their many meanings, wildfires can be tri-visual or more. Some of what even a seasoned firefighter sees never seems real. (294)

If the Geometry passage represents a distant, implacable and inhumanly objective perspective from which events might be viewed and comprehended, this passage seems to call into question whether there is any such perspective, since reality itself is unstable, mutable, neither one thing nor another—or multiple things all at once. The flames become the torch-tongue of a snake, a phalanx of "deranged military monsters"; the smoke and ashes "a bulbous mushroom impregnated by a snake in the grass," "gray brains boiling out of the crevice of the earth,"

"suffering gray intestines" (294-5). The imagery is repugnant not only in the weirdness of the individual metaphors—the reference to "the sexual" is particularly discomfiting, bordering on obscenity and inappropriateness—but in their incongruity one to another. Perhaps the fire is "procreating its meanings," but the very multiplicity of meanings seems to threaten meaninglessness, especially if the metaphors are analyzed too closely. Is the fire a monster, something unnatural and malevolent? Or, like "poisonous mushrooms," natural but dangerous? Or, like the brains and intestines, alive and pulsing but somehow part of its surroundings, just as much victim of itself as perpetrator? Yet this doesn't seem to be the right way to read this passage—as "bivisual" and "trivisual" imply, the very multiplicity and irreconcilability of the impressions seem to be the point.

This is not the first time that Maclean has made use of bizarrely mixed figurative language to convey the sense-confounding quality of the fire. Earlier when he describes the blowup from the point of view of one of the rescue rangers, he writes:

> …behind Jansson at the bottom of the gulch a spot fire flowered. Then several more flowered….Then a few tossed themselves as bouquets across the gulch, grew rapidly into each other's flames, and become a garden of wildfire….
>
> Seemingly without relation to reality or to the workings of the imagination, the flowers that had grown into a garden distended themselves into an enormous light bulb and a great mixed metaphor. Flowers and light bulbs don't seem to mix, but the light bulb of the mind strung itself inside with filaments of flame and flowers, bloated and burned itself at its top with gases, then swirled upgulch to meet the Smokejumpers trying to escape downgulch. In a few minutes they met. Then only a few minutes later the blowup passed out of the gulch, and left a world that is still burned out. (85-6)

Alan Williamson argues that Maclean's self-consciously mixed metaphors reflect the threat of senselessness that Maclean perceives in the events of Mann Gulch. *Fire,* Williamson argues, is similar to *King Lear* as Maclean characterizes it in his essay on tragedy: not a "tragedy of character," which emphasizes the responsibility of the protagonist for his downfall (like *Othello*) and therefore leaves open the possibility that we ourselves might avoid such a downfall, but a

tragedy in which everything we value or wish for seems, in Maclean's words, "condemned by some hopelessly formidable perversity of power ultimately beyond challenge,"[137] independent of our innocence or guilt. Lear's madness is, as Maclean characterizes it, the product of the loss of the belief in "a universe controlled by divine authority, harmoniously ordered and subordinated in its parts."[138] *Lear* as Maclean reads it suggests a kind of tragedy that resides not in the terribleness of the order of the universe but rather the possibility that there *is* no order. This, Williamson argues, is the vision expressed in Maclean's "giant mixed metaphor": "Human cognition fails in the face of apocalyptic and instantaneous change; and what is metaphoric coherence but a little illustration of cognitive power?"[139]

What the images at the end collectively convey is a nightmarish quality. The point, it seems, is horror, and the *breakdown* of sense. The phantasmagoria resembles the Book of Revelation; the fire has become an image of the end of the world, an apocalyptic vision. The old order is passing away, and what is to come we can scarcely imagine.

The passage becomes still more explicitly apocalyptic with the invocation of "the theological" and "the nuclear"—as usual with Maclean, the meaning of these concepts ambiguous but powerfully suggestive:

> Dead standing trees…became giant candles burning for the dead. Then one would explode, disappearing from the air where it stood, detonated by its own heat. The disappearance of the tree would not be visible; it would be a theological disappearance; immediately after the explosion, its falling would be transubstantiated into spreading waves of earth generated by its own earthquake, and after its waves had swelled and broken and passed over and under and on, it would return as sound and terminate in echoes of its earthquake rumbling out of the sides and head of the gulch. The world then was more than ever theological and the nuclear was never far off. (293-94)

The reference to the *theological*, as well as the allusion to transubstantiation, at first appears

[137] Maclean, "Episode, Scene, Speech, and Word: The Madness of Lear," in *Critics and Criticism*, 602.
[138] *Maclean.*, 599.
[139] Williamson, *Westernness: A Meditation*, p. 130.

simply an ironic reference to the astounding but not scientifically inexplicable fact of spontaneous combustion. Yet with this description Maclean implies that this terrifying force of nature *is* the divine—not that there are supernatural beings expressing their will through the fire, but rather that the tremendous and terrifying power manifested in the conflagration is what we *mean* by the divine[140]—or, at least, is an image of it.[141]

To this point we are arguably still in the realm of the tragic—the tragic sublime, the limit or horizon of sense, but a horizon that still allows for the possibility of sense even if it is a terrible kind of sense, the sense of "this whole cockeyed world that probably always makes its own kind of sense and beauty but not always ours" (208). The fire is monstrous, but the men therefore perish heroically in a battle with a monster. But there is something beyond the theological, and that is "the nuclear," and it seems at the end to threaten even this tragic sense:

> The atomic mushroom has become for our age the outer symbol of the inner fear of the explosive power of the universe. It is the symbol of a whole age, and it took an artist to express the meaning the mushroom has for us. Henry Moore['s]…bronze atomic mushroom, with its hollow eyes, is intentionally bi-visual from every point of view. Wherever you stand, the bronze looks like both an atomic mushroom and a skull, and is meant to.
>
> When the blowup rose out of Mann Gulch and its smoke merged with the jet stream, it looked much like an atomic explosion in Nevada on its cancerous way to Utah. When last seen, the tri-visual figure had stretched out and was on its way, far, far, far away, looking like death and looking back at its dead and looking forward to its dead yet to come. Perhaps it could see all of us.
>
> No one could know the power of it. It stretched until it became particles on the horizon, where it may have joined the company of the Sky Sprits as particles, knowing what we do not know, probably something nuclear. (295)

This is a grim vision—what abides, beyond human life and human striving, is the power of destruction; history is figured as a procession of death, the dead of the past and the dead yet to

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[140] I'm reminded of a comment by Jamie Redfield on the Sox, who, after losing three games in the Series, went on to win the remaining four and the pennant. "The gods switched sides—that's what we *mean* by the gods switching sides."

[141] Analogous, perhaps, to Wittgenstein's comment that "the human body is the best picture of the human soul" (*Philosophical Investigations* II, *iv*) or "the human being is the best picture of the human soul" (*Remarks*, 281).

come, which will include “all of us,” Maclean and me and you, gentle reader. In the end, the atomic metaphor suggests, it may include all of humanity, phylogeny recapitulating ontogeny. The grimness is softened by Maclean’s humane irony, but that is for the moment the only consolation offered—the consolation of consciousness, of the possibility of putting ourselves into the position of the Sky Spirits, imagining and comprehending the destruction and the end.

The account does not end with the nuclear. There is an immediate if ambivalent retreat to the less ascetic consolation of cyclical regeneration:

> Now, almost forty years later, small trees have just started to grow along the bottoms of dry finger gulches on the hillside in Mann Gulch….the grass has to be parted to find them, but I look for such things. I see better what happens in grass than on the horizon. Most of us do, and probably it is just as well, but what’s found buried in grass doesn’t tell us how to get out of the way. (295-6)

At the end, Maclean returns to “the ground” and to the point of view of “compassion” as he tries to imagine the final moments of those who were caught by the fire—what it would have been like, physically, to die in the fire (it would have been “like drowning,” suffocating from the smoke before their bodies were actually burned), and what they might have felt—terror, self-pity, and finally, a kind of pride:

> The evidence, then, is that at the very end beyond thought and beyond fear and beyond even self-compassion and divine bewilderment there remains some firm intention to continue doing forever and ever what we last hoped to do on earth. By this final act they had come about as close as body and spirit can to establishing a unity of themselves with earth, fire, and perhaps the sky. (300)

Except for the three survivors, the Smokejumpers fail, but they fail heroically, Maclean wants to say, pushing to the very extremes of human capacity, elite even in their race with death. At the end, he has already noted, they were running at a pace of about nine and a half minutes per mile, “a remarkable speed for the slowest of the fastest to maintain” (275) on that terrain, a pace that “would have been almost beyond reality to maintain for 375 yards on a slope where I had to crawl with gloved hands on a hot August afternoon” (276). And even once the fire catches them,

they strive to the very last to keep going:

> …after the bodies had fallen, most of them had risen again, taken a few steps, and fallen again, this final time like pilgrims in prayer, facing the top of the hill, which on that slope is nearly east….
>
> The evidence, then, is that at the very end beyond thought and beyond fear and beyond even self-compassion and divine bewilderment there remains some firm intention to continue doing forever and ever what we last hoped to do on earth. By this final act they had come about as close as body and spirit can to establishing a unity of themselves with earth, fire, and perhaps the sky. (300)

One might be tempted to gently accuse Maclean here of writing "beautiful nonsense," trying to ascribe meaning to a futile struggle for survival which must at that point have been almost purely instinctual. There is something here of Kipling's stiff-upper-lipped response in his poem "My Boy Jack" to the death of his son in the Battle of Loos in the first World War:

> "Oh, dear, what comfort can I find?"
> *None this tide,*
> *Nor any tide,*
> *Except he did not shame his kind —*
> *Not even with that wind blowing, and that tide.*

Kipling finds consolation in the sheer fact that his son died in military service (no details are known of his death); the consolation seems thin, perhaps self-deceiving, and perhaps finally, in the triumphant final stanza ("Then hold your head up all the more/….Because he was the son you bore/And gave to that wind blowing, and that tide!"), a denial of the tragedy of the death. Maclean does not succumb to the same denial—there is no final exclamation point—but he seems to be looking, still at the very end, for some further, final, more definite sense to these deaths. He can find only poetry, for the men's final "unity…with earth, fire, and perhaps the sky" cannot, in Maclean and Hardy's secular world, have any definite religious or spiritual meaning.

This inconclusiveness is not to say that it is meaningless: earlier, reflecting on the storyteller's task, Maclean had written: "A story that honors the dead realistically partly atones

for their sufferings, and so instead of leaving us in moral bewilderment, adds dimensions to our acuteness in watching the universe's four elements at work—sky, earth, fire, and young men" (144). To have transformed catastrophe into tragedy is to have found a form in which these elements are unified: through explanation, narration and image. Early on the men were defined by their desire to prove something to "the universe"; by the end, Maclean has shown them to have done so: not to have defeated it, as no one could, but through their extraordinary and awful encounter to have "pushed back [its] edges," in revealing everything that their story reveals, to have done something story-worthy, given the right storyteller.

Yet the consolation of consciousness through artistic form—especially when the form itself, in its fragmentation and apocalyptic imagery, embodies the possibility of a final incoherence—cannot dispel a remnant of dissatisfaction and doubt which surfaces repeatedly throughout the book. In his account of one of his treks through Mann Gulch Maclean reports being reminded of a World War I poem:

> "In Flanders Fields the poppies blow/ Between the crosses, row on row..."
> I couldn't make myself go any farther in the poem. Nothing but the crosses fitted. "Poppies," hell. Everything was dead on the hillside...As for "rows," there was a cross anywhere a body ran out of brains for lack of oxygen and rolled downhill into black death--if it was lucky, after being dead. (201)

Elsewhere he entertains "the possibility that there is no real ending in reality to the story of the Mann Gulch fire. If so, then let it be so—there's a lot of tragedy in the universe that has missing parts and comes to no conclusion, including probably the tragedy that awaits you and me." (156) This too is an acknowledgment that there may be no form, no meaningful shape, to be made of these events.

If the impossibility of compelling absolute conviction about the sense that he tries to make of this catastrophe does not wholly undermine Maclean's work, it is because he has

acknowledged and incorporated this remnant throughout the book—as in these reported moments of dark skepticism—and in the denouement. From the elevated, if not soaring, language of his benediction ("By this final act…"), there is in the final paragraphs a marked deflation from the poetic to the soberingly prosaic. A short few sentences about the time of death as recorded on the men's watches. A promise from "the Office of Air Operations and Fire Management of Region One of the United States Forest Service" to care for the crosses marking the location where each man fell. And finally a short and personal note from Maclean that reads more as a postscript than a conclusion:

> I, an old man, have written this fire report. Among other things, it was important to me, as an exercise for old age, to enlarge my knowledge and spirit so I could accompany young men whose lives I might have lived on their way to death. I have climbed where they climbed, and in my time I have fought fire and inquired into its nature. In addition, I have lived to get a better understanding of myself and those close to me, many of them now dead.
>
> Perhaps it is not odd, at the end of this tragedy where nothing much was left of the elite who came from the sky but courage struggling for oxygen, that I have often found myself thinking of my wife on her brave and lonely way to death. (300-1)

The ending of *Fire* is anti-climactic, and to Borroff it was inadequate. Poignant as it is, the allusion to Maclean's wife initially seems out of place, certainly at odds with the emphasis throughout the book on the exceptionality of the men in their youngness and their eliteness, and with the evocation of the terrible and sublime terrain—literal and figurative—in which they struggled and fell.[142]

But I would argue that the ending is integral to the form of the work, even if it is in some sense a failure—much as Wayne Booth came to see the unwieldy form of the whole as a "successful failure."[143] The ending brings the story back to Maclean, and it is a sad image, even

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[142] Borroff gently relates a similar sense that the ending fails: "If his creative energies had lasted, he would surely have been able to contrive an ending equal in power to the memorable final paragraphs of 'A River Runs Through It.'" *Op. cit.*, p. 131.
[143] Booth, "The Struggle to Tell the Story of the Struggle to Get the Story Told."

with all he has achieved, in his life and in the work we have just finished reading. He is left thinking of his wife dying, now dead, and himself an "old man" who has also lost many others and is bound soon to follow them. Death in itself may present a problem of sense, without traditional religious consolations, and beyond this Maclean has raised the specter of the atom bomb and the end of the world, and with these associations the final word of the book again suggests a discontinuity with future generations.

For Booth, Maclean was bound to fail because the story he wanted to tell was "too complicated," but I propose that the real difficulty of the task Maclean took on goes beyond the particularity of *this* story and to the problem of telling a modern tragedy, which is perhaps (in one of its forms) the very problem of modernity.

Had he lived longer, Maclean may indeed have found a more powerful and "rounded" ending to *Fire*, and it may even have been a "better" book, but the form as it is reflects something essential about the modern condition, the necessarily provisional character of any conviction we might achieve about the deeper significance of our lives. Yet at the same time it is as compelling a testament as there could be that there is such significance to be glimpsed if never fully comprehended, and to the necessity of seeking it, with all our power, to the very end.

Conclusion: The Limits of the Tragic Form

In trying to grasp the form of *Fire*—to make sense of Maclean's own endeavor and of our experience of his successes and failures—we must, I have argued, reference something like the sublime: that which is ultimately beyond human comprehension or control, which impresses itself upon human experience, which is at once inimical to human welfare, as destructive power, but also a fundamental and perhaps essential source of the meaning of our humanity, the extreme

limits in relation to which human beings define themselves.

Maclean briefly alludes to the possibility that the destructive power will ultimately be totally destructive—acknowledging that the overarching narrative of humanity has an end, the end of the world. The prospect of a true end to humanity threatens to render human life meaningless. The continuation of humanity has always been the condition of the sense of human life—the individual life ends, but the race goes on; even if the world ends, the saved live on in God. If, in modernity, a true end becomes a possibility, we do not know how to think it. One might say that to be able to think it we would need the secular analogue to everlasting life—the idea that it matters absolutely what we do, that we must be "good for nothing"—really nothing.[144] This predicament is what the apocalyptic literature of the 20th century demands that we confront.

In the end, Maclean retreats—as all of us must, to the extent that we must continue to live in the human world—from the abyss of the end of the world back to limited, if still sorrowful, ends: the deaths of the Smokejumpers, his wife's death, his own coming death. The terror in *Fire* is the terror of nature, and while coming to terms with the reality of this terror—with "the explosive power of the universe"—demands a kind of dispossession, it doesn't yet call into question the viability of the very conditions of humanity. Though he invokes the atomic bomb, Maclean does not connect the admirable and innocent hubris of the Smokejumpers to the more dreadful transgressions that human beings perpetrate, with ever greater ingenuity and consequence, against nature and against each other. In the remaining chapters, I will turn to works by Robert Lowell, Wallace Stevens, and Cormac McCarthy, for whom the terror of the universe is actually the terror of the bivalence of human nature, of that in human beings which would undermine the conditions of a truly human world. This is the ultimate threat to the

[144] Some would argue this is the proper sense of the Christian "afterlife" as well.

intelligibility of human life and experience, and therefore the ultimate challenge for contemporary literary form.

Chapter 3: Cormac McCarthy's **Blood Meridian** *and the Apocalyptic Sublime*

> Where force is sovereign, justice is absolutely unreal . . . . The structure of the human heart is just as much a reality as any other in this universe, neither more nor less of a reality than the trajectory of a planet. (Simone Weil, NFR: 243)

In the previous chapter, I read Maclean's *Young Men and Fire* as evoking a certain reality, an order against which the events of Mann Gulch can be made intelligible and which, indeed, those events seem to imply. This begins as the order which tragedies could be said generally to reveal, a kind of universal justice or economy in which the hero oversteps some human limit and pays for the transgression—the Smokejumpers, elite and reckless, "owe the universe a tragedy."

Although Maclean seeks a tragic form for the events of Mann Gulch, the work reflects his recognition that conventional tragic form would be inadequate to the reality he seeks to convey. The form that he finds is distinctively modern—self-reflexive and skeptical about the order it affirms even as it continues doggedly, and persuasively, to affirm it, on the one hand through the construction of a compelling narrative incorporating history, geography, science, and personal drama into the structure of classical tragedy; on the other through evoking the mythical and primal character of the story, painting it as the collision between "earth, air, fire, and young men"—as an encounter with the sublime, with that which marks the limit of humanly intelligible reality and human comprehension.

Fire is distinctive too, and perhaps consummately modern, in its elegiac character—it is not only tragedy but elegy, narrated from the first-person perspective of one who seeks to memorialize and mourn the dead. Maclean's effort to turn catastrophe into tragedy in fact seems to constitute the work of mourning—to come to terms with the death of the men, which is not for him a personal loss but represents the loss of his own past and youth, perhaps of what he

relinquished in choosing the career of a professor rather than a woodsman, and the loss of the more traditional, physical, and rooted world of his youth. In finding and telling the tragedy of Mann Gulch—finding and conveying the objective and impersonal law of the universe—Maclean enacts a kind of dispossession, to some degree freeing himself (and we readers, through our identification with him and our inhabiting of his narrative) from certain narcissistic attachments to the self—preparing for his own approaching death, which is not just a task for the imminently dying but for all who seek to be objective, if as Socrates argued, to philosophize is to learn how to die.

Maclean's work remains tragic to the extent that it finds some positive resolution in the evocation and affirmation of an underlying order to what happened at Mann Gulch, and—by implication—to human existence generally; he seeks and finds catharsis, which for him means that we have learned something about nature and can live in profounder accord with it as a consequence of that understanding—at least in profounder consciousness, if not in avoidance of all future disasters. We can at least affirm some reason, if not justice, in what has happened.

The end of *Fire,* however, gives the sense of some more fundamental threat, and I have characterized this as the incursion into the tragic of the apocalyptic. The final chaos of imagery, including an invocation of the atomic bomb, implicitly calls into question whether the Smokejumpers' deaths can be made sense of as Maclean has tried to do throughout the book. It raises the possibility that the law governing human life is finally inimical not only to individual happiness but to human flourishing and perhaps human survival, and it thus presents a fundamental challenge to sense, for how could we affirm such a law? At the same time, the work suggests that there is some kind of redemption to be found merely in acknowledging and representing this ungraspable and uncontrollable force.

Proceeding from my initial assumption that in reading works of literature we come to know certain human realities—the realities to which the works refer—I want in the remainder of the dissertation to draw out the reality of "the apocalyptic," the aspect of modernity that is reflected in this new genre or mode. I find it illuminatingly developed in two kinds of work, which I will treat in this chapter and the following. First of all, the tragic strand can be seen as reaching full apocalyptic realization in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*. Secondly, the elegiac strand could be seen as fully developed in its apocalyptic mode in Robert Lowell's "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket" and, very differently, in Wallace Stevens' "The Auroras of Autumn."

I mean not just to treat these works as symptomatic of underlying social, cultural, political, or economic forces, nor merely to interpret them, though both interpretation and some contextualization will be essential. The aim, though, is to continue to demonstrate and develop the mode of reading I articulated in the first chapter, a reading here aimed at showing how these literary works orient the reader toward a different background—toward those realities that mark the ground and limit of the intelligibility of our experience—and through my reading to elucidate or illuminate that background.

All of the works I have read here have been taken to be making certain claims, or expressing certain worldviews. This is not wrong, and those views may be persuasive (or not), but what I wish to show is that what we come to *know* through the poem is not, directly, what these authors or their works tell us, but rather the largely tacitly known background to which we are referred in our attempts to understand and judge them. Perhaps most essentially, we come to know *that* there is a different and deeper ground of intelligibility than that to which we ordinarily

appeal, but we also come to know something of the character of that ground, its colors and contours.

Blood Meridian may stand alone in American literature in its insistence, as it would seem, on depravity and inhumanity as the prevalent and defining features of human beings. Not only uncompromisingly unromanticizing but gleefully deromanticizing of the American West, the work could be called the apotheosis of the American apocalyptic sublime—or anti-apocalyptic sublime—as it emerges at the end of Maclean—an image of the end of humanity as we know it, or as we have dreamed it to be. In this chapter, then, I will read *Blood Meridian* with the aim of illuminating the implications of the apocalyptic view I find at the end of *Fire*.

The idea of America has always been bound up with the sense of a historical trajectory toward something new, a new condition of humanity, the departure from the old world, old ways, old institutions. The utopian dream of the Puritans, America as the "city on the hill," as close as humanly possible to God's kingdom on earth, giving way to the secular eschatology of the realization of the individual liberated from oppressive hierarchies and traditional mores, and of mankind liberated from nature through technological progress. America could thus be seen as the ultimate test of whether this liberation will lead to a significant freedom, or meaninglessness, or the end of civilization or the end of the world—whether there is or is not some other ground outside of traditional society and hierarchical institutions on which the humanity of *homo sapiens* might be grounded.

This could be considered the theme of *Blood Meridian*, as stated in the very first chapter, after the book's nameless protagonist, the kid, has run away from home, drifted from one tersely

narrated, short-lived and violent residency to another, and eventually ended up in Texas (America writ large):

> 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)[145]

From the epigraph of the book, which traces a proclivity for violence back to humankind's distant origins, to its enigmatic conclusion which seems to envision some post-catastrophic future, *Blood Meridian* conveys the sense that the question of the kid's destiny is not just a question about the prospects for human being in the nineteenth-century Mexican-American borderlands but, like *Heart of Darkness*, represents a situation which in its extremity allows something deep and persistent in human being to be revealed.

As proposed in the first chapter, a reading aimed at grasping the realities represented or evoked by the work begins with the identification of problems and challenges raised by the work—since, as Polanyi argues, the process of discovery proceeds from the recognition of something that doesn't fit into our current framework of understanding, on the one hand, and the intuitive sense of a different or more comprehensive framework which would resolve the problem on the other.

Thus such a reading begins with an attempt to articulate on the one hand what is mysterious or obscure, startling, evocative or disturbing about the work, and on the other with an attempt to articulate a sense of the whole—what the work is *about*, not in the immediate sense of the events and actions it relates, the characters and world it describes, but rather what all of these things, related in the way they are related, reveal. One could imagine the narrative as tracing a path which is conditioned by an invisible underlying geography, one that we cannot know

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[145] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian, Or the Evening Redness in the West*. All references are to the Vintage edition.

directly but only as it constrains the narrative—what the characters do and the consequences of those actions; how the world may be described; how the episodes follow one from another. Those works we find lastingly compelling—and educative—are those in which that underlying geography is solid and convincing and yet exotic or unexpected.

Our own experience can be understood as similarly illuminating of underlying conditions—moral, psychological, social, ontological—which we only come to know through encountering them. But literature allows us to see such encounters from the outside, objectively; it confronts us with extreme situations and exceptional characters, pushing to limits we are unlikely to encounter in our own lives (and simply allowing us to encounter *more* than we could possibly encounter in our own lives)—and perhaps most crucially, through its very form—its plottedness and figuration—it suggests a different order of intelligibility than that of our everyday life—ultimately the order of myth.

What is both striking and unsettling about *Blood Meridian* is, broadly, its unremitting and horrific violence and inhumanity and the seeming triumph of that violence and inhumanity. This would be disturbing enough in itself, but what further unsettles us is the coupling of this violence with the work's compelling, evocative, and sometimes exquisite language and figuration. Finally there is the parallel ambiguity of the figure of "Judge" Holden, both repellant in his wanton evil and compelling in his maniacal intelligence and unrepentant outrageousness. In these contradictions, ambiguities, and challenges to our conventional moral sense lie the problem posed by the work; in the conception of the work's referent lies the reality we would come to know through following these problems out.

Blood Meridian follows the peripeteia of the unnamed "kid," who leaves home at an early age in 1833, wanders for a time getting into various violent encounters, and ends up joining up with a group of outlaws and mercenaries led by John Joel Glanton who have a contract with the Mexican government to kill Apaches. The bulk of the book relates the gang's travels (the refrain "They rode on" recurs countless times) and their increasingly violent and unlawful activity—they are to be paid by the scalp, and as one might imagine they become less and less discriminating as to where they get those scalps—interspersed with tales of violence told by and of other characters.

The spiritual leader of the gang is an erudite monster of a man called Judge Holden (though there is no evidence he was ever actually a judge), and from their initial encounter the judge seems to want something from the kid which the kid instinctually resists. Arguably what the judge wants is for the kid to relinquish his minimal but nonnegligible moral scruples and to join the judge on the dark side—or the dark*er* side, since the kid is, after all, already an active member of a merciless band of scalphunters. But the kid commits the occasional random act of kindness, whereas the judge wantonly drowns puppies and sodomizes and murders children.

The gang's exploits culminate with their massacre at the hands of the Yuma, from which only a handful escape, including the kid and the judge. The kid evades the judge's attempts to kill him but also refrains from killing the judge when he has the opportunity. Years later, the kid, having become "the man," encounters the judge again at a saloon, tells the judge he "aint nothin," and is murdered by the judge in the outhouse. The book proper ends with the judge dancing in the saloon:

> 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 dances 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)

A short and obscure epilogue follows in which "wanderers" move across a plain following a man who seems to be digging post-holes.

Such a summary of the plot gives the sense of the book's narrative arc but little of the spectacular density of its language and imagery, which is at least as essential to its distinctiveness. There is on the one hand a pervasive sense of the grossness and decrepitude of this world—"Dry old crone, half naked, her paps like wrinkled aubergines hanging from under the shawl she wore" (97), urine and feces and pustulating wounds—and yet pulsing through it is a recurrently emerging current of strangeness and mystery. Describing a family of jugglers temporarily fallen in with the gang, McCarthy writes characteristically:

> …these four yet crouched at the edge of the firelight among their strange chattels and watched how the ragged flames fled down the wind as if sucked by some maelstrom out there in the void, some vortex in that waste apposite to which man's transit and his reckonings alike lay abrogate. As if beyond will or fate he and his beasts and his trappings moved both in card and in substance under consignment to some third and other destiny. (96)

The passage, like countless others in the novel, combines a striking image which seems an undeciphered symbol—here, the circle of firelight giving way to the blackness beyond, the wind pulling the flames into the dark—with a possible interpretation—an "as if"—that evokes a dark spirit world.

Like *Young Men and Fire*, *Blood Meridian* is also based on historical events. Glanton was a historical figure who did indeed lead a gang of mercenaries hired by the Mexican government to kill Apaches. Many of the incidents in McCarthy's book are based on a previous account of the scalphunters' exploits, the *Confession* of an adventurer named Samuel Chamberlain who purports to have traveled with the gang for a time. Chamberlain describes Judge Holden with many of the attributes taken up by McCarthy, including his size, his erudition,

and his appalling proclivities for rape and murder. "Who or what he was no on knew but a cooler blooded villain never went unhung,"[146] Chamberlain writes.

Chamberlain's account is lively; at times it is moving, as when he describes the killing of some members of the gang who are too wounded to travel so they are not captured and tortured by the Apaches—"As we cleared the grove, Glanton fired his pistol, when we all heard the dull crashing sound that told us the deed was done. All felt sad and guilty" (281)—an episode repeated in McCarthy. Other passages disturb simply by recounting the facts of the violence: "There was in [Glanton's] camp drying thirty-seven of those disgusting articles of trade, Apache scalps, cut with the *right ear* on, to prevent fraud, as some Indians have two circles to their hair" (270). But as these brief quotes should indicate, Chamberlain's account is on the whole a straightforward, conventional narrative with a personable narrator. The events and characters he describes undergo a profound transformation in McCarthy's novel. The violence is described in visceral detail; the Judge expands into a grotesque and superhuman character; the roguish humanity of Chamberlain's narration is replaced by an impersonal voice, and we are given very little of the normal human interaction that Chamberlain gives us between the members of the gang, and hardly any account of characters' thoughts or feelings (there is, for instance, no "All felt sad and guilty" in McCarthy's rendering of the "mercy killings"). This underscores the problem posed by *Blood Meridian*: what is the aim of his representation and elaboration of this story? If Maclean sought to transform catastrophe into tragedy, into what does McCarthy seek to transform historical atrocity? And if his representation seems to reveal some reality beyond the facts of Glanton and his gang's activities, how to characterize that reality?

[146] Chamberlain, *My Confession*, 271.

Critics seem to agree that *Blood Meridian* reveals something essential but are divided on the question of what. As Barclay Owens notes, interpretations of the book fall roughly into two camps (or perhaps more accurately on a spectrum between two poles): the nihilistic—i.e., that McCarthy intends to show us that the world is without sense or meaning—and the moralistic—that the work in fact conveys ethical principles, however subtly or indirectly—that it conveys what Edwin Arnold calls "a profound belief in the need for moral order, a conviction that is essentially religious."[147]

In the nihilistic camp, the idea is that, as Owens puts it, the book proves the "thesis" that "mindless, atavistic violence is the true nature of mankind, a genetic heritage in common with apes and wolves."[148] There are two parts to the nihilistic reading: first, that this *is* the "nature of mankind," and second, that there is (according to the perspective of the book) no position from which we can condemn the violence. This interpretation argues that the book demonstrates what the judge explicitly articulates. As Vereen Bell, whom Owens identifies as the progenitor of the nihilistic tendency of interpretation, writes:

> "War is God," [the judge] proclaims (p. 249), and this odd shibboleth is supported…by a genuine metaphysic that piece by piece the judge articulates. It is enacted everywhere in the novel by his dimmer protégés. It is put into words, with a Jacobean grandeur and cogency, only by the judge.

More on the judge's view later, but briefly, the judge acts as if there are no moral or normative constraints and argues that in fact there are not—that human life is in reality determined sheerly by force and that there is no other ground on which to judge actions or events.

On the other side, there is the ethical interpretation which finds in *Blood Meridian* the affirmation of (a more or less conventional, liberal) morality despite the prevalence and

[147] Arnold, "Naming, Knowing and Nothingness: McCarthy's Moral Parables," in *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy,* ed. Arnold and Luce, 44; quoted in Owens, 10-11.

ascendancy of violence and amorality in the plot and the lack of editorializing from the narrator. Harold Bloom sees the novel as a *Bildungsroman* in which the nameless protagonist undergoes a moral development from a kid with a "mindless taste for violence" to a man capable of confronting the judge, an act of courage and a moral victory despite its practical failure and the kid's demise at the judge's hands. And although Lydia Cooper does *not* find the kid or anyone else in the novel to be a moral exemplar—her book on McCarthy is called *No More Heroes*—she argues that the book does have a moral intent, that precisely by representing characters entirely lacking in empathy and internal awareness, the work allows us to see "that the act of empathy is the key to ethical engagement with the world."[149] (The work is a "negative image of the good.")

Both readings begin from the undeniable fact that *Blood Meridian* depicts a world in which amorality and immorality dominate. The characters act, by and large, with stunning disregard for any moral precept, and the most willfully evil character—Holden—gets away without punishment. The question is, as Owens puts it, "Why?" What is intention in depicting such violence, and depicting it in such a way that leaves unclear how the book means us to judge it?

Before continuing, it is worth reflecting on what it is about *Blood Meridian* that forces this question upon its readers in a way that few novels do, and what kind of answer would satisfy.

To the first issue: it is not enough to point to *Blood Meridian*'s pervasive and graphic violence. Consider the *Iliad*, which also overwhelms with its multitudes of detailed injuries and deaths, but does not leave us bemused, asking what the point of all that was; nor do critics suggest that Homer is trying to convey a nihilistic view. To most readers of the *Iliad*, Homer's piling up of bodies effectively conveys the violence of war and the shocking fragility of human

[149] Cooper, *No More Heroes*, 75.

life, which is the background against which Achilles' struggle has its meaning—the need to come to terms with and embrace his mortality and to find and affirm something more valuable than long life. Merely to depict violence and evil is hardly nihilistic; the confrontation with evil is, of course, a central theme of stories and literature throughout history.

Much rarer are stories in which evil seems to win in the end—villains may do considerable damage but are usually themselves brought to some sort of justice in the end—as Iago in *Othello*, to whom the judge is sometimes compared. But even a work such as Orwell's *1984*, in which totalitarian power triumphs over the hero not only in body but in soul, may still be seen as affirming a moral order in its narrative perspective, by telling the story in a way that makes it clear that certain actions are to be lamented or condemned—in this case, through presenting the story such that we thoroughly identify with Winston in his resistance to Big Brother and are appalled by the destruction of that resistance—effectively the moral death of the character for whom we had been rooting.

Part of what disturbs about *Blood Meridian* and leads to the interpretation of the book as nihilistic is that not only is there no "poetic justice"—good rewarded, bad punished—but the book itself seems not to pass judgment on the characters' actions, either through the inclusion of a character who can act as moral conscience or through some external narrative perspective. Even if the kid is less bad than the rest, even if, as the judge charges, he "alone reserved in [his] soul some corner of clemency for the heathen" and insisted on sitting in judgment on himself (299), he is hardly a moral exemplar, generally taking part without exception in the gang's activities. More importantly he is hardly present as a *consciousness*. Like the rest of the scalphunters, excepting the "expriest" Tobin and the judge, the kid is laconic, inarticulate. This works against our identification with him, not only because the elevated literariness of the book

ensures that most of its readers will be relatively intelligent and educated, but because we are given little sense of the kid's internal life, little with which *to* identify. It also means that he cannot refute or offer an alternative to the majestic and imposing, if appalling and perhaps not quite coherent, vision that the judge elaborately and eloquently articulates—nor can anyone else, including Tobin. No one can answer the judge's question: "For even if you should have stood your ground…yet what ground was it?" (307) Nor does the impersonal and omniscient narrator provide an alternative perspective, at least not in any obvious or explicit way. There is no moral commentary on events "from above" as in Fielding, George Eliot, Tolstoy.

This leaves the reader, the argument goes, with the sense that the heavens are empty, that there *is* no objective basis for judging between good and evil or good and bad, that there is no "what ought to be" but only "what is."

To feel that a narrative has sense is not just to judge it plausible (within the terms of the storyworld) but to have the sense that there is some *point* to the story—not necessarily that it "teaches" us something or has a moral, but that it is fundamentally about some theme of general human interest—overcoming adversity, the possibilities and pitfalls of love, the confrontation with mortality, people's foibles and their comically or tragically outsized consequences, and so on—and, further, that it affirms some fundamental justice or order to the universe. Not in a simplistic way—in fact a sophisticated consumer of stories will tend to be dissatisfied with a too rosily happy ending, in which all the good characters get what they want and all the bad characters are justly punished, because we know how the world is and such a story simply appears as fantasy, its "justice" unconsoling because so thoroughly unbelievable. We want from the story a sense that there is some normative order, an order which may well be violated but not without impunity, even if the punishment is only the judgment of God or its secular analogue—

some affirmation from the narrative perspective that judgment, the comprehension of human action in light of normative standards, is possible and necessary even if the good does not reign on earth. This is what *Blood Meridian* seems to deny the reader.

There is one established genre whose point is arguably to upset this idea of normative order, or at least to deny that it is at all efficacious. Literary naturalism could be characterized as the genre of literature in which the good emphatically does not reign on earth—in which, rather, the world is seen as ruled by "ruthless competition and survival of the fittest in harsh environments as well as random accidents in an uncaring universe,"[150] and in which human beings are imagined as largely, if not wholly, determined by biological and social forces. In his essay "The Experimental Novel," which articulates the fundamental tenets of naturalism, Emile Zola argued the author should be like the scientist, combining different kinds of characters and situations in order to reveal

> the mechanism of the phenomena inherent in man, to show the machinery of his intellectual and sensory manifestations, under the influences of heredity and environment, such as physiology shall give them to us, and then finally to exhibit man living in social conditions produced by himself, which he modifies daily, and in the heart of which he himself experiences a continual transformation.[151]

Zola makes explicit the underlying assumption of naturalism: that human action is determined by various physiological, psychological, and social laws.

Naturalism as a movement arose, following realism, as a reaction against what was perceived as the unrealistic idealism and romanticism of contemporary fiction. Works such as Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* emphasized the absence or failure of poetic sense and poetic justice, as in the beginning of the novel when young Henry going off to war is

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[150] Owens, *Cormac McCarthy's Western Novels*, 45.
[151] Zola, *The Experimental Novel*, 20–21.

dismayed by his mother "saying nothing whatever about returning with his shield or on it," and continuing through Crane's pointedly brutal and unromantic portrayal of war.

From the beginning, naturalistic novels were criticized for dwelling on and sensationalizing the low and animal aspects of human life to no apparent redeeming end; their grimness and their determinism seemed to call into question not only the prevalence but the very possibility of human agency and human goodness—and it is these qualities that seem to raise the question of whether the story ought to have been written, or what its point could be. This is the question that arises about *Blood Meridian*. While twentieth- and twenty-first-century critics tend to be less moralizing, the perplexity about *Blood Meridian* is in large measure a response to the characteristics it shares with earlier naturalistic novels—for its Darwinian portrayal of human beings, its grotesquerie, its absurdity and pessimism.[152]

If justice is impotent or if human life generally fails to conform to our ideals, that does not necessarily make justice or those ideals unreal as standards, and some naturalist works evince a strong moral impulse, seeking through their depiction of a dog-eat-dog world to stimulate social reform. And even if reform were not possible, even if the world were irremediably fallen, there is no logical reason that one could not judge its irremediable fallenness in light of an impossible good. But as I will discuss, this would have significant consequences for the way that one conceives of the good as the *telos* of human life or of an individual human life.

A satisfactory answer to this question of the "point" of *Blood Meridian*, then, would illuminate the relation of the work to some underlying order. The two tendencies of criticism earlier mentioned characterize this relation either as negative—that is, that what the work reveals is that there is no such order—or as positive, that it does in fact affirm a normative order in an indirect or subtle way.

[152] Owens, *Cormac McCarthy's Western Novels*, Ch. 3: "Blood Meridian and Literary Naturalism."

I want argue that both of these interpretations are not only inadequate but misconceived, and I would restate that what is at stake here is not just the proper interpretation of *Blood Meridian* but our understanding of some aspect of human reality. The critics to whom I have referred are trying to articulate the character of the world as represented in *Blood Meridian*, but to the extent that they, or we, find that vision convincing, our interpretation of it would be an articulation of the character of the *reality* that we come to know through the work. To briefly restate from Chapter One, we can think of that reality as that to which we must appeal in order to make sense of the work and of our response to it. *Reality* in this sense is not just the reality of the physical world but the "ideal" world, so to speak, the normatively structured world that human beings inhabit, which includes all those constraints and imperatives—historically and culturally specific, but not arbitrarily so—which bear upon us in our decisions and judgments, in the consequences of our actions. It also includes the forces—psychological, social, historical—that thwart human intentions. So the question about McCarthy can be framed: if the work in all its aspects, plot, character, style, seems *right*, what is the basis for that rightness?

If there is some ongoing and apparently irresolvable debate about a moral or ontological issue (can hurting an innocent person ever be justified with reference to a higher end? Are we free or determined?) it is likely because the question points to deep tensions in the conditions of our humanity, because two apparently incompatible positions seem both to have elements of truth to them that are not easily reconciled by simply elaborating the conditions in which each would apply. This is part of why we need literature to know the normative constraints of human life—to represent those conditions so that we can reflect on them, to objectify those deep and perhaps irresolvable contradictions.

This is, I would argue, the case with *Blood Meridian*—the two conflicting views being the nihilistic or fatalistic on the one hand and the ethical on the other hand. The debate about whether "might makes right" is as old as Thucydides and Plato. Throughout Western history philosophers and theologians have grounded the alternative in various ways, but the argument from power, as it might be called—the idea that moral objections to violence are meaningless because impotent—continually reemerges. In the nineteenth century the debate becomes ontological—whether there *is* some other ground for judgment, or not. The conflicting readings of *Blood Meridian* stem from the critics interpreting the novel as taking one or the other of these views.

Though both the nihilist and ethical interpretations are persuasive at points, I submit that neither the assumption of a meaningless universe nor of a conventional (liberal) moral background allows us to make sense of the work or the world we feel we see through it.

The ethical reading is not so much wrong—though I think the evidence for the kid as a moral hero is somewhat weak—as it simply fails as a holistic interpretation of the novel. To say that *Blood Meridian* is a morality tale about the scalphunters' lack of empathy and self-knowledge is like reducing *Moby-Dick* to an admonition to be easygoing like Ishmael rather than monomaniacal like Ahab.[153] This fails to account for the compelling power of the book, and for the sense that even if *Blood Meridian* does not undermine the possibility of moral judgment, it does disturb our conventional moral viewpoint and force us to inhabit a perspective from which moral choice and individual agency are superseded by deeper, darker, and vaster forces.

The nihilist reading seems initially more persuasive, but it finally breaks down because *Blood Meridian* does *not* subvert the possibility of moral judgment, even if it asserts that violence and lawlessness may triumph on earth. The egregious violence it depicts is horrifying

[153] Which, lamentably, some critics have done—cf. Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly, *All Things Shining*.

and is, it seems, meant to be so. Bloom claims that "[t]he three glories of the book are the judge, the landscape, and (dreadful to say this) the slaughters,"[154] but I would argue that the glory of the slaughters (as well as of the judge) is importantly ambivalent. We may revel in some, such as Glanton's death—"Hack away you mean red nigger, he said, and the old man raised the axe and split the head of John Joel Glanton to the thrapple" (275)—which evokes a certain satisfaction at the harsh justice of a violent man coming to his fated end, told with thrilling succinctness. But when it is the innocent slaughtered—when Glanton shoots the old woman in the courtyard, when the Apache boy the judge briefly "adopts" is found dead—these are not glories but horrors and we have no trouble in judging them, and the book does not subvert our belief in the objectivity of that judgment. Even when it is the Comanche slaughtering the filibusters, who have come into Mexico with their own violent purposes, the description is stomach-churning, the Comanches "passing their blades about the skulls of the living and the dead alike and snatching aloft the bloody wigs and hacking had chopping at the naked bodies, ripping off limbs, heads, gutting the strange white torsos and holding up great handfuls of viscera, genitals…" (54) The reader may feel a gutted exhilaration at the sheer extremity and the confrontation with a terrible reality, but this is to say that the glory *derives* in part from our recognition of the horror.[155]

The narration could even be said to confirm our judgment against the violence through the recurrent descriptions of the men as demonic or atavistic. For instance:

> Above all else they appeared wholly at venture, primal, provisional, devoid of order. Like beings provoked out of the absolute rock and set nameless and at no remove from their own loomings to wander ravenous and doomed and mute as gorgons shambling the brutal wastes of Gondwanaland in a time before nomenclature was and each was all. (172)

[154] Bloom, *How to Read and Why*, 257.
[155] Contrast e.g. the admittedly thrilling scene in *The Matrix* where Neo and Trinity stylishly shoot up a whole passel of enemy security guards. Bloodless and slick, this is a fantasy of violence that gives no intimation of its horror or cost.

Again and again the men are compared to inhuman or pre-human things, and otherwise seen by the narrator to embody or carry some awful darkness:

> Under the hooves of the horses the alabaster sand shaped itself in whorls strangely symmetric like iron filings in a field and these shapes flared and drew back again, resonating upon that harmonic ground and then turning to swirl away over the playa. As if the very sediment of things contained yet some residue of sentience. As if in the transit of those riders were a thing so profoundly terrible as to register even to the uttermost granulation of reality. (247)

The status of these perceptions is ambiguous—it is only "as if," only as the riders "appeared," and we are surely not meant to think that the landscape *is* sentient and expressing some supernatural judgment against the scalphunters—but they are at least compelling as images suggesting absolute depravity, counterposed in the latter quote to something pure, uncontaminated by human evil, strangely and mysteriously beautiful. So there is both a sense of judgment and also of meaning or at least meaningfulness—to which I will return.

Even at the level of the plot the novel is not wholly without a sense of justice or normative order. What happens in the book is not random but proceeds according to a kind of law—one that is almost classically tragic. The scalphunters are not heroic, but they are extreme; they transgress all the boundaries within which human community is possible and thereby bring their fate crashing down on them. In the end they "reap what they sow": "those who live by the sword, die by the sword," crime does not pay. The judge lives on at the end but he is not so much a human character as representative of some force (evil, Satan, humanity's violent nature). So the view the novel seems to put forth is not that the violent triumph but that there is a recurrent and deep tendency in human beings toward inhumanity, that this tendency will reliably erupt to wreak destruction on both the violent and the peaceful alike, and that the dominance of this inhuman will challenges our very conceptions of good and evil.

If, therefore, the form of the work accords neither with conventional morality nor with complete meaninglessness, what is the perspective it enables and even compels us, consciously or not, to take?

I propose that the perspective is post-humanist, perhaps post-historical—that of an utter objectivity which is nonetheless a judging consciousness, which recognizes that human history is driven not by and toward reason and freedom but rather by forces irrational and violent and perhaps toward annihilation, forces enormous and finally incomprehensible: what I am calling the apocalyptic sublime. This, I submit, is the reality to which *Blood Meridian* educates the reader, what we must refer to in order to "explain" the plausibility and compellingness of the language and the plot, as well as the disturbing ambivalence of the figure of the judge.

To see this we must look at, and through, the most striking features of the work.

I want to begin with the judge and give Bell's claim—that the novel illustrates Holden's views—its due, as well as to articulate the limited truth in the so-called nihilistic readings of *Blood Meridian.*

What is the judge's view? One statement of it, perhaps the most explicit and simplest, is given by the judge in the course of an impromptu symposium with the other scalphunters on war:

> Might does not make right, said Irving. The man that wins in some combat is not vindicated morally.
>
> Moral law [said the judge] is an invention of mankind for the disenfranchisement of the powerful in favor of the weak. Historical law subverts it at every turn. A moral view can never be proven right or wrong by any ultimate test. A man falling dead in a duel is not thought thereby to be proven in error as to his views. His very involvement in such a trial gives evidence of a new and broader view. The willingness of the principals to forgo further argument as the triviality which it in fact is and to petition directly the chambers of the historical absolute clearly indicates of how little moment are the opinions and of what great moment the divergences thereof. For the argument is indeed trivial, but not so the separate wills thereby made manifest.

On the first point Irving and the judge agree—that "might does not make right," nor does defeat imply wrongness. But whereas Irving unreflectively assumes a different but no less solid basis upon which one might in fact "be proven in error as to his views" (perhaps the judgments of a Christian God; the scalphunters make a few references to "the good book") the judge proposes that there is no other such basis—that the one and only thing that gives to anything its value is a man's[156] willingness to stake his life on it, that humankind is determined not by its ideals but by its conflicts, not by the values over which men fight wars but by the wars themselves, by the willingness to fight and die. At bottom this view is crude variant of social (or antisocial) Darwinism—it is the strong and only the strong who survive.

There is also an epistemological component to the judge's view—man *cannot* know the moral law; there is no certainty to be found about what is right, only about what is efficacious in the struggle for power and for survival. As he puts it:

> Man's vanity may well approach the infinite in capacity but his knowledge remains imperfect and howevermuch he comes to value his judgements ultimately he must submit them before a higher court. Here there can be no special pleading. Here are considerations of equity and rectitude and moral right rendered void and without warrant and here are the views of the litigants despised. Decisions of life and death, of what shall be and what shall not, beggar all question of right. In elections of these magnitudes are all lesser ones subsumed, moral, spiritual, natural. (250)

All that man can know for sure is the verdict of the "historical absolute."

The view is darkly Nietzschean, as has been widely recognized.[157] As Nietzsche characterizes it, nihilism arises when the values that sustain human life seem revealed as contradictory to the facts of human life:

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[156] I follow the judge in speaking of "man" rather than "human beings" or "men and women" because this seems to me to be a traditionally and archetypally masculine mode of determination, which is not to say that women follow the moral law, but they have historically sought power through negotiation, beneficial liaisons, and manipulation rather than outright violence—though, to be sure, sustaining the conditions of their societies' wars.

[157] Cf. Crews, *Books Are Made Out of Books*, 200-203.

> Until now I have endured a torture: all of the laws by which life unfolds appeared to me to be in opposition to the values for the sake of which we endure life. This does not appear to me to be a condition from which many consciously suffer; nonetheless I intend to gather together the signs from which I take it to be the fundamental character and the really tragic problem of our modern world, and as concealed necessity, the cause or interpretation of all of its needs. This problem has become conscious in me.[158]

The judge does not appear to be suffering from this perception as Nietzsche did—which implies that perhaps in the end the judge's position is too facile—but Holden similarly claims that the way of the world is at odds with the human good or goods as traditionally conceived, the two major candidates being moral goodness and happiness. With respect to the latter: in the final scene, the judge asks the kid what brought these people here, and the kid says of some man that he "come here to have a good time." The judge looks around askance and asks whether any of the patrons are there "to have a good time." The implication, it seems, is that while we may seek enjoyment or happiness, or to do good within some limited sphere, it is not those desires or conscious intentions that shape the broader contours and limits of our lives; we are, rather, determined by forces—historical, social, natural—outside our ken.

With respect to morality, the judge's argument raises or ought to raise a real question about the relation between *what is* and *what ought to be*, troubling the longstanding philosophical conceit, perhaps first articulated by Socrates, that "a good man cannot be harmed"—meaning not that good men cannot suffer bodily harm but that it is the soul that matters, and only *doing* wrong can harm the soul, not suffering it. From this perspective the fact that good men are in fact frequently harmed ought not undermine our belief in the reality of and absolute imperative toward goodness. The judge does not explicitly contest this belief but calls it into question by arguing, with the backing of historical evidence, that it is the *ultimate* law of the land that force and violence triumph. This ought to be disturbing. It is one thing to recognize that

[158] Nietzsche, *Saemtliche Werke* 12:7 [8], quoted in Carr, *The Banalization of Nihilism*, 25.

injustice sometimes triumphs over justice. It is another to see violence and force, human or natural, as the very motor of historical change—with the implication, Holden suggests, that the trajectory of history is toward destruction—again, and again, and perhaps finally.

There is an implicit challenge here to Kant and one to Hegel: to Kant's separation of the *is* and the *ought*, and to Hegel's view of history as moving toward the realization of reason and freedom. To the first: From the perspective of Socrates or Kant (or, more generally, a theoretical and logical perspective), the rightness of an action is independent of its consequences as the ideal of the good is independent of whatever happens in human history. The soul cannot be harmed because of what we mean by "soul" and "harm"; duty is independent of consequences because of what we mean by "duty." It doesn't matter that the kid dies in the end and the judge dances on; we the readers, standing in for the watchful gaze of God or reading by the light of the Good, can damn the judge with our own judgment and grant the kid whatever praise he deserves for his gestures of resistance to total inhumanity. Nor does it matter that human ancestors were scalping each other 300,000 years ago, as one of McCarthy's epigraphs informs us, and were still doing so a hundred years after the Enlightenment and are committing equivalent and perhaps worse barbarities yet today; this just means that God's kingdom or its secular analogue is not to be realized on earth but only to exist as an ideal reality, a standard of judgment by which we recognize our fallenness.

But the judge, and I think the novel as a whole—though with different implications—suggests that if goodness, justice, and humanity as we conceive them are truly impotent in the world then it may in fact be necessary to alter our conceptions of these ideals. I do not mean ceasing to believe that there is a difference between good and evil, but to recognize that there is

some deep and perhaps irreconcilable tension between our moral ideals and the real conditions of human life.

The judge and other characters make explicit the idea that the idea of justice is senseless if justice is wholly impotent. Early on the kid encounters a hermit who raises this problem:

> God made this world, but he didn't make it to suit everbody, did he?
> I dont believe he much had me in mind.
> Aye, said the old man. But where does a man come by his notions? What world's he seen that he liked better?
> I can think of better places and better ways.
> Can ye make it be?
> No.
> No. It's a mystery. (19)

The hermit is a former slaver and perhaps a pedophile (the kid awakens to find the hermit bent over him with unknown intent), and his 'wisdom' is thus suspect. But I believe we are meant to think that he has a point, however crudely made: it would, I think, be difficult to sustain conviction in the ideal of the good or of justice as the proper telos of human life if the actual telos of humanity were shown to be wholly and irremediably other—not *contingently*, because good happened to lose to evil in this or that case, but *essentially*, because the real determinants of human life on the collective scale are not only independent of but counter to determination by moral law.

As Hegel suggested, in order for us to make sense of history—in order for there to *be* history and not merely chronology—we must see events in light of some telos, which he thought of as reason and freedom. For Hegel, reason and freedom are the inner essence of human spirit, of *Geist,* and therefore the story of humanity must be the story of the realization of that essence. Not everything that happens may tend toward that realization, but the standard of rational freedom is what allows one to judge whether an event or movement is "progressive" or

“regressive”—and on the whole, of course, for Hegel this goal would inevitably be realized.[159] Few today would subscribe to Hegel’s particular formulation of the progress of human history, with its spooky metaphysical entity (whether or not this is a proper interpretation of *Geist*), and many would not share his optimism about the trajectory of Western civilization. But the commonplace if largely unconscious assumption at least among liberals is still, I believe, that the “natural” movement of history is toward the Western ideals of individual freedom and rights, cosmopolitanism, and rational and peaceful self-government, and if human life or civilization ends instead in collapse or annihilation, it will not be because of anything inherently problematic with those ideals but only because certain bad or inadequately enlightened people or peoples clung to stupid and mean beliefs and habits or reacted violently out of ignorance and fear. It will be contingent, not logical or necessary.[160]

If, by contrast, there in fact seems to be an irremediable divergence between the ideal telos of human life or human history on the one hand and actual human life and human history on the other, a different way of making sense is needed. The problem is not just that human beings are sinful and recurrently fail to live up to their ideals; this would not present practical challenges but not a challenge to sense. The latter arises when it appears that the trajectory toward destruction or inhumanity arises out of or as a *consequence* of values or qualities essential to Western civilization such as the insistence on truth (as Nietzsche famously and seminally argued), mastery over nature, and individual freedom and self-determination.

[159] The implications of Hegel’s own view for individual ethics are unclear because the direction of history is for him relatively independent of individuals’ conscious intentions. But in general if we see the direction of history as in accord with the realization of human good as we conceive it, this would be affirmative of that conception.

[160] For instance, in his 2018 book *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress,* Steven Pinker recognizes the recurrence and persistence of counterenlightenment sentiments and movements, but the argument of the book is that the core principles of the Enlightenment are the singular and solid foundation for human flourishing and that objections to them are essentially mistakes born of ignorance, self-delusion, or wishful thinking.

As the judge reflects when the scalphunters are camped one night among the ruined dwellings of the Anasazi—obliquely explicating the title of the book:

> If God meant to interfere in the degeneracy of mankind would he not have done so by now? Wolves cull themselves, man. What other creature could? And is the race of man not more predacious yet? The way of the world is to bloom and to flower and die but in the affairs of men there is no waning and the noon of his expression signals the onset of night. His spirit is exhausted at the peak of its achievement. His meridian is at once his darkening and the evening of his day. He loves games? Let him play for stakes. This you see here, these ruins wondered at by tribes of savages, do you not think that this will be again? Aye. And again. With other people, with other sons. (146-7)

This is a complicated passage, and it is not immediately clear how it relates to the judge's earlier disquisition on war, or what the logical transitions are between each part. It begins as a response to Tobin, who has protested against the judge's proposal that the proper way to raise a child is to make it fight for its life at an early age. The judge counters that mankind will degenerate if it doesn't intentionally see to its own fitness, and that this is either necessary or inevitable because of our predatory nature. But ultimately what the passage describes is a radically different view of history and the telos of human life in which history proceeds not linearly, toward some progressive realization of our humanity, but cyclically, in bursts of "achievement" (the judge has admired the stonework of the Anasazi) followed by inevitable "exhaustion" or destruction. And this cyclical character of history is, according to Holden, not accidental but intrinsic to the fulfillment, such as it is, of humanity's real telos, because what stirs the human blood is the game, and the ultimate game is war, where the stakes are the highest.

Blood Meridian cannot, of course, *prove* that the trajectory of civilization in general or Western civilization in particular is essentially toward destruction. It is fiction, and highly selective and exaggerated in what it depicts, and one could argue that the world isn't, on the whole, like what McCarthy shows us. Most readers would not, I think, see the brutes that populate the pages of *Blood Meridian* as representative of contemporary Western society, and

many would argue that while the contemporary Western world bears its share of crime and corruption, on the whole it upholds certain ideals of goodness and justice, which though deeply contested are contested on grounds of principle and not just power.

But the question is one of foundations and of direction—what is humanity at bottom, where is history headed in the long run. *Blood Meridian* could be conceived as similar to *Heart of Darkness*, as showing something about the conditions of human being by examining what happens at the extremes, outside the thick of civilization. (McCarthy's novel *The Road* is a vision of what human beings become when civilization collapses entirely. It suggests that in general what happens is that they become cannibals.)

If the forces that fundamentally drive human action and human history are not reasons but causes, moving humanity toward chaos and destruction—the fulfillment of humanity's "empirical" nature rather than its ideal realization—then this, *Blood Meridian* suggests, entails making a different kind of sense of human action and human history.

The alternative to a "worldly" conception of the human good, one to be realized within the world or within history—is to have some utterly unworldly conception of the good or the proper telos of human life—a view of human life which might be called gnostic.

Gnosticism is the modern name given to various religious sects that arose and flourished early in the first millennium, characterized by the belief that the world was not created good by a good and omnipotent God, but rather created evil or essentially corrupt by an incompetent or malevolent demiurge, and that human salvation is only to be achieved through a mystical knowledge, *gnosis*, of our true otherworldly spiritual home—knowledge of the true God, the true good, which is wholly alien to this world. As Hans Jonas writes, in gnostic belief "knowledge

and the attainment of the known by the soul are claimed to coincide—the claim of all true mysticism"[161]—it is not that one seeks knowledge of how to gain salvation; rather, the possession of the knowledge *is* the salvation.

The gnostic themes and images in *Blood Meridian* have been widely recognized and scrupulously discussed by several commentators.[162] Leo Daugherty gives a thorough reading of the work as gnostic allegory, arguing that the judge is an archon—one of the demonic agents of the demiurge who created human beings and our world, trapping the divine spark in corrupt matter—and the kid a bearer of that divine spark, albeit failing to achieve *gnosis* before the judge snuffs him out. Daugherty even provides a reading of the mysterious epilogue, which begins:

> In the dawn there is a man progressing over the plain by means of holes which he is making in the ground. He uses an implement with two handles and he chucks it into the hole and he enkindles the stone in the hole with his steel hole by hole striking the fire out of the rock which God has put there. (337)

Daugherty points out the strong gnostic resonance of the idea of releasing "the fire…which God has put there," the divine spark from its material prison. Like Bloom, he argues that the man is a figure to be counterposed to the judge:

> …the man provides a "structural" element which is absolutely necessary to the novel's Gnostic world-view, but which is nowhere to be found in the characters who figure in its primary story: he is the revealer or "revelator" of the divine, working to free spirit from matter—the pneumatic (albeit corporeal) messenger, in possession of *gnosis*, who is in service to the good "alien god."[163]

The man is contrasted in the epilogue to others who seem disturbingly vacant:

> On the plain behind him are the wanderers in search of bones and those who do not search and they move haltingly in the light like mechanisms whose movements are monitored with escapement and pallet so that they appear restrained by a prudence or reflectiveness which has no inner reality and they cross in their progress one by one that track of holes that runs to the rim of the visible ground and which seems less the pursuit of some continuance than the verification of a principle, a validation of a sequence and

[161] *The Gnostic Religion*, 35.
[162] cf. Mundik, "Striking the Fire Out of the Rock"; Daugherty, "Gravers False and True"; Dyer, "Blood Meridian as Gnostic Tirade"
[163] "Gravers True and False," in Arnold and Luce, *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy*, 169.

> causality as if each round and perfect hole owed its existence to the one before it there on that prairie upon which are the bones and the gatherers of bones and those who do not gather. He strikes fire in the hole and draws out his steel. Then they all move on again. (337)

This is extremely—one might say perversely—obscure, but at least we can say that the wanderers are presented as less-than-conscious (escapement and pallet are parts of a watch mechanism). As Daugherty says, the man is distinguished from the wanderers in that he seems "alive" and they do not. He seeks the fire and they blindly cross the holes he has made, the "evidence" of the man's search and of the divine fire, without paying any heed. He is thus the one who knows and is thereby liberated, able to act in accord with his true self, while the others are ignorant and determined by some external force.

Daugherty further suggests that the man may be a figure for McCarthy himself—the prophet or visionary on this inhospitable earth who seeks and tries to articulate the truth. (In which case it would seem that this truth can only be articulated or shown negatively—by making clear and vivid the inhumanness of this world—since *Blood Meridian* gives little or nothing that could be conceived as a positive vision of the true ideal or the divine nature. I'll return to this point.)

I find Daugherty's reading illuminating, at least in its identification of the man as a figure of revelation or consciousness, opposed to the unconscious "wanderers" behind him. I would add, in favor of this interpretation, that what is described in this passage seems to come after all the events of the novel, perhaps after everything—at the end of history, the end of civilization. The imagery seems to me post-apocalyptic, the man perhaps preparing the way for a new civilization (some critics have noted that the "implement" he uses seems to be a post-hole digger), the dazed wanderers behind him picking up the bones of the dead, of the past—or leaving them lie. The gnostic reading does not necessarily imply a literal end of the world, but just as the Christian

"kingdom of heaven" can be understood as an ever-present possibility which the believer has (or the unbeliever does not have) rather than a temporally situated afterlife, this *gnosis* is not just knowledge of this or that, but knowledge conceived from a terminal perspective—i.e., from the perspective of the end of the world: the realization of the essential fallenness of the world, the fact that all the governing logics of this world lead toward death and destruction and that redemption must be a matter of escaping or stepping outside of them.

There are two things that seem missing in Daugherty. One is a well-developed account of why we should find the gnostic vision powerful or persuasive. In general the gnostic readings of *Blood Meridian* tend to remain at the level of interpretation, using the gnostic mythology to explain or to gloss the mysteries of the novel, translating it into an allegory or illustration of gnostic doctrine and leaving unclear whether we are to take it literally or, if not, what the symbolic significance of the gnostic vision is.

Daugherty does give a highly condensed account of what the work implies about "what we used to so unembarrassedly call the 'human condition.'" As he puts it:

> *Blood Meridian* exemplifies the rare coupling of Gnostic "ideology" with the "affect" of Hellenistic tragedy by means of its depiction of how power works in the making and erasing of culture, and of what the human condition amounts to when a person opposes that power and thence gets introduced to fate.[164]

As I understand it, Daugherty means that the gnostic myth resonates with us insofar as we feel ourselves inhabiting a world that was created not for us but in service to some power that is disinterested or actively hostile toward us—a world that is not a home for our truest and deepest selves—and yet if we resist that power in trying to satisfy our own deep needs or desires or imperatives, we will suffer its wrath or some *nemesis*.

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[164] *Ibid.*, 168.

But Daugherty doesn't specify the nature of this power or its retribution. He characterizes the gnostic tragedy generally, as that of a protagonist (in this case "a dumb kid") "possessed of a spark of the divine who's outside the will of some Yahweh or other and meets his or her fate at said nemesis' hands at the end."[165] It seems legitimate to say that there could be different kinds of gnostic tragedy, different manifestations of the evil power that constitutes the world. But I think we can be more specific with respect to *Blood Meridian* about the power represented or evoked by the figure of the judge than just to say that he is pure will. I will return to this shortly.

The other thing missing from Daugherty's account is an acknowledgment of the extremely obscure character of the images he so ingeniously interprets. If that's what McCarthy meant to convey, why make it so difficult? There could of course be a gnostic answer to this—that the meaning is only meant for those few initiates—but this would need to be developed to be satisfying as a literary-critical answer.

The question is, of course, the general question of why or how poetry and literature can distinctively convey or give rise to a kind of knowledge that cannot simply be expressed propositionally, which I have tried to answer in the first chapter and ongoingly. To briefly reiterate: precisely by virtue of their ambiguity, literary images and narratives evoke a ground of sense and judgment that is not merely conventional; they evoke our knowledge, largely tacit, of such a ground and provoke us to make our knowledge conscious.

Thus while the image may well be illuminated by gnostic mythology (and I think is), it is not explained by that mythology—that is, the passage is not a code to be translated into its meaning which is (for instance) that "the man is the revealer or 'revelator' of the divine, working to free spirit from matter." The reality to which the passage refers is not the unstated "tenor" which the "vehicle" represents; rather, is the ground that connects them—the ground that

[165] *Ibid*., 171.

connects this post-hole-digging man to the gnostic prophet, and also to American Manifest Destiny and to King Arthur (which I find in his "drawing out the steel") and to the other perhaps countless possible associations. One might call this ground "myth."

The whole gnostic idea may, however, further illuminate this very idea of reading and the necessity of the ambiguity of the text, especially if in the twentieth century a new degree of ambiguity and obscurity enters literature and, especially, poetry—the idea that poetry must be difficult because modern reality is difficult, as suggested by the poetry and theories of Wallace Stevens, to which I shall turn in the next chapter. The gnostic vision suggests something about the nature of the difficulty of modern reality and the necessary corresponding difficulty of modern poetry: the idea that the truth of our situation, the ultimate good which is the unique condition by which we can make sense of our experience and of all we know, is something foreign to our ordinary apprehension of things and therefore something which can only be evoked or conveyed indirectly.

The man of the epilogue is, of course, only a single image, if outsized in its significance by virtue of its placement at the end of the story. It is his counterpart, the judge, who dominates the rest of the book, and having argued that we should give some philosophical weight to the judge's broad argument—his denial of the efficaciousness and therefore in some sense the reality of any ideal good—I return to my examination of the judge's views, which suggest a modern and secular variant of the gnostic vision.

Holden argues somewhat persuasively that history is determined neither by man's conscious intention nor by providence but by the struggle for power on the one hand and sheer random chance on the other. The world was not created by an evil or incompetent supernatural

power, but an indifferent natural power, which could be seen as having the same effect—a world whose laws are orthogonal, if not hostile, to human needs, purposes and ideals.

> The truth about the world, he said, is that anything is possible. Had you not seen it all from birth and thereby bled it of its strangeness it would appear to you for what it is, a hat trick in a medicine show, a fevered dream, a trance bepopulate with chimeras having neither analogue nor precedent, an itinerant carnival, a migratory tentshow whose ultimate destination after many a pitch in many a mudded field is unspeakable and calamitous beyond reckoning. (245)

The judge, then, makes this world his home. He lives as if this is the only world that there is. He could be seen as the embodiment of an Enlightenment thinking that is perverted by carrying its rational scientific strand to a totalizing conclusion—an absolute empiricist. Holden is a citizen scientist; as the gang travels along, the judge collects specimens and makes notes on the ruins of ancient tribes and on natural phenomena, and "educates" the gang about the nature of the world, as in this darkly humorous exchange with the gang member Toadvine:

> Only nature can enslave man and only when the existence of each last entity is routed out and made to stand naked before him will he be properly suzerain of the earth.
> What's a suzerain?
> A keeper. A keeper or overlord.
> Why not say keeper then?
> Because he is a special kind of keeper. A suzerain rules even where there are other rulers. His authority countermands local judgements.
> Toadvine spat.
> …
> The man who believes that the secrets of the world are forever hidden lives in mystery and fear. 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 thread 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.
> I dont see what that has to do with catchin birds.
> The freedom of birds is an insult to me. I'd have them all in zoos.
> That would be a hell of a zoo.
> The judge smiled. Yes, he said. Even so. (198-99)[166]

[166] The humor here, and throughout, is worth noting, and the fact that the judge himself seems to be aware of the humor—the vast superiority not just of his erudition but of his intellect, including his ironic consciousness of the absurdity of his discoursing to this band of louts. McCarthy's black humor is generally part of what makes the book so compelling and at times discomfiting to the extent that we find funny what we think ought to appall us, like Glanton's trying out of the gun—"The cat simply disappeared"—or the judge's gratuitous drowning of the two puppies he purchases from a Mexican urchin. (I realize that some readers *are* simply appalled, and credit their moral

The judge insists on mastery of his circumstances and of the unknown, and denies that there is any power beyond the human: "Your heart's desire is to be told some mystery," he says to his dumbfounded traveling companions after discovering "a great femur from some beast long extinct" (251). "The mystery is that there is no mystery" (252). The thread of order as the judge sees it is a purely natural one, and there is no other standard of judgment—no ideal 'what ought to be' by which one can judge what is. There is only "what is." There is no objective moral law, only a Darwinian law of power. As Dana Phillips characterizes it, history in *Blood Meridian* is presented not as salvation history but as natural history—not moving toward a telos but driven by laws independent of and indifferent or inimical to human ends and welfare.[167]

This can be seen as a secular version of the gnostic view, and the judge believes himself in possession of the truth, of *gnosis*. What, then, are the implications?

Hans Jonas notes that one can derive two diametrically opposed moral stances from the gnostic vision, asceticism or libertinism: "The former deduces from the possession of gnosis the obligation to avoid further contamination by the world and therefore to reduce contact with it to a minimum; the latter derives from the same possession the privilege of absolute freedom."[168]

The judge's vision leads him to libertinism—or beyond. One might say he is not really a seeker of *gnosis* at all. Daugherty's identification of the judge as an "archon," one of the evil demons who created this corrupted world, might mean symbolically that the judge is not seeking escape from this corrupted world but rather simply identifies with it. The knowledge that he has is not *gnosis*, knowledge of the true good, but only knowledge of the wholly fallen or corrupt character of the world as it is. For the judge, this vision of the world justifies the wanton

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sentiments.) The humor is, I think, is not merely incidental but essential—for humor is essentially a kind of irony, a distancing from what is transpiring.

[167] Phillips, "History and the Ugly Facts of Cormac McCarthy's Blood Meridian."

[168] Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 46.

violation of any moral law. I will later argue that the perspective of the novel as a whole suggests, rather, a version of ascetic gnosticism, the need for a detached and dispossessed consciousness, decentered from humanity, recognizing its conditionedness and dependency on some "mystery"—as well as the ineradicability of certain moral demands, even if they are impotent in determining the structure of the world or the trajectory of history.

In light of what he takes to be the true "creator" of the human world, violence and the institution of war, and the consequent lack of authority of the various moral codes which are mere artifacts of the will to power (a phrase the judge does not use but which would be appropriate), Holden makes the argument—in both word and deed—for aligning oneself with the force that truly governs the world, not just because it is expedient but because in such an alignment man's own powers are released, his spirit strengthened and expanded. The judge's view is not just that power is the determining force of history to which we must acquiesce. It is not just that war is proof of our investment; we also love war. It is a sign of passion—it *is* passion. The argument is one from passion—war "endures because young men love it and old men love it in them" (249).[169]

This is continuous with the judge's advocacy of "the dance" at the end. If the pattern of history is not moral, it can be appreciated as aesthetic—an aesthetics of force. The judge is looking for the thing that gives human life meaning despite its obvious violence, contingency, injustice. "If war is not holy, man is nothing more than antic clay," the judge tells the kid near the end (307). The judge's position is thus not nihilistic—at least not in the sense that everything is meaningless, that nothing has value—but rather a kind of extreme and fatalistic aestheticism:

[169] There may be a certain circularity here—we are passionate about war because we are passionate about war—but this is no more than the tautology that is the axiom on which the judge builds his whole argument and upon which he grounds his actions. Indeed his implicit argument is that the ultimate ground must be axiomatic, tautological—there is no other ground to which to appeal.

what is valuable, what confers value, is passion, the willingness to die for something—war is "holy" both because it manifests that passion and because it is beautiful in itself. War is aesthetic, war is the dance.

The judge, then, is not a nihilist but rather has found a *solution* to nihilism, or so he would have us believe: to identify himself with the forces of history, which he equates with force per se, with violence and power, and to take joy, aesthetic joy, in the sheer exercise of power and skill, be it his *tour de force* orchestration of the gang to create gunpowder from urine and bat guano to save them from an indian attack, or his amateur scientific studies which culminate in his destruction of the studied objects, or his exquisite dancing. Or his rape and murder of children.[170]

The question is whether the judge's view *is* "the view of the novel"—the truth to which the novel intends to educate us (which may or may not be equivalent to McCarthy's conscious intention)—or whether the novel embodies and enables a consciousness that encompasses Holden's.

There is a certain intuitive sense to the idea that the novel as a whole illustrates what the judge proclaims. He is the towering figure of the book, literally and figuratively, not just the most articulate but practically the only one to speak at length, and he dominates the plot as well and is of all the main characters the last man standing—dancing. (Although arguably he does not set the course of events but only facilitates the scalphunters' movement to their fated end.)

[170] Nietzsche, too, of course, proposed a solution to nihilism, and Crews and others think that the judge's solution is Nietzsche's solution, or the logical extension of Nietzsche's ideas. This strikes me as unjust to Nietzsche and the relative subtlety and complexity of his thought, but certainly his ideas have historically shown themselves susceptible to appalling political use. cf. Crews, *Books Are Made Out of Books*, 201–3.

There is even something admirable about the judge in his insistence on what seems to be the awful truth. He is leagues more conscious than any other character in the book except perhaps Tobin, and he is the only character wholly consistent in his professed beliefs and his actions. The other scalphunters' vague references to the morality of "the good book" are laughable, and the "civilized" powers seem at bottom to act by the judge's law but only to cover it with a veneer of good manners. Near the beginning of the book the kid comes before Capt. White, veteran of the Mexican-American War who now intends to take a band of filibusters back into Mexico to pursue the war on his own; he is the spokesman for imperialistic rapine, first arguing that the U.S. is justified in seizing power of the southern country from a "race of degenerates…manifestly incapable of governing themselves," characterizing his troop as "instruments of liberation in a dark and troubled land" (34)—and then tempting the kid with the spoils, seized land and wealth, which are to be divided among the soldiers. Then there is Trias, the Mexican governor who has contracted with the gang for scalps. Of course this is to protect his people, who have been repeatedly attacked by the native tribes, but those attacks in turn are at least partly a reaction against the incursion into their land and the injustices accompanying colonialism. When, midway through the novel, the scalphunters enter Chihuahua to get their reward for the scalps they've retrieved thus far, they are feted by the governor and the people. The reader may be initially appalled when the gang gets completely out of control, failing to behave properly at the ball in their honor, eventually eating and drinking their way through all the town's stores and terrorizing its inhabitants, but on reflection this is the logical consequence of a "civilization" that produces and then must avail itself of men who would sign on to such a bloody task.

And history provides ample evidence supporting the judge's characterization of it—filled with slaughter, written by those with the power to win wars, time and again culminating in upheavals that crush the powerless and in the collapse of societies and civilizations. If power is not wholly independent from justice—if the demands of equal rights, freedom and tolerance have political and sometimes revolutionary force because of their appeal to the otherwise unempowered—it is clear that these ideals, once institutionalized, are fragile and highly susceptible to distortion and corruption by interest and disenthronement by reactionary movements. Given all of this, arguably the judge's is the only perspective from which human life on earth could be considered generally "good"—that is, if there is something "good" about war.

The judge's view is, finally, not a coherent system but a mishmash of multiple "philosophies of suspicion," philosophies that in one way or another would have us question the order of things as it ordinarily appears—Heraclitus, Nietzsche, Hegel, etc. Holden represents not so much a specific view but an attack from all angles on the idea of the moral law—unraveling the unreflective fabric of our conviction in it. The judge thus acts as a caustic in the novel, scouring away any unreflective or ungrounded ideas of the good, giving the sense that any idea of normative order which persists must do so in full and clear consciousness—if indeed any order *can* survive all the reductive critiques which might be applied to it.

Yet there are suggestions that the judge's is not the final word.

Bell claims that the judge contradicts himself when he says, after asserting "there is no mystery," that the world is "a migratory tentshow whose ultimate destination…is unspeakable and calamitous beyond reckoning" (245). Bell attributes this contradiction to the judge's "fear that there is indeed a mystery and that its being would deny his own. The very coherence of his

argument and the cold passion of his commitment to it intimate a psychic rigidity born of dread."[171] I am not convinced that the judge is indeed in outright contradiction; it seems to me there is a difference between "mystery" and the simple chaotic unknown and unknowable. *Mystery* derives etymologically from ancient mystery religions whose initiates were *mystai*, and thus the word implies not just the unknown but something coherent and divine to be known, which gave meaning and purpose to human life. But there does seem to be a note of repressed desperation in the judge's insistence on order and control—the idea that "the freedom of birds is an insult to [him]," the erasure of artifacts after he puts them into his book, and finally the obsession with the kid who continues to resist him. As poised and in control as the judge is, his equanimity seems liable to waver when confronted by what evades or might evade his knowledge or control. This indicates something of which the judge, with all his sophistication and iconoclastic knowingness, is in denial.

Ultimately the narrative perspective, I would argue, encompasses and exceeds the judge's and suggests the "mystery" that the judge denies.

How does it do this? What *is* the narrative perspective outside of the vision the judge articulates? There is no narrative "I" and the narration does not seem tied to any particular character—it is "third person omniscient" in the conventional categorization. Yet the selection of what objects are described and what events are recounted, and the way in which they are described and recounted, is distinctive and conveys a particular and powerful vision of the world, a vision which is not identical to the judge's.

One distinctive characteristic of the descriptive style of *Blood Meridian* is its extreme precision, the fine articulation of every detail of the environment—"Saddletrees eaten bare of their rawhide coverings and weathered white as bone, a light chamfering of miceteeth along the

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[171] Bell, *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy*, 125.

edges of the wood" (246), or "regions of particolored stone upthrust in ragged kerfs and shelves of traprock reared in faults and anticlines curved back upon themselves and broken off like stumps of great stone treeboles and stones the lightning had clove open, seeps exploding in steam in some old storm" (50). Ordinarily we inhabit a human environment structured by our needs and interests—we see those things that are pertinent to our concerns; irrelevant detail fades into the background. The world as described in *Blood Meridian*, by contrast, is a world of "optical democracy" (247) in which our attention is recurrently directed to the myriad and strange particularities of the visible.

In fact the attention to visible detail is not entirely "democratic" or indiscriminate—the overwhelming preponderance of description in the book is of the natural world and the world of objects; the human characters are described no less deftly but more sketched than painted. For instance: "The man was sitting in the grass with his legs crossed. He was dressed in buckskin and he wore a plug hat of dusty black silk and he had a small Mexican cigar in the corner of his teeth" (29). There are exceptions, such as the vivid descriptions of the judge, who is however practically a force of nature himself, but on the whole the description of human characters is precise but simple and colloquial, lacking the arcane vocabulary that McCarthy uses to render the landscape vivid and mystical. The human beings in *Blood Meridian* are, by and large, dark ciphers, shadowy types clothed and surrounded by material that seems more real than they. We get no access to their inner thoughts or feelings and often they are described as if they are internally vacant, wholly determined by their environments. (If the narrator is "omniscient" either he is uninterested in the characters' interior lives or, as seems likely, they don't have much in the way of interiority.) Thus the work lacks a certain human presence, normal human consciousness, filled with people though it may be—it seems an inhuman world, seen inhumanly.

At the same time the very precision of the language—as well as a certain "baroque" or "literary" quality—brings the language to our attention, and therefore implies the work of *some* conscious narrator. The description is at once intensely visual—cinematic—and untranslatably literary. *Chamfering of miceteeth* is perfect; we see through it, sees what it describes, but also notice it *as* perfect because of its unusualness. We see what is described, but we see—or read—it *as* described for us by some intelligence.[172] McCarthy's prose is, moreover, often incantatory—"stone upthrust in ragged kerfs and shelves of traprock"—here the repetition of plosives and fricatives, the trochaic meter, conveys the sense of an order that is not just that of the natural world—the sense of mystery.

Continuous with the poetic sonic effects is the recurrent figuration in the descriptions of events and setting. The world as seen in *Blood Meridian* is not just a world of acutely perceived things—the visible is constantly figured as the manifestation of some astonishing and threatening invisible through McCarthy's hallucinogenic similes. A few examples:

> Crossing those barren gravel reefs in the night they seemed remote and without substance. Like a patrol condemned to ride out some ancient curse. A thing surmised from the blackness by the creak of leather and the chink of metal. (151)
>
> That night they were visited with a plague of hail out of a faultless sky and the horses shied and moaned and the men dismounted and sat upon the ground with their saddles over their heads while the hail leaped in the sand like small lucent eggs concocted alchemically out of the desert darkness. When they resaddled and rode on they went for miles through cobbled ice while a polar moon rose like a blind cat's eye up over the rim of the world. (152)
>
> They moved like migrants under a drifting star and their track across the land reflected in its faint arcature the movements of the earth itself. To the west the cloudbanks stood above the mountains like the dark warp of the very firmament and the starsprent reaches of the galaxies hung in a vast aura above the riders' heads. (154)

The similes are obviously not just intended to enable a more striking visualization of the phenomenon described (like Tolstoy's "the baby's arms were so fat it was as if they had been

[172] Cooper uses this as evidence for the "ethical" perspective of the work, in a convoluted way—the narrative style has a formal literariness that implies a teller, but it does not judge; thus, she argues, the style emphasizes the amoral lack of moral conscience and empathy that characterizes Chamberlain and the other scalphunters. (Ref?)

tied by string”) or to give concreteness to the abstract (“my love is like a red, red rose”). The vehicle of the simile is generally abstract, if not practically speaking inconceivable (“a land…whose true geology was not stone but fear”), while the tenor is something concrete, material, visible, if uncanny (lightning, “gravel reefs,” etc.). The effect of the similes is thus not to clarify or make vivid what is this-worldly but to evoke the other-worldly.

All of these qualities of the narrative—the detailing of the material world and the neglect or absence of interiority; the figuration evoking “some other order” which is uncanny, nightmarish, obscure—imply a radically impersonal narrative perspective, perhaps even an inhuman one. In the typical novelistic narrative perspective, the narrator seems to be someone like us (or like the author) only with the power to see across time and space and into her characters’ heads—her interests and judgments are those of a person watching the doings of other people. In *Blood Meridian*, by contrast, the perspective is detached, distant—not wholly indifferent to the fates of the characters, but as if having recognized the fundamental ill-fatedness and degradation of the human condition and continually looking through the individual characters and their interests, such as they are, to some transcendent ground.

The similes reveal this ground as the inhuman sublime: that which dwarfs human beings and surpasses their understanding. In *Blood Meridian*, it is a dark sublime, a supernatural or demonic world, dark to human understanding, a gnostic world in which some substantive principle of evil predominates and in which the good is alien and distant. The descriptions are not all dark and terrifying; the landscape has a stark and inhospitable beauty, and it often seems portentous (like the burning tree [215]). The portents, however, seem not to be aimed at human beings for them to guide their actions, but only intimations of some wholly different order of things.

This sense of an inhuman enormity in the world, indifferent to human concerns, traces back to one of the essential literary ancestors of *Blood Meridian*, Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, and it is worth briefly returning to the nineteenth century to illuminate, both by comparison and contrast, the distinctiveness of the sublime that emerges in McCarthy's novel.

As I discussed in Chapter Two, the sublime emerged in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment analysis of human experience. Its seminal Enlightenment theorists, Kant and Burke, gave thoroughly rational accounts of the sublime and our pleasure in it—for Kant it affirmed the capacities of the rational mind; for Burke it gave us the thrill of danger from a position of safety. But in the nineteenth-century Romantic development of the concept of the sublime and its expression in painting and poetry, it is the overwhelmingness itself that is valued. It seems to me the Romantics have it right—when I stand awed beneath the vast starry sky, I am exhilarated not because it indirectly reminds me of my own cognitive powers, but because it suggests a power beyond me, a physical vastness or force which then seems symbolic of a spiritual power. The Romantics invite God, domesticated by Descartes and Kant to a rational idea of perfection, to return in all his transcendent mystery—and sometimes terrible awesomeness—through the back door of Nature.

As Emerson wrote in his essay "Nature," "Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact."[173] The spiritual facts that Emerson, a Unitarian minister, found symbolized by the facts of nature were the facts of a universe ordered by God. The sublime was the greatness of God, and the individual who relied on his own perception could tap into the divine. "Revelation…attended by the emotion of the sublime…is an influx of the Divine mind into our

[173] Emerson, *Nature*, in *Essential Writings,* 14.

mind."[174] This vision was mirrored in the nineteenth-century American landscape paintings like those of Thomas Cole, who in an 1835 essay asserted that

> those scenes of solitude from which the hand of nature has never been lifted, affect the mind with a more deep toned emotion than aught which the hand of man has touched. Amid them the consequence associations are of God the creator—they are his undefiled works, and the mind is cast into the contemplation of eternal things.[175]

The grandeur of the natural world was seen as the sign of the power of an omnipotent and loving Creator.

But contemporaneous with Emerson and to some degree in reaction to the optimism of his brand of Transcendentalism, a darker vision of the sublime was also emerging in America. In nineteenth-century American literature, the old suspicions of Epicurus and the ancient materialists as well as the Gnostics—that whatever ordered the universe it was no loving and caring God—found new form, perhaps most fully embodied at that time in Melville's singular story of the hunt for the white whale.

In the "natural fact" of the enormous white whale that took off his leg, Captain Ahab finds a concrete symbol—or manifested reality—not of a benevolent deity or divine Platonic Good but of some malicious power. In response to his first mate Starbuck, who objects to his revenge quest by protesting that the whale is just a "dumb brute," Ahab famously rejoins:

> All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event—in the living act, the undoubted deed—there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask![176]

Ahab takes his own disfigurement as symbol and instance of all human suffering that defies human sense, and the whale as symbol and embodiment of those forces in the universe that bring such suffering. He admits even that "[s]ometimes I think there's naught beyond" the mask of the

[174] "The Over-Soul," quoted in Novak, p. 34.
[175] "Essay on American Scenery," quoted in Powell, *Thomas Cole*, p. 39.
[176] *Moby-Dick*, 144.

visible. But it is only by construing the world as it impinges upon human beings as the manifestation of some intelligence—some "inscrutable malice" as it would seem, judging from the world's thwarting of human need and desire—that human beings can assert agency, can maintain spiritual integrity when the body is dismembered.[177]

Ishmael, the narrator of *Moby-Dick*, also finds the whale as symbolic of something inimical to human happiness—not as a bringer of death and destruction, but as an image of the universe's utter indifference—or worse, the absence of any "reasoning thing" at work in the workings of the universe at all. Ishmael's fear is the one that Ahab ostensibly dismisses, that "there's naught beyond" the "pasteboard mask" of the visible world. This is most powerfully expressed in Ishmael's discourse on "The Whiteness of the Whale." The terror of whiteness is the terror of the void, the horrible idea that beneath and beyond or beneath everything humanly sensible and meaningful is a blanketing nothing.

In a sense this is a vision yet more disturbing than Ahab's. In the latter, the universe is hostile to humankind; in the narrator's (be he Ishmael or Melville) it is totally indifferent. Later in the novel, the cabin boy Pip is abandoned on the ocean and in his terror has a vision continuous with Ishmael's, of "the unwarped primal world" beneath the surface, "the multitudinous, God omnipresent, coral insects that out of the firmament of the waters heaped the colossal orbs," "God's foot upon the treadle of the loom" in the alien deeps. God's laws are conflated with the laws of nature. This was a pleasing thought to the earlier Enlightenment scientists and philosophers—the laws of nature were a delightful order, and modern science thus now allowed man to grasp the mind of God—as Newton put it in the Principiae: "This most

[177] One might question the justification of Ahab's rage at a beast he was in fact trying to kill. It makes a certain sense in light of the Christian idea that humankind is meant to have dominion over the rest of creation—secularized into the Enlightenment ideal of human mastery over nature—but even pious Starbuck, embodiment of the protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism, recognizes that it belongs to the order of things that an animal will fight for its life.

beautiful system of the sun, planets, and comets, could only proceed from the counsel and dominion of an intelligent and powerful Being....This Being governs all things, not as the soul of the world, but as Lord over all…"[178] But in Melville's vision, Nature in its deepest, darkest, and vastest being—the unfathomable depths of the ocean being both symbol and reality—is terrifying in its strangeness and beyond the grasp of human reason.

Robert Frost's 1922 poem "Design" reflects this vision as well—in it, the poet watches a white spider devour a white moth (on a white flower)—with unmistakable allusion to Melville—and asks himself what kind of "design" is manifest in the gruesome chance that brought the moth to the spider's grasp. The final lines of the poem suggest the two awful possibilities:

> What but design of darkness to appall?--
> If design govern in a thing so small.

Either the world's designer is cruel or indifferent, or there is no design of things at all, at least in the world beneath the level of ordinary human perception, the world of nature which is the very substrate of things. And in some sense these possibilities are indistinguishable, all of them issuing forth in an order of the world that is thoroughly contrary to human reason, will, desire, and flourishing—a thoroughly inhuman world, and one that threatens meaninglessness. This is what one might call the naturalistic sublime. And it is what is figured in Maclean's fire and confronted in his book.

But in *Blood Meridian* is not just nature that is "red in tooth and claw," but humanity; it is not just the chaos and heartlessness of nature that is terrifying but the trajectory of human history. And this raises the specter of the "apocalyptic sublime," which might be understood as this awesome and terrifying naturalism extended to human history.

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[178] Newton, I. General Scholium. Translated by Motte, A. 1825. Newton's Principia: The Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy. New York: Daniel Adee, 501.

Human beings have been violent from the beginning, as McCarthy emphasizes with his epigraph describing the discovery of the prehistoric scalped skull. But the unprecedented eruptions of the twentieth century—the explosion of modern, enlightened Europe into mechanized warfare; the Holocaust and other genocidal atrocities; the detonation of the atomic bomb and the proliferation of nuclear weapons—have made present and palpable a new possibility: that our dark and destructive tendencies are not just an unfortunate abiding fact of human life to be "muddled through" but might be determinative for our trajectory. The danger is not (just) meaninglessness, as threatened by a naturalistic and indifferent cosmos, but annihilation, at least the loss of civilization or the loss of our humanity.

This, I would argue, is the background of *Blood Meridian*. It is not just a revisionist Western meant to confront us with the realities of historical violence, but a reflection upon a "subterranean stream"[179] of the trajectory of the global West.

The perspective of *Blood Meridian* is therefore apocalyptic in the contemporary secular sense. The work alludes to the ending of human worlds: in its allusions to the extinction of past cultures (the Anasazi) and present cultures (the annihilation of the buffalo), in the final triumph of the judge over all moderating forces, it conveys the possibility or probability of our own annihilation, physically or spiritually, especially as we read it in light of the enormities of the twentieth century and the atomic clock ticking closer to midnight.

But as the etymology implies, apocalypse is not only end but revelation—revelation that the laws of the world are not what we thought. The consciousness of *Blood Meridian* is, finally, outside the action; it is not the consciousness of the characters—even of the pontificating judge—but an observing consciousness. It is not indifferent to suffering and injustice, but it sees

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[179] This is Hannah Arendt's phrase, speaking of what is revealed in the rise of Nazism and Stalinism: "The subterranean stream of Western history has finally come to the surface and usurped the dignity of our tradition." Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism,* ix.

that suffering and injustice, the actions and passions of individuals, in the context of historical enormity, comprised by the actions of individuals but moving independent of individual intention and agency; individuals, their motives and beliefs, appear as tiny particles comprising the dark wave of prehistory and history and future, against a yet deeper background of mythical significance.

One could think of this consciousness as the Gnostic's divine spark that is imprisoned in fallen matter and seeks to free itself. Daugherty equates the divine spark to the kid's weak moral impulses,[180] and I will demur, but I should say a word here about the kid, who is, after all, the protagonist, and whose progress determines the narrative of the book, such as it is. *Blood Meridian* could from one perspective be characterized as the kid's tragedy: he is led by his own character and circumstances to an inevitable clash with a force that must overwhelm him. The kid shows himself as exceptional in a muted way; in his recalcitrant decency he is exceptional among the company he keeps, as well as in his dogged determination to survive. His heroism, if it can be called that, is not that of the classical tragic hero, halfway between men and gods, but an everyman's heroism, the heroism of a tough, basic humanity. He is similar in this respect to the Smokejumpers of *Young Men and Fire*, distinguished not by his distinctive personality but by the situation in which he finds himself, to which he rises with unusual resilience if not ultimate success.

This relates to the locus of what I am calling the consciousness of the novel. Already in *Fire*, the book is as much about the observing consciousness—in that case, Maclean—as it is about the protagonists of the "action" story. In *Blood Meridian* the balance is shifted yet further, such that primary focus is not the kid but the world he moves through, the forces he encounters (particularly the judge and what he represents). This could be seen as part of the movement from

[180] Cited in Owens, 11.

the tragic to the apocalyptic, or from traditional tragedy to modern apocalyptic tragedy. In the former the individual is defined and elevated by the immense opposing forces that he encounters, even if he is finally crushed by them. In the latter he is dwarfed by those forces and virtually disappears against their immensity.

I would say that what Daugherty calls the kid's "divine spark" is rather the kid's natural humanity, his social nature. What we empathize with in the kid are his moments of humaneness, most poignantly near the end of the book when he tells his story to an old woman he finds huddled alone in the desert, and promises to help her to find her people, only to discover that the woman is long-dead, a dried husk of a corpse. Such gestures are surely good and hardly to be despised in a world so inimical to them.

They are, however, no match—either practically[181] or aesthetically—for the equally natural violent and sadistic tendencies the judge brings to their conscious perfection. The fact that the judge is orders of magnitude more erudite and articulate than the kid is, of course, hardly a reason to discount the kid's moral impulses. A number of contemporary moral philosophers argue that morality is fundamentally built upon sympathy or empathy, prior to any moral reasoning,[182] and there is even a contemporary suspicion of reason as potentially warping our moral sentiments.[183] But I would counter that the very attractiveness of the judge, whose reasoning is not mere casuistry but an articulation of certain real features of the world and history, suggests that moral feelings are not sufficient to combat the forces he represents and the vision he conveys. What is needed is a vision that includes but supersedes that of the judge. And the

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[181] The so-called Parable of the Tribes is relevant here—violence will triumph over nonviolence because if you have an aggressive group and a nonaggressive one, the aggressive one will either dominate the nonaggressive or the nonaggressive will have to become aggressive to defend itself.
[182] For example, Martha Nussbaum's claim for the importance of literature to our moral lives is based on the idea that literature expands our capacity for empathy, enabling us to identify with people unlike ourselves.
[183] This emerges in recent interpretations of *Moby-Dick* such as Dreyfuss and Kelley's which see Ahab's sin as the elevation of reason over feeling.

only consciousness in the novel that encompasses the judge's is what we might call the consciousness of the novel itself.

The idea of the need for an encompassing consciousness is to some degree Hegelian, consonant with the idea that the development of humanity is the process of human spirit coming to know itself, coming to consciousness, in a way that sublates—enfolds and transcends—previous and inadequate modes of understanding. But *contra* Hegel, *Blood Meridian* suggests a tragic division in *Geist*: the divorce between the progress of consciousness and the trajectory of humankind. In reading the work we feel the incommensurability of any proximally livable and meaningful human world, on the one hand, and the utterly indifferent natural world and vast inhumanity and violence of history on the other. And it is unclear whether a reconciliation is possible—whether it is possible to live a human life in recognition of such inhuman conditions.

But the evocation of the sublime is why the novel is not nihilistic. The language continually summons images of some other and "unreckoned" dimension of existence. As Bell claims:

> *Blood Meridian* is haunted by the mystery that its own language challenges the very nihilistic logic that it gives representation to. The language itself is a presence, and the world as it enters into language is a presence; and whatever it is that this presence may be said to be is precisely what the judge and his cerebral violence have declared war upon. The richness generated out of such morally impoverished material seems intended to appear miraculous and in some sense transcendent and beyond the reach of the mind, which is finally merely a fact among others. (128)

The language is thrilling, compelling—despite being (when it comes to the scalphunters) dark and disturbing—because of the sense of *depth* it conveys, a depth which seems not just fantasy but in accord with our experience and our sense of the world—not our everyday experience but those moments when for one reason or another things are thrown out of kilter, defamiliarized. The evocative ambiguity and strangeness of McCarthy's descriptions suggest a vast but only dimly glimpsed whole. This whole includes the reality of evil, but also, by implication, the reality of good, since evil can only be recognized as evil by the light of something that stands in

opposition to it. Not ordinary goodness, though this has its place, but a searing light of some absolute ideal, dispossessed of self and objective.

Even more fundamentally, the language is what transforms apocalyptic horror into the apocalyptic sublime. As we have seen,[184] the sublime is originally something evoked in language, by description, even if that description is of something grand perceived in nature. In both *Moby-Dick* and in *Young Men and Fire*, the terror of reality as a deterministic or chaotic void is transformed by the stunning poetic descriptions of such a reality. To this degree the sublime as it emerges in these works is continuous with Kant's conception: it is an affirmation of the possibility of human consciousness; the exhilaration is the exhilaration of our capacity to give form to something so that we can contemplate and to some degree come to terms with it, even if we cannot fully comprehend it.

One might ask why *Blood Meridian's* incantatory language and supernatural metaphors should be thought of as evoking something *real* rather than just a fantasy. This is to raise again the question provoked by the general claim that we can come to know something through literature if we have to rely on our own judgment to determine whether a work is plausible and compelling or not, and the answer is the same as given in the first chapter—that is, that these images suggest a direction for inquiry and reflection which is productive, and that we are able to make more comprehensive sense of our experience and our knowledge of the world if we accept rather than dismiss our sense that there is something right and revealing about the vision McCarthy gives us.

That vision—that of a post-humanist consciousness that sees individual action as dwarfed by the enormity of history—may sound like the perspective articulated by the judge, and the judge is indeed the voice of one dimension of the reality we come to see through the novel; he is

[184] In Ch. 2.

the explicit consciousness of the novel, and because he is conscious—blazing through the dim consciousnesses of the other characters and the mute opaqueness of the landscape, searing through our own conventional predilections of thought—he attracts even as his sadism and destructiveness repel.

But the novel suggests, and embodies, a consciousness beyond the judge's—since we are able to judge the judge, and not just by our preexisting and largely conventional morality but in light of the depths implied by the novel's poetry—depths which the judge shrilly defies in his insistence that "There is no mystery," no order that goes beyond what he wills.

The judge identifies himself with the forces of history, with the forces of violence, domination, and erasure, and so maintains a fiction of his own agency. The consciousness of the novel, on the other hand, is an ironic or double consciousness: it recognizes its impotence in determining the trajectory of history, but sees and judges that trajectory in light of some intimated and truly human (ideal) destiny.

Perhaps one should distinguish between human *fate* and human *destiny*. The novel is not nihilistic because while it sees the prospects for the human fate as grim, it implies that there is such thing as a human destiny, that there are ideals of humanity that are the light by which we understand and judge. (It is hard for me to imagine a truly nihilistic novel, for the very depiction of degradation as degradation seems to me to necessarily imply a standard of judgment.) But the novel suggests that the human destiny is far from assured, and just as soberingly, that perhaps it must be ultimately sublimated to the destiny of a consciousness independent of happiness or flourishing.

Blood Meridian is not a morality tale because it recognizes that "being good" (empathetic, social, liberal) has proven insufficient, at least empirically—insufficient to stem the blood-

dimmed tide—and perhaps ideally as well, that is, insufficient to the ideal of a fully realized humanity, which includes not just the pursuit of individual happiness but also of excellence, struggle, mastery, truth, extremity. (Hence the ambivalence of the figure of the judge as both Enlightenment and Nietzschean figure, the compelling power of his awful consistency, competence, and iconoclasm.) The work is not nihilistic, on the other hand, because it does not deny the possibility of judgment in light of the good or the truly human, even if the standard is elusive and can only be suggested. It may be a modern tragedy, an apocalyptic tragedy, suggesting that there is a normative order but it is inevitable that we should come into violation of it, maybe as an entire civilization and maybe catastrophically.

To return to the idea of epistemological reading: ultimately the point of such a reading is not to arrive at one more interpretation of the novel but to attend to the human realities, that is, the conditions of sense, to which we are referred in reading and trying to understand it. In the case of McCarthy, I have argue, we are referred to what I have called the apocalyptic sublime: the inconceivable immensity and enormity of a human past, present, and uncertain future proceeding according to a logic beyond our full comprehension and far beyond our control—an immensity and enormity which calls into question all our norms and standards, because of their seeming failure to secure a human future and because of the incommensurability of such norms and standards with the inhuman laws of necessity and chance that order the universe. At the same time this vision implies the austere light of some good that would be adequate to judge and to comprehend it.

I am reminded of Simone Weil's writings on the contradiction at the heart of the human condition:

> The essential contradiction in human life is that man, with a straining after the good constituting his very being, is at the same time subject in his entire being, both in mind

> and flesh, to a blind force, to a necessity completely indifferent to the good. So it is; and that is why no human thinking can escape from contradiction. Contradiction itself, far from always being a criterion of error, is sometimes a sign of truth.[185]

Weil's point is different; she is speaking of a timeless contradiction in the human condition: the fact that human beings are matter and therefore subject to causal laws, and at the same time spirit subject to the laws of justice and desire for the good. One might say that *Blood Meridian* points toward a particular historical, modern form of this contradiction: the way in which force shows itself potentially and fatally determinative not just for individual human lives but for human history.

This constitutes the tacit resonance between what we read, on the one hand, and what we know or suspect of human life and the historical situation on the other. As we attend to the story and attempt to follow and to make sense of it, our tacit knowledge of our situation—and our tacit suspicions about it—are integrated into an intimation of a new coherence (which may be that of a fundamental contradiction), a whole that would make sense of these evocative fragments. If we adequately internalize this new coherence, we read both the book and the world in light of it. (And the example of *Blood Meridian* as I have interpreted it should make clear that the integrations and coherences we find through literature need not be harmonious; they may, and perhaps in the contemporary situation must, encompass terror and contradiction.)

All of this could be formulated using the concept of *myth*. Claude Levi-Strauss characterized myth as that which allowed human beings to inhabit the essential contradictions in human life.[186] *Blood Meridian* is not a myth by the common scholarly or conventional definitions, but my reading suggests that it does what Levi-Strauss says myth does. One might say it evokes a mythological horizon—that is, again, certain fundamental conditions according to

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[185] Weil, *Oppression and Liberty*, 173.
[186] Lévi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth."

which we must make sense of our experience. If *Blood Meridian* strikes us as not only disturbing, a nightmarish possibility, but in some sense true, it is of the narrative's conformity to underlying laws and the contradictions between those laws. The power and genius of the work is, I think, that it allows us to feel and to inhabit this particular tension between the necessary and the good and, potentially, to bring it to consciousness.

Thus I would argue that the judge figures as a perverted or inverted model of a consciousness we cannot fully or finally conceptualize, and even McCarthy can only suggest through the form of the novel as a whole. All the mysteries of the work, including the baffling epilogue, figure above all this encompassing consciousness, a light by which—maybe—human destiny could govern human fate, or at least a light by which we would see the end clearly.

Chapter 4: The Apocalyptic Elegies of Robert Lowell and Wallace Stevens

If Maclean transformed catastrophe into tragedy by finding tragic form for the events of Mann Gulch, one could say that McCarthy transforms historical catastrophe into apocalyptic form, finding the events he describes as images of an end of humanity seeded within human nature and human history. McCarthy's work at the same time suggests the possibility of a consciousness that would stand outside and be able to comprehend this enormity, allowing us at least to comprehend and to judge it, and possibly to find a radically different way of being human.

In this chapter, I continue to develop the idea of the apocalyptic as both modern reality and emergent literary form, turning to two authors who elegize humanity as we have known it and considering what is revealed by the kinds of elegy that they write.

Tragedy and elegy could both be thought of as modes of making sense of loss, or, in the case of tragedy, defeat, failure and destruction—"catastrophe"—more generally. Tragedy, the dramatic or narrative mode, makes sense of catastrophe by showing it to be in accord with law; classically, it shows the greatness of the protagonist to be inextricably tied to his or her downfall. Though tragedy does not typically deal with a particular real-world loss (*Fire* being an exception), the genre could be said to model a way of making sense of loss generally, or at least a certain category of loss which is neither totally arbitrary or contingent (a "freak accident") nor simply universal and inevitable (aging, dying) but which is the consequence of some action with its roots deep in the protagonist's character or situation and ultimately in human nature or the human situation. It is for this reason that tragedy can be educative. This kind of intelligibility takes the form of a *story* because it is about understanding human action and its consequences—

the seeming laws of the universe are what we come to know, what we are referred to, in making sense of the unfolding of the narrative.

Elegy, on the other hand, is the lyric mode of making sense of or coming to terms with loss.[187] Traditionally it laments the death of a person; it is distinguished from "other forms of pure lament or memorial" in that it "frequently includes a movement from expressed sorrow toward consolation."[188] The concern in the elegy is generally not, as in tragedy, to explain or show what led to the death of the departed, but rather to memorialize the one who is gone—and through this memorialization to affirm that the good he or she represented persists in some ideal form, that the human world is and remains meaningful and ordered despite the loss of one of its members, even an extraordinary one. The poem could be said not only to assert this meaning and order but to constitute it—the poem *is* the form in which the good of what is gone or past not merely persists but takes on or is shown to have a meaning that transcends the lost object.

The elegy has thus been characterized as the literary form of mourning, as performing the "work of mourning" in Freud's sense.[189] As Peter Sacks puts it, the poem effects a "movement from loss to consolation" through the "deflection of desire, with the creation of a trope both for the lost object and for the original character of the desire itself"[190]: the elegy finds a figurative form for the lost object and for the poet's attachment to that object—which, if the poem is of any general interest, is an attachment with which the reader can identify. So, for instance, in the sixteenth century Ben Jonson reconciles himself to his son's death by recognizing that his son always belonged to God and not to him:

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[187] That is, elegy in the modern sense. The origin of the term, *elegeion*, referred to a particular meter used by Greek poets for a wide range of subjects. (See "Elegiac Distich" in Preminger, Brogan, and Warnke, *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*.

[188] Preminger, Brogan, and Warnke.

[189] See Sacks, *The English Elegy*.Cavitch, *American Elegy*, 1; and Ramazani, *The Poetry of Mourning*.

[190] Sacks., 7.

> Seven yeeres thou'wert lent to me, and I thee pay,
> Exacted by thy fate, on the just day.

Here, as is common in traditional elegies, the loss is understood as part of the order of things, and that order is divinely underwritten and thus ultimately to be affirmed.

The poem doesn't simply serve as a substitution for the object (as if it could), but transforms the object into something enduring—at one level, through the way it is described and figured in the poem, associating it to persistent images and themes; at another level, through the very writing of the poem. For instance, Jahan Ramazani notes that the structure of Milton's "Lycidas", one of the classic elegies in the English language, follows a characteristic pattern of mourning as described by Freud: "Each single one of the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object is brought up and hypercathected, and detachment of the libido is accomplished in respect of it" enabling the "withdrawal of the libido from this object and the displacement of it onto a new one."[191]

The danger of speaking of elegy (or tragedy) in terms of mourning is misconceiving it as personal and psychological. This can be seen in Ramazani's characterization the poems he discusses as personal expressions of the poet, doing the work of mourning for the poet, e.g. in speaking of "Lycidas":

> Analogous with the shepherd's lament is, of course, the implicit work of mourning carried out by the poet himself; he finds recompense not only in religious substitution but in making this very poem, redirecting his affection from the lost friend to the brilliant artifact that is in some measure a replacement for the man it mourns.[192]

This is not wrong; presumably, great poetry must come out of problems, issues and experiences that are genuine goads to the poet. But a poem is also written to be *read*, and it succeeds as an artwork insofar as it is compelling to its readers, most of whom will never have known Edward

[191] Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 245, 249, quoted in Ramazani, *The Poetry of Mourning,* 3.
[192] Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, 3.

King. The poem as personal expression might be of interest to the extent that we are interested in the feelings of others, but even here, if we are to be interested in it as *poetry* (rather than historical document or psychological symptom) we must presumably feel what is expressed to have some relevance to our own experience or to human experience more broadly, and to have significant *form*. Along these lines, Northrop Frye argues strongly that it is mistaken to critique a poem for failing to be "sincere," as Samuel Johnson did of "Lycidas" based on the conventionality of the poem and the slightness of Milton's acquaintance with the young poet who is ostensibly the poet's subject. On the contrary, Frye asserts that "*Lycidas* is a passionately sincere poem," not primarily due to the depth of Milton's feeling for King, truly grieved as he may have been, but "because Milton was deeply interested in the structure and symbolism of funeral elegies, and had been practising since adolescence on every fresh corpse in sight, from the university beadle to the fair infant dying of a cough."[193]

Thus, Frye argues in the same vein, understanding the poem means not tracing it back to its sources in the poet's biography but rather to its literary sources:

> We notice that a law of diminishing returns sets in as soon as we move away from the poem itself. If we ask Who is Lycidas? the answer is that he is a member of the same family as Theocritus's Daphnis, Bion's Adonis, the Old Testament's Able, and so on. The answer goes on building up a wider comprehension of literature and a deeper knowledge of its structural principles and recurring themes. But if we ask, Who was Edward King? What was his relation to Milton? How good a poet was he? we find ourselves moving dimly in the intense inane.[194]

But if the elegy is not to be read as an expression of personal mourning—at least, not merely or not necessarily—how are we to understand it? What is the significance of associating Milton's Lycidas to other literary characters?

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[193] Frye, "Literature as Context: Milton's *Lycidas*," in *Northrop Frye on Milton and Blake*, 30.
[194] Ibid., 29.

My argument in the foregoing chapters suggests that "a wider comprehension of literature and a deeper knowledge of its structural principles and recurring themes" are of interest because they reflect human reality, the normative foundations of the human world. Along these lines, and specifically with respect to elegy, then, to be "interested in the structure and symbolism of funeral elegies" is to be interested in a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of loss and death—one which relates loss and death to abiding human realities, both what is lost in the loss of the particular object, and what endures.

In Milton's poem, the drowned Edward King becomes the shepherd Lycidas, who as Frye notes "is equivalent to Adonis, and is associated with the cyclical rhythms of nature"[195]—King's death becomes only a phase in the cycle of death and rebirth seen in nature and mirrored in myth; "Lycidas" is transformed through the course of the poem from the physical body ("For Lycidas is dead," in the first stanza) to immortal spirit ("For Lycidas…is not dead," in the penultimate stanza), the soul that lives on with God and the spirit that lives on in poetry—King's poetry and, more pertinently, Milton's. Milton's poem not only asserts that transformation but performs it; the poem constitutes the abiding order to which it refers, but this is persuasive insofar as the order to which it refers, or which it evokes, seems *real*.

This is not to say that to "believe" in "Lycidas" we must believe in fauns, satyrs, or even in St. Peter as represented in the poem, sporting "mitred locks" and carting his "massy keys." I think we need not even believe literally in the personal afterlife as Milton depicts it, the spirit of Lycidas attended by singing saints.[196] What must compel conviction is the *basis* of Milton's

[195] Frye, *Northrop Frye on Milton and Blake*, 25.
[196] As Coleridge first argued, and many after him, the poet may use fantastic characters and situations and yet "transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief" (*Biographia Literaria*).

figuration, the implicit relation between the drowned Edward King or the dead generally and the imagery and narrative of the poem—the *myth* of the poem, as Frye characterizes it.

> Within the total literary order certain structural and generic principles, certain configurations of narrative and imagery, certain conventions and devices and *topoi*, occur over and over again….*Lycidas*…is informed by such a recurring structural principle. The short, simple, and accurate name for this principle is myth….
>
> The Adonis myth in *Lycidas* is the structure of *Lycidas*…..It is the connecting link between what makes *Lycidas* the poem it is and what unites it to other forms of poetic experience.[197]

What does it mean to say that "the Adonis myth is the structure of Lycidas"?

In his "Archetypal Criticism: Theory of Myths" in *The Anatomy of Criticism*, Frye distinguishes between the "representational" and "structural" elements of art and literature, corresponding to "content" and "form" as typically understood. The former pertains to what the work represents, the latter to the principles of its stylization, abstraction, or conformity to conventions which differentiate the work from what we find in the "real world." (Of course, as has been argued variously and extensively, the distinction breaks down, but it is analytically useful.)

To understand literature, Frye argues, means to understand the structural principles that underlie (all) literary works—or literature grasped as a coherent whole, a system—just as understanding painting depends on grasping relations of proportion, color and so on (not just the "narrative content" of works) and understanding music depends on grasping principles of harmony, rhythm, etc. The equivalent in literature is myth.

> …the primary business of the critic is with myth as the shaping principle of a work of literature. Thus for him myth becomes much the same thing as Aristotle's *mythos*, narrative or plot, the moving formal cause which is what Aristotle called the "soul" of the work and assimilates all details in the realizing of its unity.[198]

[197] Frye, 32.
[198] Frye, *Northrop Frye on Milton and Blake*, 33.

I have alluded to myth throughout the dissertation as a way of characterizing the normative conditions to which we are educated in the process of reading reflecting on literature. Frye's account, which finds an intrinsic connection between myth and literature and conceives myth not just as particular stories of one culture or another but as fundamental structures of sense, will help me to give further substance to this term.

Myth, for Frye, is first of all what we commonly understand by the term, that is, traditional and paradigmatic stories involving supernatural beings, divine or demonic. But these stories are not themselves the ultimate "formal cause" of literature, as Frye's analysis implies even if he does not say so explicitly. That is, the particular stories of traditional mythologies derive from or reflect something more fundamental, the basic structures of intelligibility of human experience. This is not to deny that myths may also be *constitutive* of experience—that is, that human beings make sense of what they do with conscious or unconscious reference to myth—nor to deny that our deep structures of understanding are significantly formed by our specific culture and historical period. It is only to insist that myths are not arbitrary, that mythical stories "take hold" because they respond to fundamental human problems and correspond to basic material, psychological, social and moral realities. One might distinguish between myths—the particular stories—and myth—the underlying ground, or horizon, of intelligibility.[199]

Frye characterizes the most basic underlying mythical structure in terms of a fundamental divide. On the one side there is heaven or the divine, representing the total fulfillment of human desire. What Frye calls "apocalyptic" imagery represents the "categories of reality in the forms of human desire, as indicated by the forms they assume under the work of human civilization"—

[199] I credit this distinction to Elder.

that is, the garden (the vegetable world), the sheepfold (the animal world), the city (the mineral world).[200]

On the other side is hell or the demonic, representing the undesirable and all that denies human desire, largely in the imagery of "the vast, menacing, stupid powers of nature" (the untamed forest or barren heath as opposed to the garden; wild and dangerous animals as opposed to the domesticated sheep; the waste land as opposed to the city). What these images represent or manifest is "inscrutable fate or external necessity," that which thwarts human will or desire.[201]

With the exception of pure depictions of one or the other of these extremes (of which there are relatively few in literature), Frye argues that literary works derive their structure and power from the paradigmatic conflicts between "heaven" and "hell"—the ultimately desirable, or good, and the ultimately undesirable, or evil—as played out in the human realm (or in a non-human realm with distinctively human characteristics, like that of the Greek gods or Aesop's animal fables).

Frye argues that the underlying structure of literature, which is myth, is, or has been, fundamentally cyclical, reflecting the cycles of nature, human life, and civilizations, each of which have their "light" and "dark" sides—spring and summer versus fall and winter, birth and youth versus old age and death, the rise and fall of civilizations. The broadest literary genres are defined by which part of the cycle they describe: tragedy is about the downward movement of the cycle, comedy about the upward movement. Elegy could be said to make the downward

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[200] Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 141.
[201] Frye, 147. I find it curious that Frye rarely uses "good" on the one hand or "evil" or "bad" on the other in the descriptions of these worlds, for it seems to me that this division could equally, perhaps more satisfyingly, be reformulated in those terms which are ideal rather than ambiguously empirical like desirable and undesirable. Frye resists this equation on the basis that "morality" often acts as external constraint in conflict with desire. But human beings so often desire what would ultimately result in undesirable outcomes, and at least the Christian heaven is correspondingly associated with the proscription of desire. The Christian view is Platonic in that the good and the desirable ultimately coincide—since for Plato the ultimate object of our eros is the good, and as Socrates frequently insists in Plato's dialogues, we cannot really desire other than the good; if we seem to do so, it is only out of confusion or ignorance.

movement tolerable by looking forward to, or affirming, the upward movement, as is explicit at the end of "Lycidas": Lycidas's death is the setting of the sun, implying the morning sunrise.

But myth is not—for Frye, I think, and certainly in the way that I understand it—merely consoling fantasy, a story laid on top of, and possibly distorting or obscuring, the way things really are so as to make them bearable, inventing meaning for what is "really" meaningless. Andrew Von Hendy distinguishes between "constructive" and "ideological" theories of myth that emerged in the modern period, the former seeing myth as an essential source of value and meaning which is in some sense *true* or at least an indispensable ground, the latter seeing it as falsifying, whether in the interests of a particular group vis-à-vis another or simply as therapeutic protection against nihilism.[202] One might see these not as mutually exclusive alternatives but as different aspects of or ways of seeing myth: particular historical mythologies may have ideological determinants and a social functional role, but in its basic narrative and imagistic components myth is also an essential way of making sense of reality as human beings encounter it.

If, therefore, the basic mythical structure is the duality of the ultimately desirable and the ultimately undesirable, this reflects the fundamental condition of human experience—its teleological character, the fact that we are driven to seek some things and to avoid some things, that the objects of our experience either conduce to or stand in the way of our ends. But why would we need myths to conceptualize these ends and the impediments to them? One might say, we don't—at least, many modern people live apparently human lives without subscribing to myths in the traditional sense, to stories of divine or demonic powers, or even to good and evil understood as metaphysical realities rather than utilitarian or pragmatic categories. But the absence of traditional myth in modernity has been understood as part of the crisis of modernity,

[202] Von Hendy, *The Modern Construction of Myth*.

leaving in its void either a sheerly materialist and utilitarian worldview, the conventional ideologies of late capitalism (say, the achievement of personal happiness through career and family), or pernicious but meaning-providing nationalist or racist myths.

Literature could be said to inhabit an intermediate space between traditional religious belief and a wholly "flattened" world. Works of literature do not assert of themselves that they are *true* in the way that myth does (as Mircea Eliade writes, "Myth tells only of that which *really* happened"[203]), yet they too could be said to function as "symbols" of the deep conditions of human life—that is, through plot and imagery "express[ing] the inexpressible," and "provok[ing] an unending task of interpretation."[204] This is not to deny that much can be said about what a work might mean, but to suggest that the works refer us to certain fundamental realities or conditions of judgment, and that because our knowledge of these conditions necessarily rests on what we only know or can only know tacitly,[205] the conditions must always exceed what can be explicitly stated about them—while at the same time rationality demands they be made as conscious as possible. Hence the "unending task of interpretation" provoked by an enduring literary work—and, I would add, something beyond interpretation which is the attempt to articulate the conditions of interpretation, or judgment, themselves.

To return to Milton and to Frye's claim that the Adonis myth is the "structuring principle" of "Lycidas," then: to put it simply, this means that the narrative or arc of the poem is one of death to rebirth as part of the cyclical order of things. The dominant imagery is pastoral, the

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[203] Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, 6.
[204] Todorov, 206-7, quoted in Von Hendy, *The Modern Construction of Myth*, 36.
[205] For instance, what makes something beautiful—but also, as Polanyi argues (see Ch. 1), the standards to which we appeal to judge something true. I take this also to be one of the points of Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*.

imagery of classical antiquity, but these images are ultimately images of Christian salvation. As Frye argues, the poem reflects four orders of existence:

> First is the order revealed by Christianity, the order of grace and salvation and of eternal life. Second is the order of human nature, the order represented by the Garden of Eden in the Bible and the Golden Age in Classical myth, and which man in his fallen state can, up to a point, regain through education, obedience to law, and the habit of virtue. Third is the order of physical nature, the world of animals and plants which is morally neutral but theologically 'fallen.' Fourth is the disorder of the unnatural, the sin and death and corruption that entered the world with the fall.[206]

Milton's poem acknowledges all of these levels but the redemptive myth, or myths—Christian and classical—encompass the orders of the merely natural or the threatening chaos. This is what constitutes its elegiac effectiveness, its capacity to give sense and consolation.

Elegy as a form of intelligibility or understanding, however, is not timeless but historical. Just as Maclean, in seeking to make sense of the deaths of the Smokejumpers, has to depart from traditional tragic form, modern elegists have had to depart from the pastoral form of "Lycidas" and other earlier elegies. The elegy develops historically in ways that are not merely a matter of formal changes but reflect a changing historical reality.

Ramazani shows how poets since the nineteenth century have used and transformed the conventions of the traditional elegy to create "anti-elegiac elegies" that reflect "the acid suspicions of our moment."[207] In particular, Ramazani notes, modern elegists take issue with "the psychological propensity of the genre to translate grief into consolation."[208] Whereas traditional elegies perform the work of mourning successfully, achieving a detachment of the ego from the lost object, modern elegies tend to be "melancholic" in Freud's sense, reflecting a thwarted mourning, an inability to fully move beyond the loss.

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[206] Frye, *Northrop Frye on Milton and Blake*, 27.
[207] Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, x.
[208] Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, 3.

At its basis this “melancholia” may be attributed to the degeneration of conviction in the old structures of order according to which people may find consolation for the loss of their loved ones—the belief that the deceased lives on in the Christian afterlife, for instance. One might object that there is little to suggest that people living in modern society are on the whole less able to cope with the deaths of loved ones than people living in traditional societies—even atheists, for instance, are able to find consolation in secular “myths” of the persistence of their loved ones in their offspring, in memory, in their accomplishments, even in the energy and matter of the universe which as we now know can be neither created nor destroyed.[209] Yet if we take modern(ist) poetry to reflect the acute edge of modern consciousness—the most extremely individual and historical consciousness, the consciousness of the individual for whom social institutions are the least solid—there is reflected in this poetry a disintegration of any firm ideal or normatively structured reality within which to make sense of loss, and it is not only the particular loss (the death of an individual) but this loss of stability and ground that the modern elegy often deals with, more or less explicitly.

Elegy has perhaps always been about the death of a world and not only the death of an individual within that world; Frye characterizes the subject of the traditional pastoral elegy as “a representative of the dying spirit of nature.”[210] In traditional elegy thus understood, though, there is some kind of resurrection or renewal, whereas in modern elegy the loss seems not to be just one phase of a cycle, the coming of winter that only precedes the coming of spring, but a loss without redemption, one which simply leaves the world emptier, or—in the “apocalyptic elegies” I will discuss—figures the end of the world itself. Modern elegies mourn, in Ramazani’s cataloguing, the deaths of “ritual, God, of traditional consolation, of recuperative elegy, of the

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[209] cf. Rizvi, “Grief Without Belief.”
[210] Frye, *Northrop Frye on Milton and Blake*, 25.

sanctity of the dead, of 'healthy' mourning, and even perhaps—in the age of the visual media and psychology—the death of the poet."[211] In traditional elegy, beneath the death of the individual or the ending of a season is a deeper and persistent reality that is not lost. In modern elegy, one might say, the world itself dissolves, and what is left is a kind of consciousness—the poem as the form of the consciousness of the poet. One might say that traditional elegy could still rely on underlying shared collective myths, particularly religious beliefs; modern elegy lacks that (relatively) stable foundation.

Among the modern "anti-elegiac" elegies, I want to focus on two that could be called apocalyptic in both dimensions of the word: that is, revelatory and having to do with the end of the world, or at least the end of *a* world. These poems do not only struggle with grieving absent the traditional consolations; they confront the very disintegration of the human world. And they are not merely skeptical and recriminatory, calling into question the order of things, debunking the old consolations; beyond the disillusioning there is some kind of revelation. (Perhaps the apocalyptic retains something inherently modernist rather than postmodernist, not merely deconstructive and disillusioning but constructive, if only of a transcendent perspective.)

These two aspects are not unrelated, as it is not accidental that *apocalypse* with its original meaning of *unveiling* came to be associated to the passing away of the world. The revelation *is* the revelation that the world which one inhabits or has inhabited is not solid, stable, or sustainable as it seems, and the revelation of a perspective that transcends and relativizes the perspective from within that world.

What is distinctive to the modern apocalyptic is a sense of the possibility that humanity might come to an end not as part of a divine plan but due to the terrible and largely unintended

[211] Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, 8.

consequences of human action. In this chapter I want to suggest specifically how Lowell's and Stevens' poems, to the extent that we find them persuasive, educate us to the reality of apocalypse—to the self-destructive and potentially terminal logics at work in human history. Each is an elegy not just for an individual but for a world. These works were both written in 1946, and they suggest, more or less explicitly, that the catastrophes of the first half of the twentieth century can only be comprehended by reconceiving the character of human history in light of an end that is at the same time a revelation—of ultimate tensions within the conditions of modern human life, and perhaps the possibility of a transformed humanity.

"The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket"

I begin with Robert Lowell's "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket," which also, in a very different way from *Fire*, aims at transforming the catastrophe of death into artistic form, occasioned as it was by the death of Lowell's cousin Warren Winslow.

Lowell's poem is often considered in relation to "Lycidas." "Quaker Graveyard" is also dedicated to an acquaintance who died at sea—Winslow was a Navy sailor who died in the apparently accidental explosion of his ship in port during World War II.[212] It has, furthermore, a similar structure to Milton's elegy, with almost the same number of lines (194 to Milton's 193), likewise loosely rhymed and divided into stanzas of varying length; Hugh Staples therefore argues that the poem "implicitly invites" the comparison to Milton.[213]

If so, the effect is to emphasize how otherwise unlike "Lycidas" Lowell's poem is—that is, in alluding to this paradigmatic and traditional elegy, Lowell summons up a set of

[212] I can find no evidence that Lowell was close to Winslow; there is only one reference to him in Lowell's letters, in the context of a discussion of "Quaker Graveyard" (where he refers to Winslow as "the one the poem's about") (Lowell, Letter to Shozu Takunaga, Jan. 10, 1969, in *The Letters of Robert Lowell*, p. 510).
[213] See Hugh Staples, *Robert Lowell*, p. 45.

expectations which he will then defy; “Lycidas” is part of the background against which “Quaker Graveyard” has its meaning. In dramatically departing from the conventions embodied by Milton’s poem, Lowell thus implies that the conditions of traditional elegy—the persistence of a stable order which the bereaved can accept, if not welcome—no longer hold.

The poem begins with an account of the discovery of an anonymous “drowned sailor,” “bloodless, a botch of reds and whites,” whose “open staring eyes/ Were lustreless dead-lights.” Already there is a contrast with traditional elegy, both in the anonymity of the dead and in the hideous description of the corpse, the emphasis not on the dearly departed soul but on the already decaying flesh. The poet-prophet then admonishes the sailors (or himself) to “ask for no Orphean lute /to pluck life back”—explicitly rejecting one of the fundamental myths underlying “Lycidas,” the recovery of the dead from the underworld through song—figuratively, the possibility of a meaningful immortality through memorialization in poesy. This suggests an extreme materialism—that despite the classical allusions, this world is all there is. The sea is a “hell-bent deity” but only by analogy, because of its overwhelming violent power.

As the poem proceeds, it implies that human beings themselves—including the drowned sailor—are the ones who are responsible for this world of force and violence, through making war on nature and on one another. (As one commentator puts it, “The poem is unusual because, while it mourns the lost cousin, it also assigns him responsibility for his own death.”[214]) The first section begins with reference to “our North Atlantic Fleet,” and ends with the fleet firing its guns in “hoarse salute” to the dead—this is a world of war, a world at war, and the first section already suggests that this world is a world of pure force, if one sees it truly, stripped of any idealistic veneer. We have the instruments of war—“[t]he guns of the steel fleet”—but no

[214] “The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket." Encyclopedia.com.

reference to its purposes. There is the sense, then, of the absence not only of one soul but of the "soul" of things generally, of ideal (that is, non-material) ends and purposes.

But the dominant imagery of the poem is not of war but of whaling, and in the subsequent sections the poet identifies the Sailor—and also himself and his fellows and perhaps all of us readers as well—with the Quaker whalers of Nantucket and particularly their famous literary representatives, Ahab and the crew of the Pequod.

> Guns, cradled on the tide,
> …rock
> Our warships in the hand
> Of the great God, where time's contrition blues
> Whatever it was these Quaker sailors lost
> In the mad scramble of their lives. They died
> When time was open-eyed,
> Wooden and childish; only bones abide
> There, in the nowhere, where their boats were tossed
> Sky-high, where mariners had fabled news
> Of IS, the whited monster.
>
> This is the end of the whaleroad and the whale
> Who spewed Nantucket bones on the thrashed swell
> And stirred the troubled waters to whirlpools
> To send the Pequod packing off to hell

What does the poem intend to evoke with this association?

The whale is most obviously the force of nature with which men are in fatal combat, killing and being killed—pursuing the whale for profit, howling for revenge when it lashes back at them; twice Lowell refers to "the bones" of the drowned whalers "cry[ing] out" for the sea beast that stove their boats. But the whale is also associated with God—it is "IS, the whited monster," the capital "IS" suggesting God's statement to Moses, "I AM THAT I AM" (Exodus 3:14).[215] In the fifth section the whale is identified with Christ and the whalers with his crucifiers,

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[215] At least one critic has also linked it to Christ as characterized in Gerard Manley Hopkins' poem "That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire": "I am all at once what Christ is, | since he was what I am, and / This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, |

as Lowell gives a gruesome description of the killing and rendering of the whale, merging this with a description of the Pequod's sinking:

> The gun-blue swingle…hacks the coiling life out: it works and drags
> And rips the sperm-whale's midriff into rags,
> Gobbets of blubber spill to wind and weather,
> Sailor, and gulls go round the stoven timbers
> Where the morning stars sing out together
> And thunder shakes the white surf and dismembers
> The red flag hammered in the mast head. Hide
> Our steel, Jonas Messias, in Thy side.

In addition to the references to Jonah and Jesus there is the echo in these lines of God's challenge to Job out of the whirlwind:

> Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? declare, if thou hast understanding.
> Who hath laid the measures thereof, if thou knowest?….or who laid the corner stone thereof;
> When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?[216]

This section thus evokes the appalling sinfulness of human beings and human nullity in the face of divine might and glory; it summons all the catastrophe of the crucifixion, man's ignorant destruction of his own salvation, and his belated recognition and repentance—or at least the poet's recognition and repentance on mankind's behalf.

"Quaker Graveyard" is thus rightly read as a jeremiad lambasting humanity's violence and greed, evoking our judgment and repulsion with its assaulting diction. This could still be leading to an elegiac affirmation of the divine order according to which the souls of the dead are saved by grace. If the structuring principle of "Lycidas" is the Adonis myth, the crucifixion at the end of the fifth section of "Quaker Graveyard" might lead us to expect that the structuring myth of Lowell's poem is the Resurrection. This would be similar to the Adonis myth in offering the

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patch, matchwood, immortal diamond, / Is immortal diamond." (Shmoop Editorial Team. "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket: Section 3 Summary.")

[216] Job 38:4-7, King James Version.

consolation of rebirth, and of course in Milton's poem the ultimate myth *is* Christian—Lycidas's Adonisian "resurrection" is explicitly underwritten by Christ's ("So Lycidas sunk low, but mounted high/Through the dear might of him that walk'd the waves"). Arguably, emphasizing the Christian, historical narrative, as Lowell does, rather than the pagan, cyclical one suggests that what is at stake in "Quaker Graveyard" is not only one immortal soul which is assimilated to the ongoing rhythms of nature, but the fate of humanity as a whole, a humanity desperately in need of redemption. We might then expect the poem to metaphorically deliver and affirm that collective redemption as the only possible redemption of Winslow's death, the only possible consolation for any individual's death.

But the vision of "Quaker Graveyard" is far from traditionally Christian, both in its depiction of God and of "man" (as in McCarthy this is a vision of humanity as defined by the destructive masculine which drives the course of its history), and the poem calls the possibility or character of "salvation" radically into question.

If the whale is God, this suggests not the personal savior represented by Christ but the God of Job who identifies himself with the Leviathan, and this depiction of God is ambivalent. His "answer" to Job's question of why he must suffer is not an answer but a display or assertion of power.

Other figurations of the whale-God of "Quaker Graveyard" evoke not even the temperamental father figure of the Old Testament but some more alien deity. IS instead of I AM implies a power that is not a humanlike intelligence but something blind and brute; this god is a monster—a "whited monster," which suggests the "whited sepulchre" of Isaiah, shining and pure on the outside but horrible and corrupt within. As in *Moby-Dick*, the whale in Lowell's poem is an ambivalent figure. Killing it is monstrous, but the whale is also a monster (even if only made

so by man's own pursuit), responsible for countless human deaths. If nature is a manifestation of God's law on earth, then this suggests that God may be malevolent or, perhaps worse, wholly indifferent to human welfare. (This is the "naturalistic sublime" as I characterized it in Chapter Three.)

Moreover, the poem suggests that it is the essential spirit of humankind that has brought us to this point—that human spiritedness is intrinsically bound to transgression and to violence and thus our end is either annihilation—if we fulfill that spirit—or exhaustion—if we relinquish it. This human striving, which at times takes the form of domination and violence, could be seen as a response to the perception of an indifferent universe. Ahab's pursuit of Moby Dick is arguably the insistence on some kind of sense and purpose as against the possibility that "there's naught beyond" the mask of the material world. As Nietzsche says of the human will, "it will rather will *nothingness* than *not* will."[217] If Ahab is from one perspective the villain of *Moby-Dick*, he is also its tragic hero, its towering figure, and in "Quaker Graveyard" alongside the obvious critique of Ahab and the whalers I read a subtle tone of mourning for their spirit:

> This is the end of running on the waves;
> We are poured out like water. Who will dance
> The mast-lashed master of Leviathans
> Up from this field of Quakers in their unstoned graves?

"Mast-lashed master" also evokes Odysseus and Dante's ambiguous portrayal of the Greek hero in the Inferno, a "false counselor" but one whose words seem truly to speak to the highest aspirations of humanity:

> Call to mind from whence ye sprang:
> Ye were not form'd to live the life of brutes,
> But virtue to pursue and knowledge high.[218]

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[217] Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, 97. This interpretation of Ahab comes from Charles Thomas Elder.
[218] Canto XXVI, trans. Henry F. Cary.

This thread is thus in tension with the idea that the poem presents human violence and overreaching simply as a moral error to be renounced. Perhaps it is—certainly that violence and overreaching has led to the present situation to which Lowell alludes, and to the Sailor's death—but it is also constitutive of human being and even of human greatness.

Thus the structuring principle of "Quaker Graveyard" appears at this point to be not a single myth but the competition between two myths, which one might characterize as tragic humanist on the one hand and Christian on the other. The allusions to Ahab and the Pequod suggest the myth of the quest—the quest against the monster, in this case ending in catastrophic defeat. In Frye's typology, *Moby-Dick* would be a tragic rather than a romantic variant of the quest myth, affirming the indomitability of a hostile reality over human will and desire rather than the ideal of human power triumphant. In the romantic arc, the hero destroys the monster even if he goes down with it; in *Moby-Dick*, the whale prevails totally—but the story still affirms something of the heroism of Ahab's quest to strike back at the hostility of the universe, even if in the end that quest is misconceived. There is also the resonance with Dante's Ulysses and with Icarus, both of whom trespass the set boundaries of the human world and are consequently destroyed, but destroyed as heroes, or at least exceptional figures, figures whose pursuits define the limits of human striving.

This myth is in competition with the myth of the Resurrection, of penitence and salvation. The two myths could be seen to jostle for control of the poem until the end of Section V and the cry of repentance. But after this there is a stark break and discontinuity between Sections V and VI, after which arises a new set of images.

After the almost hysterical crucifixion, the poem does seem temporarily to move toward the implied salvation through penitence, shifting to a dramatically different register—Section VI

is separately titled “Our Lady of Walsingham” and describes pilgrims to a shrine of the Virgin in England. The setting suddenly becomes pastoral, and instead of “fighting Quakers” we have barefoot penitents and a memory of the deceased Sailor in peaceful harmony with the divine order, having once “whistled Sion by that stream.” But the vision is ambivalent:

> There once the penitents took off their shoes
> And then walked barefoot the remaining mile
> And the small trees, a stream and hedgerows file
> Slowly along the munching English lane,
> Like cows to the old shrine, until you lose
> Track of your dragging pain.

This bovine humanity hardly seems like a compelling alternative to the Quaker whalers in their “mad scramble” (one thinks of Nietzsche’s “herd” and the “Last Men” whose greatest wish is to eliminate suffering from human life), and while the sea may be a place of terror and violence, these lines suggest the inadequacy or diminishedness of landedness—the obverse of the fraught heroism of the seafaring life.

Here, too, we get a very different vision of God in the description of the statue of the Virgin:

> Our lady, too small for her canopy,
> Sits near the altar. There’s no comeliness
> At all or charm in that expressionless
> Face with its heavy eyelids. As before,
> This face, for centuries a memory
> Non est species, neque decor
> Expressionless, expresses God…
> …She knows what God knows,
> Not Calvary’s cross nor crib at Bethlehem
> And the world shall come to Walsingham.

Much of this section is quoted from E.I. Watkins’ description of the shrine in *Catholic Art and Culture*, which laments the decline of religiosity in fragmented, secular modern culture and expresses the hope and need for a renaissance, and the description can be taken as characteristic

of a Catholic mysticism, the figure of the Virgin inscrutable and inaccessible to this-worldly perception.[219] But Lowell gives us not a mystical vision but the perspective of someone thoroughly outside of the union with God. Albert Gelpi refers to this description as "Gnostic," wholly otherworldly and incomprehensible, in opposition to this wholly corrupt world which cannot be redeemed, only escaped. "God here is all inscrutable transcendence and no tormented immanence."[220] Whatever the world shall get from coming to Walsingham, it is not the redemption from a personal savior which would be the hoped-for response to the plea to "Jonas Messias," but rather a radical unselfing, even an annihilation. As Gelpi puts it, "[t]he way to Walsingham presages not a redemption *of* the human but a redemption *from* the human."[221] This is the utter negation of Ahab, defined in relation to a god "whose right worship is defiance,"[222] "striking through the mask" in order to know the truth of this god and to avenge himself and humanity. Here instead we have a humanity prostrate before a divinity that is to remain ever mysterious and unmovable—or perhaps, as Lowell's description suggests, before a vacant idol, since an impenetrable and unresponsive divine will is difficult to distinguish from no God at all.

In the final section the troubling ambiguity of this vision of God reaches a catastrophic dénouement. We are returned to Nantucket and to a seascape empty of the divine, though filled with the ghosts—or perhaps just the corpses—of humankind's turbulent history:

> The empty winds are creaking and the oak
> Splatters and splatters on the cenotaph,
> …It's well;
> Atlantic, you are fouled with the blue sailors,
> Sea-monsters, upward angel, downward fish…

[219] Hobsbaum, *Reader's Guide to Robert Lowell*, 42–43. See also Ross Labrie, The Catholic Imagination in American Literature, p. 169.
[220] Axelrod and Deese, *Robert Lowell*, 63.
[221] Axelrod and Deese, 63 (emphasis mine).
[222] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 416.

The image of human beings as monstrous hybrids of angel and fish is striking, conveying the sense that humanity is fundamentally conflicted, in tension with itself. I am reminded of Richard Goldschmidt's conception of "hopeful monsters," new species that emerge as "macromutations," most—but not all—of which are nonadaptive. The connection to evolution is, I think, justified, even if Lowell was unaware of Goldschmidt's hypothesis,[223] as the remainder of the section and the conclusion of the poem offers a Darwinian retelling of Genesis that upends the idea of man's "dominion" over nature:

> When the Lord God formed man from the sea's slime
> And breathed into his face the breath of life
> And blue-lung'd combers lumbered to the kill
> The Lord survives the rainbow of his will.

The famous last line refers, of course, to God's promise to Noah never to flood the earth again—that is, that he will never again wipe out humanity. Yet here, as I read it, God's promise proves hollow—humanity is doomed; the Lord "survives" his creation, that is, outlives it, whether because humanity is destroyed by the nature it insists on dominating or because it brings on itself its own destruction, which may finally amount to the same thing.

One could therefore say that the myth that structures "Quaker Graveyard" is, finally, the gnostic myth, as in McCarthy (though almost certainly not with McCarthy's conscious intentionality)—a modern gnostic myth in which the essential corruption of this world issues forth or is manifested in historical forces that move human history inevitably toward a violent end, and salvation is attained only through an escape from history—a salvation of consciousness that comes from identifying from a perspective outside of human history, in this case, with that of the God who remains after his human creation has perished.

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[223] Put forth in *The Material Basis of Evolution*, published in 1940, so it is not inconceivable that the idea might have influenced Lowell at least via cultural osmosis, but I'm not aware of any evidence that he was familiar with it.

Such a myth would constitute a radical departure from the myth of death to rebirth that structured "Lycidas," and perhaps the departure is even more radical than that, if Frye is correct to see the myth underlying premodern, or pre-modernist, literature generally as that of a cosmic cycle. Apocalypse in the sense in which I have been using it—catastrophic rather than apotheistic—could be characterized as the breaking of the cycle. The "myth" of apocalypse is the myth of the end of humanity, the end of history, which as figured by Lowell is not the arrival at God's kingdom but a wasteland in which only the Lord survives.[224]

It may in fact be more accurate and revealing to say that the poem is structured not by a single myth but by the competition between its myths—naturalistic, Christian, and gnostic—and that this very ambivalence and competition and the ultimate "triumph" of the latter is, in a sense, its structuring myth. The loss it figures and mourns is not just the loss of the deceased but of a certain conception of salvation and of human progress.

Thus in Lowell's poem redemption and the promise of resurrection are thwarted. The loss of his cousin and all the human loss Winslow's death represents is not to be made sense of with reference to redemption or the promise of resurrection but rather with reference to a new history of humankind—a history whose logic is not the logic of progress, the Hegelian movement toward the realization of reason and freedom, but the unfolding of perhaps irreconcilably conflicting human imperatives and inhuman forces. This is again the apocalyptic sublime, and the consolation of this elegy is only the consolation of consciousness, of comprehending human life and history in the blinding light of this terrifying trajectory.

This encompassing perspective is embedded in Lowell's very language—the incantatory cadence which gives the sense of an inevitability that is exhilarating even as it is terrible—the

[224] In Viking myth, the end of the world—Ragnarök—is inaugurated when the Midgard (world) serpent Jörmungandr releases his tail to do battle with the gods, in image of the breaking of the cycle as the beginning of the end.

final lines, a perfectly rhyming couplet in iambic pentameter, expressing consummation, even if that consummation demands a kind of dispossession.

Wallace Stevens' Search for the "Supreme Fiction"

In "The Auroras of Autumn," Wallace Stevens suggests that even this sense of consummation might be a fiction. Stevens' poem does not so much imply the possibility of a literal end to the species or to civilization as Lowell's does, but it is pervaded by a strong "sense of an ending"—suggesting, both though its themes and its highly ambiguous and often obscure form, the utter insubstantiality of all prior foundational myths of human life and the ungroundedness of any sense we make. The poem, and Stevens poetry and poetic theory generally, at the same time constitute an argument that poetry is absolutely necessary to revealing or creating a new ground of sense. It thus thematizes the fundamental process of poetic sensemaking, its difficulties and its possibilities, and suggests that an awareness of this process is essential to a modern apocalyptic consciousness, which must not only cognize the reality of our situation but recognize how our apprehension of that situation is the product of, and depends upon, an ongoing task of construction by both poets and readers.

The central preoccupation of Stevens' poetry is often characterized as "the relationship between imagination and reality." This is not an idle intellectual exercise but a response to a problem that Stevens feels deeply, which is, at least in part, the crisis first deeply registered in the nineteenth century—the loss of traditional religious faith and the need for a new way of conceiving the transcendent basis of human life.[225] Thus Stevens' oeuvre as a whole could be

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[225] A number of contemporary philosophers have argued that human life does not need a "ground." Levinas has characterized Heidegger's work as providing "a foundation without a ground" (*God, Death, and Time*, p. 30) and the phrase has also been applied to Polanyi; Dewey's pragmatism and Habermas's theory of communicative action could also be understood as conceiving of the normative basis of human life as something intrinsic, plural, and

considered elegiac, an act of mourning. Stevens is a Romantic in that he believes that the only way to find such a ground is through "the imagination," the individual's capacity to apprehend structures of meaning in the world beyond what is visible or given.

Fundamentally, Stevens sought to find or to create "a poem equivalent to the idea of God,"[226] a "supreme fiction," a *myth* in the sense articulated above: a narratively structured and imagistically embodied reflection of the fundamental reality in relation to which human beings ought to live. Assessing what he achieves or fails to achieve in his poetry, how he goes about searching for or trying to write such a poem, ought therefore to direct us to the core of the problem raised by all the works I have discussed—the problem of finding a ground of sense adequate to the modern situation.

While Stevens claims for poetry a role analogous to that of religion, he acknowledges that the "God" one finds through poetry is substantially different from the God of traditional religion. This crisis at the same time creates the possibility of a new consciousness. As Stevens says in one of his essays:

> To see the gods dispelled in mid-air and dissolve like clouds is one of the great human experiences. It is not as if they had gone over the horizon to disappear for a time; nor as if they had been overcome by other gods of great power and profounder knowledge. It is simply that they came to nothing....It was their annihilation, not ours, and yet it left us feeling in a measure, we, too, had been annihilated. It left us feeling dispossessed and alone in solitude, like children without parents....They were not forgotten because they had been part of the glory of the earth. At the same time, no man ever muttered a petition in his heart for the restoration of those unreal shapes. There was always in every man the increasingly human self, which instead of remaining the observer, the non-participant, the delinquent, became constantly more and more all there was or so it seemed; and whether it was so or merely seemed so still left it for him to resolve life and the world in his own terms.[227]

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dynamic. But as I would argue that even within these frameworks there is or must be a horizon, transcendent in at least the relative sense, to which we appeal in our judgments. It may not be a "ground" that we need, but some conception of the basis of judgment that allows for an appeal to a good beyond utility or convention.

[226] Stevens and Howard, *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, 369-70.

[227] "Two or Three Ideas," in Stevens, Kermode, and Richardson, *Wallace Stevens*, 843.

Without the gods—which is to say without traditional religion, in a society in which the gods or God are no longer a part of the shared social reality—the individual becomes newly responsible for the discernment of ultimate value. This allows for a kind of freedom, but it also creates the danger of nihilism.

There is another contemporary crisis as Stevens conceives it, or another fundamental component to the present crisis, which arises only in the twentieth century: what Stevens calls the "pressure of the contemporaneous" or the "pressure of reality," which is "the pressure of an external event or events on the consciousness to the exclusion of any power of contemplation" (654). Stevens' comments on this "pressure" are written in the 1930s and early 1940s, and their proximate referent is the tumultuous events of the period—the aftermath of the first World War, the Depression in America, the outbreak of World War II. But it is not just the fact of war and social distress, which have obviously been part of the human situation throughout history. It is, it would seem, the way in which these events create a fundamental uncertainty, the sense that "the end of civilization...is not merely possible but measurably probable" and indeed that it has already happened: "If you are not a communist, has it not already ended in Russia? If you are not a Nazi, has it not ended in Germany? We no sooner say that it never can happen here than we recognize that we say it without any illusions."[228] The fact that Hitler would be defeated, then, does not negate a lasting change in the historical situation, the fact that stability and progress are not given, that we now live in the shadow of the ongoing possibility of an "end of civilization." This is what makes Stevens' poetry "apocalyptic" in the sense considered in this dissertation.

Stevens sees poetry as the essential response to both of these crises, or both of these aspects of the historical crisis. And the poet does this through a reconciliation of "reality" and "the imagination," a reconciliation that takes the form of a kind of elegy.

[228] "The Irrational Element in Poetry," in Stevens, Kermode, and Richardson, 788.

With respect to the departure of the gods: Stevens muses in one of his adages that "After one has abandoned a belief in god, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's redemption."[229] In one of his early and most famous poems, "Sunday Morning," Stevens describes a woman resisting the austere and (as she and, it would seem, Stevens experience them) life-denying demands of Christianity—lazing at home instead of attending church, she dreams of "silent Palestine/Dominion of the blood and sepulchre" and asks "Why should she give her bounty to the dead?" protesting that "Divinity must live within herself," in her emotion-laden experiences, particularly of the beauties of the natural world. But she is troubled by the transience of earthly life, the lack of transcendent meaning—"But in contentment I still feel/The need of some imperishable bliss."

The poem seems to reject the possibility and even the ultimate desirability of such transcendent assurance; the narrator proclaims twice that "Death is the mother of beauty" (the first time, perhaps, too facilely, but the second with seemingly greater conviction) and laments the projection of earthly delights into a fantasized unchanging paradise, suggesting such a heaven could not have the piquancy of life on earth—"Alas, that they should wear our colors there,.../ And pick the strings of our insipid lutes."

Stevens claimed that "the poem is simply an expression of paganism" and agreed with an interpreter that it described "a naturalistic religion as a substitute for supernaturalism,"[230] and, unlike most of his later poetry, it does not directly reflect on poetry or the imagination and their role in the redemption of reality. But arguably the poem enacts what he would later make explicit in both his poetry and his prose—that "divinity" lies not only in the keen perceptions of all the meaningful-seeming nuance of inner and outer reality—"Passions of rain, or moods in falling

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[229] From "Adagia," in Stevens, Kermode, and Richardson, 901.
[230] Stevens and Howard, *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, 250, 464.

snow;/Grievings in loneliness, or unsubdued/Elations when the forest blooms;/ Gusty emotions on wet roads on autumn nights"—*but in their articulation in poetry*. The poem concludes:

> We live in an old chaos of the sun,
> Or old dependency of day and night,
> Or island solitude, unsponsored, free,
> Of that wide water, inescapable.
> Deer walk upon our mountains....
> And, in the isolation of the sky,
> At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
> Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
> Downward to darkness, on extended wings.

Literally paraphrased, these lines articulate our existentially lonely position in the universe, and essentially assert that there is no reality beyond this world. Yet that is not, I think, what most readers find conveyed by this passage—rather, the poetry of the passage itself, its beauty and suggestiveness, convey a deep meaningfulness, if a somewhat bittersweet one. The poem itself enacts the "new paganism" it proposes: "paganism" because in it divinity is to be found not in a single transcendent being but in nature (and in the self). "New" because there is no definite or reified belief in spirits here, no theology or ritualistic practice (beyond the writing of poetry), but only the discernment and poetic evocation of some beyond, some horizon of meaningfulness beyond the visible or experiential but graspable only through the visible or experiential. The poem thus at once both registers the loss of the old "imperishable bliss" but at the same time finds the spirit of what was lost within the perishable. It describes the perishable in a way that evokes that spirit, that divine, now transformed from a personalized God—"Jove in the clouds" with "his mythy mind"—to something only evoked or suggested by our emotions or perceptions.

In the poem, one might say, reality changes "from substance to subtlety," a phrase Stevens uses in characterizing the transformation of "reality" in the modern period:

> The theory of poetry, that is to say, the total of the theories of poetry, often seems to become in time a mystical theology or, more simply, a mystique. The reason is the same

> reason why the pictures in a museum of modern art often seem to become in time a mystical aesthetic, a prodigious search of appearance, as if to find a way of saying and of establishing that all things, whether below or above appearance, are one and that it is only through reality, in which they are reflected or, it may be, joined together, that we can reach them. Under such stress, reality changes from substance to subtlety.[231]

This statement itself is somewhat mystical, but that is consistent with its claim that the theory of poetry (or art) becomes in modernity a "mystical theology"—the very characterization of what art does must refer to a reality that can only finally be known through the experiential union with the divine, or its analogy. Stevens is reflecting here on the movement toward abstraction in modern art, and in the essay in which this quote appears he connects this movement to the diminishment of religious belief and a correspondingly increasing sense that "this world"—the phenomenal reality of our experience and our scientific knowledge—is all that there is. Yet at the same time this "all" is felt, at least by the poet, not to be merely material, and many of the phenomena of our experience and of nature strike us as symbolic (the magnitude of a mountain or roaring waterfall as conveying some more-than-natural greatness) or archetypal (the aura of the mother as not reflecting a psychological attachment but a deep condition of sense). As with the Transcendentalists, the phenomenal world is symbolic of the spiritual. This is not necessarily to claim that the natural world was created by some supernatural power *as* symbolic, but that the natural world (and perhaps the artificial world as well) is an inexhaustible source of images according to which we make sense of our experience—especially, I would add, when that experience resists conventional categorization.

The Transcendentalists as well as the earlier Romantics had, on the whole, a far greater degree of conviction than later thinkers about this relationship between the phenomenal world and spiritual reality, a conviction that there *was* some transcendent reality or order there to be

[231] From "The Relations Between Painting and Poetry," in Stevens, Kermode, and Richardson, 750.

known.[232] One can see this reflected in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Romantic art, in which natural scenery clearly represents or manifests an ideal order, and especially the sublime. Even for Melville in 1850, this symbolic interpretation of the world becomes problematic; either one fixes on and reifies a meaning like crazy Ahab, who "pile[s] upon the whale's white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his hole race from Adam down," or else one can revel in polysemy like passive Ishmael. In either case the ontology is called into question, and becomes further troubled by the various developments in the late nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth—among others, the "hermeneutics of suspicion" of Freud and Nietzsche, the emerging relativism of early sociology and anthropology, the ever-increasing pace of technological and social change, the political and cultural clashes bursting out into two world wars.[233]

There is consequently a shift, as Charles Taylor describes, from Romantic art portraying "unspoilt nature, human emotion…in such a way as to show some greater spiritual reality or significance" to nonrepresentational modern art in which "the locus of epiphany has shifted to within the work itself," an awareness of the mediating work of human subjectivity and a focus on the medium itself as the source of "epiphany." The epiphany now "can only be brought about through the work, which remains a 'symbol'…we can't understand what it is qua epiphany by pointing to some independently available object described or referent."[234] The work still is still "referential," but its referent must now be evoked rather than depicted.

A naturalistic painting of a mountain, if it is a great one, is necessarily a painting of sublimity or beauty. But in modern abstract art, the physical and visible object, the "tenor" or

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[232] As discussed in Ch. 3, there were exceptions, of course, such as Melville, for whom the character of the ideal order and perhaps its very existence seemed already to be in doubt.
[233] For a thorough and illuminating analysis of the cultural conflicts leading to the two world wars, see Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*.
[234] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 419.

symbolic referent of the visual metaphor, so to speak, becomes progressively difficult to precisely or definitively articulate, and the "vehicle" correspondingly becomes indeterminate or elusive.[235] One might say that there is a shift from attention to the tenor of the metaphor to the creation of the metaphor as a whole, the imaginative apprehension and artistic creation of some sensible representation of an intelligible reality. In Romantic paintings one looks "through" the mountain, which is clearly a mountain, to the sublimity it symbolizes. In the art of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Stevens argues, the object becomes progressively less "objective." This abstraction disrupts our reduction of the object to the concept under which we usually classify it, and thereby have done with it.[236] Rather than a "realistic" depiction of Mount Saint-Victoire, which we simply identify as such, Cezanne gives us, as Stevens quotes the artist, "planes bestriding each other...Planes in color...The colored area where shimmer the souls of the planes, in the blaze of the kindled prism, the meeting of planes in the sunlight."[237] What the picture depicts is no longer the mountain but something evoked by the abstracted visual components, the colors and angles of the planes comprising the landscape. As Cezanne's quote implies, with its personification of the planes and its reference to their "souls," this is not a shift to sheer aesthetic or visual play, either; the "planes bestriding each other" still *refer* to something. But that referent—the reality depicted by the painting—shifts from substance to subtlety, from some object visually depicted to something spiritual evoked or suggested by the visual.

Stevens links this abstract transcendent referent to the Platonic good:

> Pure poetry is both mystical and irrational…[W]hile it can lie in the temperament of very few of us to write poetry in order to find God, it is probably the purpose of each of us to

[235] This is not necessarily true of all modern art. Some German Expressionism, for instance, could be said to make its meaning *more* explicit through its departures from naturalistic depiction. On the other hand, Cubism understood itself as concerned with visual appearance and not symbolic or expressive meaning.
[236] Compare Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of Enlightenment reason and their argument for the need to rehabilitate the non-linguistic from the tyranny of conceptualization, e.g. in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*.
[237] Op cit., 750.

> write poetry to find the good which, in the Platonic sense, is synonymous with God. One writes poetry, then, in order to approach the good in what is harmonious and orderly. Or, simply, one writes poetry out of a delight in what is harmonious and orderly….[T]he poets who most urgently search the world for the sanctions of life, for that which makes life so prodigiously worth living, may find their solutions in a duck in a pond or in the wind on a winter night.[238]

So in poetry one seeks and finds harmony and order, that which makes life worth living, and it does this through occasioning an immediate, if temporary, grasp of transcendent meaning—"a momentary existence on an exquisite plane."[239]

The specifically poetic approach to the good goes by way of specifically poetic "resemblance." In "Three Academic Pieces" Stevens writes that "the resemblance between things" is "one of the significant components of reality." By this he seems to be referring to an essential quality of the world as we find it. Resemblance is "the base of appearance" and Stevens' first example is that of color: "There is enough green in the sea to relate it to the palms...the light alone creates a unity." As I look at my desk, my first impression is in fact of chaotic dissimilarity, but soon I see the kinds of relationships Stevens means: the horizontal of the desk echoes the horizontal of the stacked books and of my laptop, and so on, and one book is like another. This is another aspect of resemblance: simple categorization, which allows us to recognize a thing for what it is—"each man resembles all other men, each woman resembles all other women, this year resembles last year."[240] It is only against these kinds of likenesses that one apprehends the unlikenesses that are equally essential to our experience (a point Stevens does not make).

These are examples of resemblance in "nature," which are resemblance between "two or more of the parts of reality." But there are also metaphorical resemblances, and these include resemblances "between something imagined and something real as, for example, between music

[238] "The Irrational Element in Poetry," in Stevens, Kermode, and Richardson, 786.
[239] *Ibid.*, 286.
[240] "Three Academic Pieces," in Stevens, Kermode, and Richardson, 686.

and whatever may be evoked by it" or "between two imagined things as when we say that God is good."[241] These latter examples imply that "reality" for Stevens means the visible, sensible world, and that what is not visible or sensible is "imagined."

Yet the division is not so simple. Resemblances involving what is imagined are, or become, part of "reality" too, as Stevens says when speaking of the way in which an object may "resemble" its (former) owner:[242]

> One may find intimations of immortality in an object on the mantelpiece; and these intimations are as real in the mind in which they occur as the mantelpiece itself. Even if they are only a part of an adult make-believe, the whole point is that the structure of reality because of the range of resemblances that it contains is measurably an adult make-believe.[243]

It would seem that there are two meanings of "reality" at work here. In the first instance, "reality" as "nature," as the visible, sensible world, is opposed to what is imagined. But in the second instance, as in this passage, reality is the world as we inhabit it and that world is inextricably structured by the imagination as well as by physical objects.[244] In the latter case reality is not simply equivalent to "nature"; it includes nature but also what we apprehend through metaphor.

Everyone's world is therefore structured by the resemblance of the real to the imagined, but poetry intensifies these resemblances and thereby creates a heightened sense of reality:

> Poetry is a satisfying of the desire for resemblance....Its singularity is that in the act of satisfying the desire for resemblance it touches the sense of reality, it enhances the sense of reality, heightens it, intensifies it. If resemblance is described as a partial similarity between two dissimilar things, it complements and reinforces that which the two dissimilar things have in common. It makes it brilliant. When the similarity is between things of adequate dignity, the resemblance may be said to transfigure or to sublimate them.[245]

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[241] *Ibid.,* 686-7.
[242] It would seem that resemblance can be of one of two kinds, similarity or contiguity. Stevens does not make this explicit in the essay, but it accords with Roman Jakobson's assertion that these are the two fundamental possibilities of relationship and form the basis for metaphor and metonymy, respectively. ("Two Aspects of Language," in Jakobson, *Language in Literature*).
[243] *Op. cit.,* 688-9.
[244] Compare Heidegger's description of human beings, *Dasein* as Being-in-the-World.
[245] *Ibid.*, 690.

Stevens does not elaborate on the difference between the "normal sense of reality" and the poetic, heightened sense that is "in excess" of the normal sense, but I think the idea of social reality I have elaborated (see especially Chapter One) is clarifying here. In our ordinary mode of apprehending the world, we operate according to conventional resemblances or what Berger would call typifications. We recognize a woman as like other women according to the relevant characteristics (which is, by definition, what makes her a woman); a classroom as like other classrooms, and so on.

Poetry, on the other hand, evokes or draws our attention to resemblances that are not typical. Keats finds a resemblance between a Grecian urn and an "unravished bride of quietness/ ...foster-child of silence and slow time." And the commonality between these two dissimilar things is not to be found in or at the level of everyday, mundane (or profane), pragmatic, typified social reality. It is difficult to characterize the level at which that commonality *is* to be found, which is perhaps precisely the modern problem. Formerly it might have been characterized as the sacred; for the Romantics, the sublime; at other times, the mythical, the transcendent. In the twentieth century perhaps one can say little more than that it is the *relatively* transcendent, that is, whatever belongs or ought to belong to our ground of apprehension or judgment that goes beyond everyday social reality.

The "adult make-believe" that poetry creates or enables is thus one in which some depth dimension of reality is made present and real.

> In short, a sense of reality keen enough to be in excess of the normal sense of reality creates a reality of its own. Here what matters is that the intensification of the sense of reality creates a resemblance: that reality of its own is a reality.[246]

[246] *Ibid.*, 691.

That is, the reality created or evoked by poetry "resembles" reality proper—poetry (and ultimately by this Stevens means all art) shows reality transformed into something harmonious and ordered, or one might say reality given *form*.

In pre-modern(ist) poetry, at least in Stevens view, there is some definite or agreed-upon character to the common ground of resemblance. As his poem "Of Modern Poetry" begins:

> The poem of the mind in the act of finding
> What will suffice. It has not always had
> To find: the scene was set; it repeated what
> Was in the script.
> Then the theatre was changed
> To something else. Its past was a souvenir.
>
> ...It has
> To construct a new stage.

This suggests that pre-modernist poetry could rely on a certain common background of that ultimate source of value and meaning to which poetry is supposed to point—it had only to find new metaphors by which to convey it. Modern poetry, on the other hand, must find its own basis for resemblance and this basis is always provisional.

> It has to be on that stage
> And...speak words that...
> In the delicatest ear of the mind, repeat,
> Exactly, that which it wants to hear, at the sound
> Of which, an invisible audience listens,
> Not to the play, but to itself, expressed
> In an emotion as of two people, as of two
> Emotions becoming one.

What is essential here, and essentially modern, is that the poem does not simply describe or evoke some realm of transcendent value, which the reader might just take as a fantasy. What the audience hears is *itself*, its own response to the play, and this is not a fault of the poetry but its purpose: through its multiplicity and ambiguity, to turn its readers back toward themselves so that they recognize that which is evoked by poetry to correspond to and awaken some essential

quality of their own consciousness. The figure of "an emotion as of two people, as of two/Emotions becoming one" suggests that the meeting of poem and reader is like the meeting of two subjectivities, which is the condition for the reader's access to her own deepest sensitivity—"the delicatest ear of the mind."

The title of this poem—"Of Modern Poetry"—in combination with its first line—"The poem of the mind in the act of finding"—could be taken to imply that in some sense all of modern poetry *is* that poem. For Stevens, a poem is fundamentally a metaphor (for reality). Thus modern poetry as a whole is a metaphor for modern reality, which is "a prodigious search of appearances" for a principle of unity, or rather, prodigious *searches.* It is essential that Stevens' poetry finds myriad figures for reality and poetry or the imagination's relation to it: poetry constructs the theater and acts out reality upon the stage; a feminine figure, "the maker," walks along the shore and sings a song that echoes or mediates or creates the song of the sea; reality is a dump, a heap of broken images, and poetry sits on it and tries to create something from the rubbish. Even within a single poem the representation of this relation shifts: in "The Man with the Blue Guitar," reality, "Things as they are" are at one point "changed upon the blue guitar"; at other points what the guitarist plays is counterposed to reality. There is always some tension, but the relationship ranges from strict dichotomy to productive interdependence. But the fact that this myth must be expressed in these diverse figures is essential to the myth itself and its distinctiveness from traditional myths: not just its content but its form, its character, has changed, has become subtle, shifting, and a co-creation between poet and reader.

Correlate to this change is a recurrent elegiac tone in Stevens' poems, a sense of the loss of sure transcendental sanction—which manifests itself in hesitations, expressed uncertainty,

recurrent deflationary moments—at the same time that the poems continue to affirm the continuance in a different, more modern, form of what has been lost.

Stevens remains largely within the tradition of Romantic poetry as Von Hendy describes it, which, though preoccupied with finding a new mythology to replace the traditional religious belief that can no longer compel conviction, "does not produce any new mythology except the 'reflexive' sort that consists of celebrating the power of the imagination *to* produce a new mythology."[247] Stevens' claims for poetry are no more modest than the nineteenth century Romantics'—he seeks "to find the good which, in the Platonic sense, is synonymous with God"[248] (or "to integrate the mind and the world within a sentient unity of being," as Joseph Carroll puts it.[249] Malcolm Woodland characterizes Stevens' primary concern as "whether the world contains a teleological principle that would give shape and meaning to the spectacle of phenomenal change."[250] But as that "whether" indicates, these grand ambitions are counterbalanced by deep doubts as to whether their fulfillment is possible. These doubts are both doubts about the capacities of the limited and mortal poet, and doubts that there *is* such a good or a unity there for poetry to find that is not sheer subjective fantasy. This ambiguity is captured in Stevens' poem "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," as when he writes:

> …the theory
> Of poetry is the theory of life,
>
> As it is, in the intricate evasions of as,
> In things seen and unseen, created from nothingness,
> The heavens, the hells, the worlds, the longed-for lands.

On one reading, he seems to suspect that the figurative language of poetry—which is also the figurative language of myth and religion—is mere construction ("the intricate evasions of as")

[247] Von Hendy, *The Modern Construction of Myth*, 42.
[248] "The Irrational Element in Poetry," in Stevens, Kermode, and Richardson, 786.
[249] Carroll, *Wallace Stevens' Supreme Fiction*, 47.
[250] Woodland, *Wallace Stevens And The Apocalyptic Mode*, 250.

out of “nothingness” to satisfy our longing for absolute meaning, the standards of good and evil embodied in heaven and hell. What we are evading is the knowledge that there is no such meaning, there are no such objective standards. On another reading, however, these myths are precisely what we are missing such that we fail to respond adequately to our situation. Yet this is also life “as it is,” and these “longed-for lands” do exist, even if it is we who have created them.

This ambiguity is precisely the problem that Stevens’ poetry takes up as an unending preoccupation. Stevens gives us, over and over, the image of a mind searching and sometimes finding a reality outside of itself which is not mere material reality. This, I think, *is* the “supreme fiction” he offers: the myth of the imagination, which is a myth of consciousness—and the myth of the poet, perhaps the myth of himself as the poet. Stevens’ myth cannot be the myth of any divine beings, in which we can no longer believe. As the headings of the three sections of his poem “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” assert: “It Must Be Abstract”; “It Must Change”; “It Must Give Pleasure.” To the first: the modern myth must not be a particular story which is obviously an invented *story*, like Blake’s or Yeats’ elaborate mythologies—these may in fact seem to convey deep truths about our situation, but only in the way that few if any would take them as sacred; it must rather seem to refer to the deep *realities* of our situation. To the second: those realities are both historical, changing over time, and aspectual, appearing now one way, now another, and dependent on the individuals’ capacity for reading. And finally, it must have *erotic* power, must reflect that which compels our deepest interest and love—and it is something that we know and respond to aesthetically, sensuously, through our tacit response to the world.

The elements of the supreme fiction could be said to appear early, in poems such as “Sunday Morning,” as well as “The Snow Man” and “The Idea of Order at Key West,” which in different ways describe the mind’s construction of a world, but a constrained construction—the

creation of a world that is not just subjective fantasy, but whose meaningfulness only emerges through the apprehension and articulation by the imagination—an activity that is at once creation and discovery. At the same time the myth is the myth of the uncertainty, provisional character, and failures of this attempt (which is why it is, as in the subtitle of Carroll's book, a *new* Romanticism, chastened by the critiques of the eighteenth- and nineteenth- century Romantic project and the failures of that project to achieve its aims).

It is essential that the supreme fiction is articulated in *poetry*—or rather, it *is* poetry, and difficult poetry. Stevens could have added "It Must Be Difficult" to his qualities—and it must be difficult, ambiguous, because it must direct our attention to the horizon of sense—to the margins of our own tacit knowledge.

Now to return to the second and more obviously apocalyptic moment of the modern crisis for Stevens, the "pressure of the contemporaneous" and the specter of the "end of civilization." To some degree poetry responds to this aspect of the crisis by responding to the aspect just discussed, the crisis of meaning—poetically transforming the world to make possible a reconciliation with it. However, in the context of his discussions in his essays of this "pressure," poetry's role sounds more oppositional, or even escapist: the poet "resists" or "evades" the pressure of reality. Stevens meets the anticipated charge of escapism directly, saying that "there is no question of escape," that "the poet who wishes to contemplate the good in the midst of confusion is like the mystic who wishes to contemplate God in the midst of evil"—that is, the realities of the contemporary world are there whether one likes it or not, and the question is the direction of one's attention, the quality of one's consciousness, the reality one inhabits. He goes on to claim that the poet's resistance cannot simply be a matter of going off on flights of fancy; it

must begin from and transform the situation in which it finds itself: “Resistance to the pressure of ominous and destructive circumstance consists of its conversion, so far as possible, into a different, an explicable, an amenable circumstance.”[251] These two characterizations seem initially at odds with one another—the mystic, it would seem, does not *convert* the evil reality into good; he lives in reality exactly as it is and merely focuses his attention on the good. But, to invoke the ambiguity of “reality” considered earlier, one might say the mystic *does* inhabit a different reality simply by virtue of seeing the world around him (“reality”) in light of the “imagined” absolute reality and standard of judgment that is God.

We can (only) get a sense of what this “conversion” looks like by looking at Stevens’ poetry. He does not write explicitly of the evils of contemporary reality; whenever war or dictators or other facets of the contemporary “pressure” appear in his poetry, they are abstracted, though sometimes still excoriating, as in the description of some fascist or demagogic figure in “The Man with the Blue Guitar”: “the beautiful trombones behold/The approach of him whom none believes,/Whom all believe that all believe,/A pagan in a varnished car,” a figure of “petty misery” destined to be “toppled.” Here the description of the demagogue, the evocation of his “resemblance” to a drum rolling over the subtle pickings of the blue guitar, summons the reader’s attention to a standard by which the false loudness of political rhetoric can be *seen*, understood, judged.

But the direct (or even not-so-direct) critique of contemporary events does not seem to be Stevens’ primary concern, and the vast majority of his poetry instead seems to seek the extraordinary dimension in what is perennially around us. This is true before, during, and after World War II, the historical event that manifests this second crisis for Stevens (as for many), so it is not immediately clear what further poetic response, if any, this second crisis calls forth.

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[251] “The Irrational Element in Poetry," in Stevens, Kermode, and Richardson, *Wallace Stevens*, 789.

There does, however, seem to be a general if uneven shift in the character of Stevens' poetry, specifically in the way in which reality and the imagination's relationship to it are figured. In the later poems, the affirmations of the imagination's power that we see in "The Idea of Order" and "Sunday Morning" and even in "The Snow Man," austere but crystalline, give way increasingly to moments of extreme doubt or else to affirmations that are more severely restrained, qualified, or self-subverted.

This movement is neither linear nor total. Even in the early poetry the affirmations are often subdued or hedged; and there are later poems of affirmation like "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour," "The Rock," and "Of Mere Being." But the latter tend to be hemmed in by poems intimating a drafty, threatening and threatened world. There are early poems too which are less sanguine, such as "Comedian as the Letter C," but here the failure seems contingent, an individual failure in light of grand unrealized possibilities (the possibility of creating a new world—"founding a colony"—or saving this world). The later poems seem, conversely, to limit the redemptive possibilities to finding some space, a still point, a momentary epiphany, while all around the world continues in its terrifying cycles, and the failure seems not the failure of the individual but rather fated by the very character of (modern) reality.

The recognition or fear seems to emerge that poetry, as Wittgenstein says of philosophy, leaves everything as it is, that at most it can offer a temporary refuge, a "rendezvous."

The relation between these crises might be conceived as follows. In the first crisis, the disappearance of the gods, there is "just" the threat of meaninglessness, the "indifference" of the phenomenal world, the loss of "some imperishable bliss"; the poetic reconciliation in this case is to show us that "the indifferent experience of life is the unique experience, the item of ecstasy which we have been isolating and reserving for another time and place, loftier and more

secluded."[252] With the threat to civilization, however, even this "perishable bliss" becomes threatened; it is no longer adequate simply to find some inner irrational source of meaning—or rather, this may be all that one has, but the salvation of the individual soul is not the salvation of the world, and therefore the salvation of the individual is itself imperiled, since this "salvation" is bound up with the fate of this world for the modern individual. I think this is at least implicit in Stevens' later poetry.

Conversely, the contemporary crisis might be seen as emerging from the crisis of meaning, the breakdown of consensus about the ideal ends of human life and even the loss of conviction that there are such ends, leading to fragmentation and erosive and destructive conflict.

For Stevens, under these conditions the modern poet does become a mystic contemplating good or God in the midst of evil. Poetry creates a still point, a "place of communion"[253] with the transcendent ground of our being, but the storm rages without. The question can then be raised whether, or in what sense, this meets the challenge to meaning posed by our historical situation.

"The Auroras of Autumn"

I have summarized Stevens' poetic theory with some illustrations from his poetry, but although Stevens himself elaborated this conception extensively in prose, this conception itself is such that it can only be grasped and made persuasive through reading and inhabiting the poems themselves. "The Auroras of Autumn" is one dramatization of Stevens' search for the supreme fiction, and could be characterized at the same time as aspiring to *be* (part of) what it narrates the search for—and, written in 1946 after the "pressure of reality" and the specter of the "end of

[252] "Two or Three Ideas," in Stevens, Kermode, and Richardson, 848.
[253] Thanks to Liam Maguire for this formulation.

civilization" have thoroughly pervaded Stevens' consciousness, it reveals something of the fate of the search for meaning in light of the End.

The poem begins with a contemplation of the heavens—of what would seem to be the constellation Draco and the canopy of stars, although it could also describe the sinuous form of the northern lights of the title:

> This is where the serpent lives, the bodiless.
> His head is air. Beneath his tip at night
> Eyes open and fix on us in every sky.
>
> Or is this another wriggling out of the egg,
> Another image at the end of the cave,
> Another bodiless for the body's slough?

The question immediately posed seems to be whether there is any reality to what we think we see in the lights in the sky—whether they are as they look to be, the sign of some meaningful structure to the world, divine eyes that watch us, or whether rather such visions are merely like one of the shadows seen by the deluded prisoners of Plato's cave.

It is striking and essential that from the very beginning the poem resists easy understanding and determinant paraphrase. Why "wriggling out of the egg"? The syntax of the sentence implies an interpretation opposed to what has gone before ("Or"), i.e. that the previous vision is deluded and redundant ("another"), just one more fantasy among all the ways in which human beings try to escape "the body's slough." But on the other hand, eggs are *meant* to be wriggled out of, and to fail to do so would mean eternal juvenility or death. Thus there is an immediate ambiguity about the character of human entrapment in our immediate world, the world of the material and social. And this ambiguity is the ambiguity of the poem itself (this poem, and perhaps poetry generally): is the suggestiveness and power of an image the real

intimation of something outside or beyond the enclosure of our ordinary understanding, or is that very image—the picture of an "outside" or "beyond" the shell—false, illusory?

Stevens does not answer the question directly but instead gives another image of the serpent, literally a more grounded one:

> This is where the serpent lives. This is his nest,
> These fields, these hills, these tinted distances,
> And the pines above and along and beside the sea.
>
> This is the height emerging and its base
> These lights may finally attain a pole
> In the midmost midnight and find the serpent there,
>
> In another nest, the master of the maze
> Of body and air and forms and images,
> Relentlessly in possession of happiness.

The first of these stanzas seems to describe the serpent as human beings have come to know it, as part of the shared environment. The next alludes to the auroras, suggesting that the celestial emerges from the terrestrial, perhaps acknowledging that our myths arise from our experience of the material world, but also proposing that they have some independent status or reality—the Platonic form of the serpent, our concept of the serpent, may not precede its earthly instantiations (existence precedes essence), but the symbolic meaning or significance of the serpent is not simply invented or arbitrary.[254]

But then comes another disillusionment:

> This is his poison: that we should disbelieve
> Even that. His meditations in the ferns,
> When he moved so slightly to make sure of the sun,
>
> Made us no less as sure. We saw in his head,
> Black beaded on the rock, the flecked animal,
> The moving grass, the Indian in his glade.

[254] Why it should be the *serpent* that is "master of the maze…Relentlessly in possession of happiness" remains mysterious to me.

These final lines describe only “nature,” but suggest a subtly Romantic view of nature, ordered and harmonious, human beings (the “Indian”) in harmony with animals in harmony with the sun. It is ambiguous whether this final image is what we are left with *after* our disbelief, or whether it is a continuation of the earlier description of what we can now no longer believe (that is, that the serpent is “master of the maze” and “relentlessly in possession of happiness”), but perhaps that ambiguity is the point. The snake on the rock is surely real; its significance is what is in question.

Marie Borroff construes this first section as proceeding through three myths, from cosmic and abstract to progressively more local, concrete and particular,[255] but in this progression I see also a movement of disenchantment, or at least increasing uncertainty about any reality or order beyond the immediate and concrete. At the same time, the poetry itself seems to continue to attest to some such order, which comes through in these lines by way of little more than an exquisite precision of description—not the prophetic musicality of Lowell but apt and balanced phrases which conjure the sunlight reflecting on the shining black scales, the rustling of the grass in otherwise silence, the sense of perfection one sometimes gets when observing the natural world, which then makes the return to the social world jarring in its noisiness. The lines depart just enough from prosaic diction and syntax (the alliteration of “black beaded,” the internal alliteration of “rock” and “flecked,” the subtle quasi-iambic pentameter of the final line) to become more than just the effective mimesis of a natural scene and to suggest an *image*—that is, an image *of* something beyond itself. (Perhaps little more of an image than the natural scene itself may be, as the Romantics saw nature as an image of the transcendent—the poetic rendering simply constituting the imagined natural scene as an object of aesthetic contemplation.)

Yet Stevens cannot let even this ever-so-subtly romanticized nature stand unironized. The next section, as well as the following two, begin “Farewell to an idea,” which Borroff interprets

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[255] Borroff, “Wallace Stevens’ 'The Auroras of Autumn'" (Lecture 20, ENGL 310, Yale Open Courses).

as Stevens taking leave, at least temporarily, from the foundational cosmic myth described in the previous section, and, I would add to this, the myth of nature.

The second section proceeds by describing a white cabin, "deserted on a beach," with white flowers on a white wall,[256] flowers that remind the poet "of a white/ That was different, something else, last year/ Or before, not the white of an aging afternoon…" The poet does not make explicit what was "different" about last year's white, and thus the desired and absent whiteness seems less like something real in the poet's past and more like a transcendent ideal, like the magic that seems to imbue remembered childhood—more keenly, perhaps, with the poet's own aging: As Merle Brown has written, this section, and the poem as a whole, suggest approaching death. (In the next stanza, the mother "has grown old," and more drastically, "The house will crumble and the books will burn.")

Borroff characterizes the myth of this section as the myth of the changing of the seasons, but the passage from autumn to winter itself is of course symbolically significant as well:

> The season changes. A cold wind chills the beach.
> The long lines of it grow longer, emptier,
> A darkness gathers though it does not fall
>
> And the whiteness grows less vivid on the wall.

The encroachment of winter is the encroachment of emptiness, darkness, fading, dying.

But then the auroras make their appearance as the antithesis of the whiteness and of the chilled, static nothingness—they are spectacular, brilliantly colored, "change" (which is, relevantly, one of the requisites of a supreme fiction) made enormously visible:

> The man who is walking turns blankly on the sand.
> He observes how the north is always enlarging the change,
>
> With its frigid brilliances, its blue-red sweeps

[256] This also evokes the terrifying nullity of whiteness described in "The Whiteness of the Whale" in *Moby-Dick*.

> And gusts of great enkindlings, its polar green,
> The color of ice and fire and solitude.

This seems an image of the sublime somewhat analogous to the end of "Quaker Graveyard," an evocation of a cosmic perspective, though a very different one than represented by the serpent—an austere beauty that relativizes human endings. The auroras here—and throughout the poem—are, as I read them, an image of what transcends and outlasts individual human life and perhaps all human life. But they are an ambiguous image, searingly beautiful but mute, fluctuating, remote. So while they seem an image of the transcendent horizon of meaning, at the same time they provoke the question of whether they are just a human projection or the reflection of something real and external—that is, whether they are in fact an *objective* correlate. To answer in the negative would be to find the conditions of human life and sense unraveled, and the poem could be characterized as the drama of the poet's search for the answer. Throughout "Auroras," Stevens calls into question the suggestiveness of language and image as manifested at the end of Section II, vacillating throughout the poem as to whether what the imagination thinks it grasps in fact has any enduring reality or referent.

I would characterize this section as not only the myth of the changing of the seasons and of death but as a kind of antithesis of the first section. If Section I is a series of images of meaning as immanent in the cosmos or in nature, the heavens dotted with "eyes that watch us," Section II conversely imagines the world as without any inherent human meaning (thus it is white, a "heartless void" or "dumb blankness" upon which nature "paints like the harlot,"[257] color belonging only to the brilliant but ephemeral spectacle in the sky, which may well be meaningless itself). Here again is the naturalistic sublime, and one might call this the corresponding myth Nietzschean or existentialist—that modern myth with its roots in Lucretius

[257] *Moby-Dick*, 169-170.

and the Epicureans that the world is fundamentally atoms and void, and what meaning there is must be imposed by human beings on meaningless natural phenomena, with no transcendent sanction or objective reality. As in "The Snow Man," however, even this utterly objective vision, the vision seen by the observer who is "nothing himself," still seems to have some inherent significance, if only the significance of beauty—"the junipers shagged with ice,/ The spruces rough in the distant glitter/ Of the January sun." The vision of the auroras at the end of this section is similar—they are silent, distant, indifferent to the fate of the man "walking blankly on the sand," but they still figure as an image of something humanly significant—if an image of something in light of which individual human beings may be utterly *in*significant.

These first two sections therefore dramatize the problem of finding a myth adequate to the modern situation. We cannot believe, at least literally, in stories of divine beings like the cosmic serpent; on the other hand, the world still seems imbued with some order, but how to tell if that order is not just our own projection? The image of the auroras suggests the kind of order we might legitimately find—one which demands a kind of dispossession—and from this point forward Stevens seems to grapple with this idea, both directly and obliquely, retreating and evading it before it returns in the later sections.

Sections I and II each describe a cosmos that is impersonal, even it is meaningful. Sections III and IV (each also beginning "Farewell to an idea") turn from the myths of an individual alone in such a cosmos to those fundamental and archetypal relationships that structure the human world: the myths of mother and father.

> …The mother's face,
> The purpose of the poem, fills the room.
> They are together, here, and it is warm….

> …The house is evening, half dissolved.
> Only the half they can never possess remains,
>
> Still-starred. It is the mother they possess,
> Who gives transparence to their present peace.
> She makes that gentler that can gentle be.

The mother is warmth, protection, comfort; she is, as Simone de Beauvoir would put it, "pure immanence" (that which *can* be possessed, the woman who will reassure and love absolutely), that into which the poet, facing the terrifying aloneness conjured in the previous section, would like to sink. But as every grown child discovers, she cannot fulfill this fantasy of total refuge, in part because she is only another human being; in part because she is impermanent: "And yet she too is dissolved, she is destroyed./ She gives transparence. But she has grown old." The mother here is associated to the house and both are terrifyingly impermanent. This is all the more devastating as the mother is associated with the supreme fiction Stevens seeks in "Notes," of which he says, "The vivid transparence that you bring is peace." The mother is, one might say, the primal supreme fiction, that matrix into which each of us is born. The dissolution of this perfect wholeness is essential to individuation and consciousness, but here it would seem we have something more than the ordinary trauma of separation and disenchantment. The mother is the house and beyond the house there is only unsheltered expanse, the sandy waste of the beach beneath the fluctuating sky; there is the sense that whatever myth one might inhabit after her passing, it will not be one of any encompassing security.

After another "Farewell to an idea," we are told, "The negations, the cancellations are never final/The father sits in space, wherever he sits,/Of bleak regard." Beyond the comforting circle of the mother's embrace there is the father, native not of the hearth but of the less-homely sky. The father "says no to no and yes to yes. He says yes/To no and in saying yes he says farewell." The father's "saying farewell" identifies him with the poet, and in general the father

occupies a special position vis-à-vis myth—he is a mythical figure but also source of myth. He is judge, creator, patriarch, but he is also the encompassing consciousness, a figure for the imagination; his is "the highest eye/And the lowest ear…that discerns…things that attend it until it hears/The supernatural preludes of its own," his is "the angelic eye" that "defines/Its actors approaching, in company, in their masks." He seems, finally, the personified predecessor of the auroras: "He assumes the great speeds of space and flutters them"; he is "seated by the fire/And yet in space and motionless and yet/Of motion the ever-brightening origin"—a striking abstract image of some absolute condition of being.

All this suggests a myth of individuation or of the development of human consciousness, the differentiation from the primal unity with the mother and the identification with that already-individuated figure, the father. This identification seems to be the necessary alternative after the devastating recognition of the previous section of the mother's aging and death, and more generally the fact of transience and destruction.

But the father's throne is somehow beset, and the section concludes again in a menaced tone: "What company/In masks, can choir it with the naked wind?" This transcendent imagination's "actors" are "masked," patently false, and therefore (or somehow) insufficient to contend with or withstand the gusts of naked reality. Here the myth of individuation and of the powers of the human imagination run up against the earlier annihilating vision of Section II.

The following section develops this disillusionment with the father and his imaginative constructions, and seems to express disgust with "humanity" in general. It describes the mother and father throwing a party in which "the father fetches tellers of tales," musicians, "negresses to dance," "fetches pageants out of the air," "fetches his unherded herds," orchestrates a party that the poet eventually calls "a loud, disordered mooch." The image is one of artificial, repulsively

indulgent and ultimately meaningless fantasy: “These musicians dubbing at a tragedy…which is made up of this: That there are no lines to speak[.] There is no play./Or, the persons act one merely by being here.” This seems an aporia, similar to Stevens’ characterization of arriving at “the plain sense of things” in the poem of that name: it is “as if/We had come to an end of the imagination.”

The recovery from this disaster of sense comes from a return to the auroras, a stunning description of the spectacle as “a theatre floating through the clouds,” purposeless and magnificent. Against and despite the degradation of humanity and the failure of the human artifices, nature, there is the magnificence of indifferent and inhuman nature, a beautiful sublimity incommensurate with the human scale. By contrast, the human world comes and goes: “A capitol/ It may be, is emerging or has just/Collapsed.” Here too is the suggestion of that “pressure of contemporary reality,” the chaotic flux of current events and the threat of the end of civilization, relativized by the enormous and ethereal image of the lights in the sky.

Yet it is not enough for this spectacle just to *be*. The poet then pronounces, in what is perhaps the poem’s emotional climax:

> This is nothing until in a single man contained,
> Nothing until this named thing nameless is
> And is destroyed. He opens the door of his house
>
> On flames. The scholar of one candle sees
> An Arctic effulgence flaring on the frame
> Of everything he is. And he feels afraid.

The first stanza suggests that this immense inhuman horizon must somehow still be made part of human consciousness, part of an *individual* human consciousness. And it must be there transformed, made “nameless” and “destroyed.” This at first defies sense—how can “nothing” become something by being *un*-named and, even more paradoxically, destroyed? Un-naming is a

common theme in Stevens; "do not use the rotted names" the poet enjoins in "The Man With a Blue Guitar," and "The sun/Must bear no name, gold flourisher, but be/In the difficulty of what it is to be" in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction." Un-naming would thus seem to be the fundamental poetic act, or at least the essential condition to a poetic re-naming. And destruction must come first; the condition of a new creation is the breakdown of the old edifices; as Stevens says elsewhere: "The mind is the great poem of winter, the man,/Who, to find what will suffice,/Destroys romantic tenements/Of rose and ice" ("Man and Bottle").

Yet this does not entirely resolve the difficulty. The auroras have *already* been poetically transformed, renamed—must *this* poetic construction be (again) unnamed, destroyed? This perhaps too-comforting, too-human image of the auroras as a "theatre"? It is unclear, but what is unambiguous is the terror of the man, his sense of the inadequacy and insignificance of the "one candle" of an individual human consciousness in the face of an annihilating immensity—whether it is the annihilation of one's own death or of the collapse of a civilization.

In Section VII, Stevens wonders whether there *is* an imagination capable of an objective perspective, an imagination of which the auroras are objective correlate. He begins by powerfully describing such an imagination, which identifies itself no longer with the father but with the auroras:

> Is there an imagination that sits enthroned
> As grim as it is benevolent, the just
> And the unjust, which in the midst of summer stops
>
> To imagine winter? When the leaves are dead,
> Does it take its place in the north and enfold itself,
> Goat-leaper, crystalled and luminous, sitting
>
> In highest night?....
>
> It leaps through us, through all our heavens leaps,
> Extinguishing our planets, one by one,
> Leaving, of where we were and looked, of where

> We knew each other and of each other thought,
> A shivering residue, chilled and foregone
> Except for that crown and mystical cabala.

But the poet cannot help but then belittle this grand vision—a belittlement that is at the same time a recovery from the reduction of the self to "shivering residue" in the face of the inhuman eternity:

> But it dare not leap by chance in its own dark.
> It must change from destiny to slight caprice.
> And thus its jetted tragedy, its stele
>
> And shape and mournful making move to find
> What must unmake it and, at last, what can,
> Say, a flippant communication under the moon.

This, it would seem, is both the fate and the prerogative of the modern consciousness that is driven to seek truth which it equates with a skeptical questioning of everything. The imagination cannot take itself too seriously, it must ironize itself, and the poem here enacts that ironization, leaping in the final two stanzas of this section "from destiny to slight caprice," from "jetted tragedy" to "flippant communication." Critics have called Stevens a comic poet and here his comedy emerges with, I think, a double edge, both assertion of human life and joyousness despite the threats of meaninglessness or inhuman circumstance, but also ironization that undercuts the meaningfulness that potentially comes from facing those circumstances.

The belittlement is transformed into acceptance in the final section. Stevens begins by calling us "an unhappy people in a happy world," which Borroff interprets to mean that "we live in a world in which there is splendor and vitality and the sun is like a jungle tuft of feathers and like an animal eye, but we're unhappy because we lack the faculty of imagination."[258] Stevens

[258] Borroff, *Op. cit.*

then exhorts the "rabbi," apparently a figure for the poet, to save these unhappy people, to allow them to see what their own imaginations fail, without the poet, to grasp:

> Now, solemnize the secretive syllables.
>
> Read to the congregation, for today
> And for tomorrow, this extremity,
> This contrivance of the spectre of the spheres,
>
> Contriving balance to contrive a whole,
> The vital, the never-failing genius,
> Fulfilling his meditations, great and small.
>
> In these unhappy he meditates a whole,
> The full of fortune and the full of fate,
> As if he lived all lives, that he might know,
>
> In hall harridan, not hushful paradise,
> To a haggling of wind and weather, by these lights
> Like a blaze of summer straw, in winter's nick.

On one level, this is profoundly affirmative of the power of poetry to convey a "whole" within which human life appears intelligible. On the other, it ironizes this power; this concluding section is full of alliteration, calling attention to the artificiality of the language; Stevens calls the "spectre of the spheres" a "contrivance," diminishes it into "a blaze of summer straw/ In winter's nick." As Borroff says:

> The splendors of the aurora have come to that, "by these lights, / like a blaze of summer straw, in winter's nick." That's the last metaphor for the Aurora Borealis. "Winter's nick" is the solstice; the coming of Capricorn, the constellation, and the auroras are like "a blaze of… straw" in the midst of all that. Not a very grand image, but for Stevens this is what we have, and this is enough.[259]

If in Lowell we see how the world might end with a bang, Stevens confronts us with the possibility that it might end with a joke, with a fatal irony, with our failure to achieve conviction about our apprehensions of anything transcendent.

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[259] *Ibid.*

But even so, the transcendent abides in the poem, beside the belittlement. Even the unsatisfactory character of the final stanza could be felt as provocation, leaving a longing for the intimations of transcendence earlier in the poem, a longing that suggests, even if it cannot prove, that there is some object to which it is correlate. As Malcolm Woodland argues:

> Stevens reads the aurora borealis as the harbinger of a postapocalyptic apocalypse, of an "apocalypse *without* apocalypse," of an end that transcends and exceeds the narrative of teleological fulfillment inscribed in the apocalyptic tradition, and his elegiac *mourning* of this end inscribes a certain *resistance* to that situation within the poem.[260]

"The Auroras of Autumn" thus elegizes what is perhaps the most fundamental myth—the myth of the very possibility of making mythical sense, sense that is more and other than utilitarian. The consolation, then, in "Auroras" is in a sense even more austere than in "Quaker Graveyard"—it is the consolation of a double consciousness, the recognition that the question of the reality of what the imagination grasps cannot finally be resolved with respect to any particular, given mythical structure of sense (so the archetypal mother and father figures that appear in the middle of the poem must fall by the end, or at least lose their solidity).

This does not mean that the poem asserts that there *is* no such possibility or such sense. As I have said, elegy *mourns* the lost object, which means not only recognizing the loss but also affirming the value of what is lost, a value that persists. The elegy transforms the object. In this case, one might say the transformation is "from substance into subtlety." The poem affirms through its very ambiguity and suggestiveness the existence of *some* order which exceeds our consciousness and must be known. That is the essence of the myth that remains for Stevens when the other myths have been mourned—the myth of the imperative for consciousness to discover and articulate its own conditions.

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[260] Woodland, *Wallace Stevens and the Apocalyptic Mode*, 139.

That is not *all* that remains, such that all we come to know through Stevens' poetry is that there is an imperative to consciousness, but nothing of this elusive object of consciousness itself. In "Auroras" we are referred to the archetypal figures of mother and father, not only persons but bearers of two fundamental aspects of the individual's relation to the world, essential realities of our constitution, and the poem also compels us to come to terms with their limitations and their transience and the need to find some ground beyond them, which is to be found in relation to something transcendent, figured in inhuman nature and its "innocence," which becomes a recurrent theme of the last few sections. The poem is a modern elegy, elegizing the ground of sense, but there is also something of the traditional elegy in it, elegizing the aging poet facing extinction, personal or collective, and affirming something that will abide, perhaps not temporally, if whatever abides can only abide in human consciousness, but nonetheless in a significant way, through our imagination of the personal or the human arc, which becomes part of our current reality.

But "Auroras" suggests that only the (myth of the) imperative to consciousness is global—other orders are or may be local. The particular myths of the poem are represented as dissolving and recondensing, as ethereal and elusive. What is mourned, then, is not myth or foundational sense *per se*, but the determinacy of myths and our certainty about them.

What Stevens' claim (or others' claim, including mine, on his behalf) to be an "apocalyptic" poet, a poet responding to the threat of the "end of civilization," shows is that the response to the apocalyptic situation must include the recognition of the way in which we are co-creators of the reality (the world) we inhabit. We are partners with other human beings—poets and artists co-creating with other makers past and present, readers and viewers co-creating with

artists past and present—and our human subjectivity is partner, too, with all its external conditions.

At the same time there is something not finally satisfactory about Stevens' poetry as a response to the apocalyptic situation. One interpretation of Stevens' work claims that for him, as for all modern poets, "'the central concern'…is 'the quest for wholeness' and…this quest always, necessarily, fails."[261] One might argue further that wholeness or meaningfulness or belief in our own creativity is not what is required, that the "supreme fiction" that we need is not just the myth of our capacity and responsibly for creative consciousness, "the poem of the mind in the act of finding," but a way of understanding the historical conditions of that consciousness, one that takes up the historical human situation, the human destiny in relation to economic and political and social and cultural realities. Some of Stevens' poems do engage with historical conditions, but this engagement seems peripheral to his fundamental project, which is one of poetically constituting a world that one can "celebrate," a world in which our deep needs for meaning and the external world can be reconciled. Stevens keeps his poetry from becoming sheer fantasy or escapism by its continuous dramatization of the struggle for sense, the acknowledgement that sense *is* a struggle, but ultimately he is a "comic poet." His poetry provides perhaps the austerest comedy possible; the individual must find her light, her joy, her sense of meaningfulness, in flashes of aesthetic perfection in the midst of war, depression, and banality. The question is whether one can be a comic poet of any kind in an untenable historical situation.

Stevens' limitation may stem from the fact that he does not see the cataclysmic trajectory itself as the *result* of our failure to grasp reality. Rather, the evils are simply there, and poetry appears as a symptomatic treatment, a means of continuing to bear and to find meaning amongst them. But I would argue that our problem is not "just" nihilism, not just whether we can find a

[261] Carroll, *Wallace Stevens' Supreme Fiction*, 2.

myth to believe in, a reenchanted world to inhabit, a way to stage comedy in the midst of tragedy (which is not to say Stevens does these things blithely or facilely). Our problem is to see the real conditions of our lives.

It is true that we must, as Stevens enjoins us, recognize the reality we inhabit to be a function of our capacity to read, and work to discern/create the ulterior depths of that world. We must recognize reality to be not "substance" but "subtlety," not *things* but aspects, and poetry can convey this.

Stevens' limitation, I submit, is his way of conceiving that depth. He remains too Romantic, wanting to find God in the phenomenal world. But the conditions we would need to grasp in order to redeem, or at least to make sense of, the apocalyptic situation, are those of humanity's historical development—including the moral and ethical dimensions of that development, both what we have realized and what we have violated. Arguably humanity's destructive trajectory is a result of the failure to apprehend our historical being in all its dimensions. To the extent that history appears in Stevens' poetry, it is part of the nightmare from which we must awaken, the reality to be escaped through affirmation of the abiding transcendent, of "harmony and order," and the poetry seeks to transform this nightmarish reality into something more "amenable." But one might argue that to find proper form for reality is not necessarily to show it as harmonious but to show it as having sense against a normative background. I would contend that Stevens' poetry, in its development through his career, in its failure or limitation, reveals how the specter of the "end of civilization" makes our problem not one of meaning(fulness) but of consciousness of our true situation. It points beyond itself to the need for "the poetry of history," an adequate historical consciousness. What we need, one wants (I want) to say, is not a myth, or a supreme fiction; what we need is reality.

(I would note that my criticism raises an important point about our education by literature—that we need not find a poet or author to be wholly "right" in order to be educated by reading and reflecting on his or her work. What the work must do is refer us to real problems, and show sufficient honesty, integrity and insight to elicit some deeper tacit knowledge of our own in judging it, and stimulation to, if necessary, go beyond it.)

This limitation of Stevens' would seem to send us back to Lowell and McCarthy. Yet I would argue that these works read differently, and necessarily so, in light of what Stevens suggests: that our fictionalizing is essential to our knowledge of reality, and the kind of fictions required are *poetic* fictions; only through poetic resemblance can we become aware of a certain dimension of the ground of intelligibility. On the other hand we come to see the necessarily provisional character of all these fictions.

Reading Stevens and Lowell in tandem—along with the other works treated—therefore collectively suggest that the apocalyptic consciousness is a double, or multiple, and multiply ironic consciousness. First there is the recognition that our construals of the character of the end we face are constructions, but constructions that we cannot do without, and constructions that are not free but are ways of groping toward, bumping up against, the "limits of reality" which for us human beings include the limits of sense. And then, more wrenchingly, there is the tension between the imperative to consciousness in an apocalyptic world and the need to live in that world—between the absolute imperative toward goodness in light of its utter inefficacy; the need to be oriented toward a proximal future while recognizing the very real possibility of futurelessness, to take responsibility while feeling one's powerlessness. And the need to "leap from destiny to slight caprice," to continue to assert what allows us to keep living—the need for joy, celebration—which I think is not just a psychological need but also a facet of consciousness,

a recognition of real goods, but goods that become radically relativized and perhaps must be finally relinquished—mourned—in light of the larger and grimmer reality.

Beyond these tensions, though, there is a common orientation that these works urge upon us—an orientation urged by the tensions themselves. They press us to become conscious of and thus internalize the loss of the former certainties of humanity—to mourn, to relinquish, not our humanity, but those former certainties, to become, perhaps, what Stevens called the "more than human human."[262]

[262] Stevens and Howard, *The Letters of Wallace Stevens*, 434.

Conclusion: Reading At and Against the End of the World

> And in our day, when historical pressure no longer allows any escape, how can man tolerate the catastrophes and horrors of history—from collective deportations and massacres to atomic bombings—if beyond them he can glimpse no sign, no transhistorical meaning; if they are only the blind play of economic, social, or political forces, or, even worse, only the result of the 'liberties' that a minority takes and exercises directly on the stage of universal history?
>
> Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*

So we come to the end, if not (yet) the End. I have tried to read my four authors "epistemologically," to attend to the significant problems that each work posed to me and to articulate the reality or realities, the deeper ground of comprehension, to which it was necessary to appeal in order to resolve or at least clarify those problems. Specifically, I have tried to attend to the problem and reality of our apocalyptic situation; my selection of these works was guided by the intimation that they referred to and might illuminate that situation.

I have argued that the works educate us, not through making claims but through what they compel us to consult as we read and try to make sense of them. They do not *tell* us that the developments of the last century put our humanity into question, but they dramatize that destabilization in its various aspects. In trying to understand the drama and the images, we draw upon and draw together our existing knowledge, both tacit and explicit, and that knowledge is transformed: deepened, sharpened, corrected, made conscious; perhaps in some instances wholly overhauled.

I came to these works already bearing some sense—some belief and some nascent knowledge, partly tacit and partly explicit—of the threat of an end to humanity as a spiritual as well as physical calamity, a sense derived not only from the news but from the political and social theory, history and philosophy of the crisis of late modernity. As I synthesize what I take

to be the collective implications of my readings, I want to consider what literature, as distinct from such theoretical treatments, contributes to our understanding of and response to this crisis in its present manifestation.

In his influential if contentious book *The Myth of the Eternal Return,* Mircea Eliade argues that human life is lived in flight from the "terror of history"—the sense that there is no logic or meaning to the course of events, and therefore that the suffering wrought by war, famine, natural disaster, oppression, exploitation and so on is without reason or justification. In Eliade's account, prior to modernity people evaded this terror through interpreting extreme suffering as the doings of divine or supernatural agents or forces, giving it meaning and thereby making it (more) tolerable. Modern humanity, Eliade argues, has lost this sacred ground of justification and intelligibility and the buffer it provided against the terror of history. Like Wallace Stevens, Eliade argues that the "pressure" of the events of the early twentieth century challenged both the sacred meaning of history and its secular reformulations, such as Hegel's view of history as proceeding toward the realization of reason and freedom, or Marx's interpretation of history as class struggle culminating in a classless, egalitarian and truly human society. History becomes merely the "blind play of economic, social, or political forces."

This is bad enough—to see the sufferings and unfulfilled deaths of human beings throughout the ages as simply waste or the wreckage of market forces or struggles for power. But the works I have read suggest an arguably more terrifying terror—the prospect that history is not an arbitrary sequence of contingencies but in fact follows a logic proceeding toward dehumanization, the destruction of civilization, and possibly the extinction of the species. Such a prospect represents a different threat to sense, analogous to the threat that death poses to the

sense of an individual human life, though even more radically, since one way we make sense of the death of the individual is to see him or her as a part of a larger whole, society or the species, that persists both materially and as the bearer of human culture and value. The persistence of the whole becomes uncertain on a global level in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

This dissertation and the works considered in it could be understood as responses to the terror of history as it has further developed in the last century, and as we now feel it in the twenty-first. I have chosen these works because I believe that they acknowledge that terror and attempt, more or less directly, to come to terms with it, and that engaging with them illuminates whether and how it is possible for us to inhabit an apocalyptic reality: whether there is an alternative to fleeing into denial, dissociation, and fantasy, and what that alternative might be.

My readings suggest that there is an alternative, a way to make sense of our situation that still affirms the possibility of living toward a human end, even independently of the hope of salvation, divine or secular. They indicate that there is a way to construe and construct the human meaning of history, even a history apparently tending toward human destruction. I have read my chosen works as referring us to this ground of sense—this myth, in the sense in which I have used the term—through more or less direct representations of a radically endangered or untenable human situation that seems to threaten all sense. This may seem paradoxical, but, as I have argued, they do this by finding literary form for their catastrophic subjects, representing them so as to make the meaning of those subjects manifest.

Literature is not the only medium in which such an effort has been attempted. Perhaps the more obvious efforts would be those of historians and social and political theorists—the direct and explicit attempts to make sense of the facts of the past and present by analyzing their causes. Simone Weil's *Oppression and Liberty* and Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*,

both foundational for my own understanding of the crises of the twentieth century, aim to discern and articulate the human meaning and underlying causes of events that each saw as manifesting a fundamental breakdown or undermining of the conditions of human civilization, and both explicitly argue for "comprehension" as the condition for any adequate response to these crises.[263] These and other such treatises form the historical and theoretical background against which I have read my works, and I think that some such background is necessary; literature alone cannot educate us to our historical situation, and the works themselves refer us to this kind of empirical and theoretical background.

But the literature of apocalypse is also necessary to comprehension. I propose that the works discussed do something analogous to, and at the same time distinct from, historical and theoretical tracts such as Arendt's and Weil's. The latter are explanatory and analytical and directly tackle the contemporary historical catastrophes; they explicitly articulate the ethical and political conditions that come into view as those conditions are shockingly violated, as well as articulating those characteristics of our time that make such a violation possible and perhaps even inevitable. By contrast, the works I have discussed are literary and only obliquely touch upon twentieth-century history, but as I have tried to argue, their form similarly refers us to certain deep conditions of the modern—apocalyptic—situation. These apocalyptic literary works

[263] "The conviction that everything that happens on earth must be comprehensible to man can lead to interpreting history by commonplaces. Comprehension does not mean denying the outrageous, deducing the unprecedented from precedents, or explaining phenomena by such analogies and generalities that the impact of reality and the shock of experience are no longer felt. It means, rather, examining and bearing consciously the burden which our century has placed on us neither denying its existence nor submitting meekly to its weight. Comprehension, in short, means the unpremeditated, attentive facing up to, and resisting of, reality whatever it may be." Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, viii. In Weil: "If, as is only too possible, we are to perish, let us see to it that we do not perish without having existed. The powerful forces that we have to fight are preparing to crush us; and it is true that they can prevent us from existing fully, that is to say from stamping the world with the seal of our will. But there is one sphere in which they are powerless. They cannot stop us from working toward a clear comprehension of the object of our efforts, so that, if we cannot accomplish that which we will, we may at least have willed it, and not just have blindly wished for it; and on the other hand, our weakness may indeed prevent us from winning, but not from comprehending the force by which we are crushed. Nothing in the world can prevent us from thinking clearly." Oppression and Liberty, p. 23.

at once refer us to a catastrophic human trajectory driven by unconsciousness, ignorance, violence, impotence, and the disintegration and failure of traditional grounds of meaning and judgment, at the same time they imply through their mode of representation a different and transcendent perspective from which to see and judge, and perhaps allow us to momentarily inhabit that perspective. I will close by suggesting that what these and other literary works can do distinctively, in complement to discursive works, is to suggest and, at least temporarily, reorient us toward that horizon of judgment and compel us to probe the depths of our tacit knowledge of the conditions of our humanity. This suggests the need for an ongoing practice of reading.

I began with Maclean and the search for a tragic form adequate to the shocking and terrible deaths of fourteen young men in the Mann Gulch forest fire. Maclean saw and represented his Smokejumpers as tragic heroes, representative of a kind of beautiful hubris, a human confidence and greatness that transgresses against some order of the universe and thereby provokes its *nemesis*. But as the distinctly modern and nontraditional form of his work indicates, he also saw the need to find a different way of understanding that order, which could no longer be conceived as divine, and yet still seemed to encompass more than just the purely physical laws of nature. Ultimately, the Smokejumpers' battle with and ultimate defeat by an overwhelming conflagration becomes an image of each human life and death and finally of the career of the human species as a whole, so the search for sense is generalized. I argued that the form Maclean finds reflects and, to some degree, transcends two threats to the task of making sense of catastrophe in modernity—first of all, the absence of some collective religious or

mythical way of construing human experience and especially human suffering, and second, at the end of the work, the prospect of human extinction.

Fire suggests that "the Universe," that great Other to humankind, that which is not humankind, is still imbued with human meaning, that confronting the Universe still has meaning—not because there are supernatural beings that declare and underwrite that meaning but because all that we know and experience of human life can only be comprehended with reference to this background of immensity which is an object both of terror and of a kind of eros, a source of imperatives and constraints which cannot be derived from utility or moral rules. There is no "external" argument to be made for this, but only the evocativeness of image—the temporal and spatial geological vastness of the Western landscape, the beauty and terror of fire which Maclean paints with his strange poetry.

Maclean's immediate concern is not the end of civilization but the deaths of individuals, and yet the specter of the End haunts his work—as it must, to some degree, haunt the consciousnesses of all who lived through the dropping of the atomic bomb and the terrifying instability of the Cold War. Maclean uses the figure of "the end of the world" to characterize the terror of the historic 1910 wildfire, and at the end of the book, in his final description of the conflagration that killed the Smokejumpers, he invokes the Bomb, and images of immensity give way to the grotesque and the apocalyptic, a breakdown of sense in the face of individual and collective death.

In the end, Maclean suggests the analogy of the collective end to an individual end and finds the sense of both in a kind of Stoicism—defeat by such implacable forces is a part of the human condition, at some level inexplicable but also the condition for a compelling heroism. He surmises that, for his Smokejumpers, fear is burned away at the end and what is left is only a

kind of pity: not self-pity but some "divine bewilderment" that something so valuable could be extinguished, a grief that "finds its answer, if at all, in its own final act" which is simply an insistence on a continued striving to live humanly in the face of all that would deny and annul that human life. This is what he finds in the image of the Smokejumpers who "after [they] had fallen, had risen again, taken a few steps, and fallen again, this final time like pilgrims in prayer," expressing "some firm intention to continue doing forever and ever what we last hoped to do on earth." He sees this courage too in his wife "on her brave and lonely way to death,"[264] and in his work he manifests his own intention to live and die similarly, expending the energy of his last years clambering the steep sides of Mann Gulch, struggling to master the complicated mathematics of fire science, grappling with a subject whose weight and complexity partly but not completely resisted his attempt to find its form. The imperative he reads in the Smokejumpers to struggle for life, however futilely, becomes his own imperative toward consciousness and expression, and in the questions it raises, its loose ends and provocations and failures, it becomes ours as well.

The figure of apocalypse for Maclean is wildfire, a natural disaster, and in *Fire* defeat and death appear as disasters that come upon human beings from the outside or from nature, though such disasters are of course an essential feature of the human condition. Such a view of the threat is consistent with Maclean's apparent retreat at the very end from the apocalyptic vision, his descent from the towering inferno back to the ground, to the realm of individual death and the Forest Service's pledge to maintain the grave markers of the men, which reintroduces the assumption of a human future, at least a proximal one. Human beings in Maclean's vision have their failings and their tragic flaws as well as their lesser and occasionally downright bad

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[264] Maclean, *Young Men and Fire*, 299–301.

specimens, but our basic humanity is something fundamentally good—as Maclean himself conveys as narrator, with his humor, humaneness, integrity and tenacity, as well as the appealing and varied humanity of the characters he describes.

Lowell and McCarthy emphasize on the contrary that that the threat to humanity is internal as well as external. “The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket” and *Blood Meridian* confront the apocalypse as something seemingly intrinsic to human history which human beings bring upon themselves—as the historical development of human nature. Central to both of their visions is an inherent and determinative violence in human beings, which both authors have seen magnified into globe-spanning war in the twentieth century. McCarthy tells a historical tale of human depravity, of a band of mercenary scalphunters who somehow manage by the end of the book to yet further lose their humanity, and Lowell turns an elegy for his dead Navy sailor-cousin into a jeremiad eliding the war of his time with the gory slaughter perpetrated in the nineteenth-century whaling trade.

But neither of these works is simply a polemic against violence or an argument that human beings are violent animals, which is historically obvious. In both, the violence is represented as bound up with a modern crisis of sense, of which it appears as both cause and symptom in a kind of vicious cycle. On the one hand, the fact of force as the dominating determinant of human life and human history seems to call into question the liberal ideals—peace, progress, utility, humaneness—that we see, convincingly, dismantled and trampled in both works. On the other hand, force and violence gain all the more ascendancy as all forms of legitimate authority, both traditional and modern, seem to lose their sanction. This loss is exemplified in the judge’s exchange with the scalphunters after he lectures them on geology and prehistoric time:

> A few would quote him scripture to confound his ordering up of eons out of the ancient chaos and other apostate supposings. The judge smiled.
> Books lie, he said.
> God dont lie.
> No, said the judge. He does not. And these are his words.
> He held up a chunk of rock.
> He speaks in stones and trees, the bones of things.
> The squatters in their rags nodded among themselves and were soon reckoning him correct, this man of learning, in all his speculations, and this the judge encouraged until they were right proselytes of the new order whereupon he laughed at them for fools.[265]

Modern science has challenged the authority of religion, but, the passage parabolically suggests, modern science cannot serve as the new authority either. Its truths are not moral truths and thus it places no constraints on those who wield it, and they can use or not use it as it serves their ends. I argued that the judge identifies himself with history, and here the judge mimics history in wielding science as a corrosive of traditional forms of belief and then denying even its objectivity or the reality of anything except what he himself declares. What he declares is constrained by one thing only, the only constraint left after all ideals have been denied, which is the brute reality of force.

And it is not just that force breaks the bounds of weakened ideal constraints. The sheer exercise of power becomes dangerously compelling when other beliefs and motivations wane, and we as readers at times experience a kind of exhilaration in the violence. In Yeats' famous lines, "The best lack all conviction, while the worst/ Are full of passionate intensity." The "best" in *Blood Meridian* scarcely rise above an impotent mediocrity, while the judge dominates gloriously. The passion and the intensity—the sheer fact of the judge's undivided, confident exertion of power; the annihilating descent of the Comanches upon the filibusters; Glanton's unrepentant end—hold, I think, a certain disturbing attraction. Lowell's poem provides a similar contrast between the Quakers' bloody hunting and evisceration of the whales, described in his

[265] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian, Or the Evening Redness in the West*, 116.

pounding, inexorable rhythms, and the docile penitents under the opaque and perhaps blind gaze of the Virgin. The works compel us to acknowledge this attraction to the exertion of power, the expression of will, and not, I think, simply to have us ward against it. This too is part of what it means to be human, this terrible striving.

The standard according to which we would resist and judge against such power cannot, these works suggest, be only that of enlightened self-interest or empathy or the moral law, Kantian or Christian or otherwise, none of which are finally adequate to withstand the power of force—including its aesthetic or erotic power. But the forms of the works do nonetheless evoke a standard of judgment and resistance and the knowledge of a need for such a standard. The narrative or poetic voice of each imagines and compels us to inhabit an impersonal consciousness which stands outside and above the figures of violence and even outside and above this humanity so constituted, since we see it from a perspective beyond its end. And yet this perspective is not "inhuman" but some "more than human human": things seen from this angle, from this extreme distance, have value still, but a value the basis of which is not yet fully known or grasped, a value derived not from the happiness of the individual and not even from the collective well-being of the species but from an intimation of a humanity defined in relation to some absolute.

McCarthy and Lowell are not prophets; they do not know what "humanity" is or ought to be any more than their readers (or at least their more sensitive, intelligent and educated readers). But if their works, as well as Maclean's and Stevens', have some compelling power and continued interest despite their limitations, it is because, and insofar as, their vision resonates with our own tacit knowledge of certain conditions of human life—not just confirming what we already know, but occasioning a new integration or integrations, compelling us to see how,

disturbingly, our experience and knowledge gain a new coherence when seen from this perspective, and also making the demand for an ongoing effort of understanding. These authors put before us narratives and images that seem right, the source of that rightness only partially known to the authors themselves, and we must take up the task of discerning that source. Their works can be seen not as definitive pronouncements but as struggles to come to some further comprehension of the twentieth century trajectory which can, they implicitly argue, only be arrived at through narrative and image and difficult literary form.

Stevens, finally, helps us to understand why the difficulty, ambiguity, obscurity might be necessary to the fundamental task of representing the crisis. In "The Auroras of Autumn," as well as in his prose reflections on the relation bewteen poetry and reality, Stevens reflects a concern with a different but in some sense encompassing aspect of the End. The historical catastrophe, the catastrophe that is history, that Lowell and McCarthy figure in their works, depends upon and in part *is* the catastrophe of a collective (and for many, also an individual) failure to be able any longer to conceive and experience a normatively structured and meaningful human reality, to inhabit a world in which human imperatives and constraints can still compel conviction and stand athwart the sweep and the lure of force. Some new basis of judgment must be apprehended, and Stevens suggests that it is poetic resemblance that can evoke and orient us toward and even in some sense constitute this basis of judgment.

In these works of apocalyptic literature, history becomes the revelation of the inhuman as it works itself out within humanity, and of an inhuman background that conditions and will outlast human life—but it also becomes the revelation of some transcendent standard of judgment, which the works suggest both negatively, through the reaction provoked in us by the spectacle of destruction, and positively, through images of austere sublimity. The suggestion is

that only through the identification with something far, far larger than ourselves might we adequately comprehend and judge our situation.

I have offered an interpretation of these works, but to return to my overall theoretical project, the interpretation is not the same as the reality to which they refer us. The strangeness, difficulty and ambiguity of narrative form and images is essential to the distinctive way that literature might be revelatory. The work, being a fiction and the creation of a limited human consciousness, is not divine revelation but the expression of an intuited coherence dramatically different from the whole as we typically conceive it: as something stable and abiding, with ourselves at the center. In trying to make sense of these works, not in order to reduce them to some literal statement but in order be able to grasp and inhabit them, our perspective is shifted and our very sense of reality changed. In discerning the ground of "resemblance" (what have nineteenth-century scalphunters to do with the contemporary crisis? What does the white cabin on the beach evoke? Why do these things seem *right*?) we are educated to that ground, and to the fact that there *is* such a ground, that reality—in the only humanly meaningful sense—is such that this is how we must come to know it.

These authors' ideas and visions are of course not authoritative, nor is this the only way that the themes they address could be imagined or dramatized. But in the effort to attribute sense to their works, we are referred to our experience and our educated intuitions. We draw on these and test what literature presents against them, and on the other hand test our own previous manner of comprehending our experience against these new visions, and perhaps find that they allow a greater comprehensiveness, if also a more disturbing one.

Thus the final implication of the dissertation is the need for an ongoing practice of reading, and reading of this kind: not for the extraction of meaning but to make us attend to those realities to which literary works refer us. There is, obviously, much more to be said than I have been able to say about the conditions of humanity as revealed through apocalyptic works—more that would emerge from the consideration of other works, of more contemporary works that dealt with the ever more pressing ecological crisis and other material and nonmaterial threats to the human. This ongoing practice of reading is a matter of widening and deepening consciousness but perhaps most fundamentally a matter of direction. The point is not just to know something but to be continually reoriented, made aware of a different ground of judgment, of something called "humanity," which we only have some chance of preserving if we come to a far deeper understanding than we yet have of what it is and what threatens it. The imperative of reading is the imperative to *make humanity conscious*—to articulate and therefore to bring to consciousness—to bring into being—what humanity is, which would maybe allow it to be something else. Even a conscious humanity would be something different from an unconscious one, and would perhaps—if anything can—make it possible to tell a different story of ourselves.

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