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"Things happen to you they happen": Cormac McCarthy, Morality and Neo-Naturalism

While certain critics have noted particular affinities between Cormac McCarthy's writing and that of earlier generations of American naturalists, that element of his novels has rarely been granted sustained attention. In general, critics have identified only a relatively loose determinism in novels such as *Outer Dark* (1968), *Blood Meridian* (1985) and *The Crossing* (1994). McCarthy's post-9/11 novels, *No Country for Old Men* (2005) and *The Road* (2006), require a reconsideration of the way in which his work relates to naturalism. Elements in these novels suggest that a more clearly deterministic naturalism has become increasingly significant in McCarthy's work. This essay offers a perspective on McCarthy's increased engagement with naturalism in these works, and the wider ethical and political implications of this development. Beginning with a commentary on naturalism, and its manifestation in America, we then consider the form's resurgence in twenty-first-century American culture. After a brief survey of McCarthy's relationship to naturalism in his twentieth-century work, the essay concludes with a closer examination of naturalist tendencies in *No Country* and *The Road*.

Naturalism, American Naturalism and Neo-Naturalism

In its literary form, naturalism emerged in the late nineteenth century as a mode of writing which purported to enable the author to conduct an experiment into how human lives are governed by internal and external forces. Émile Zola is the figure most fully associated with the emergence of the form in terms of its carefully considered philosophical principles, which demanded that the author withdraw from his/her creation once an initial scenario is constructed, allowing deterministic forces to decide the characters' fortunes. With regard to his early novel *Thérèse Raquin* (1868), for example, Zola declares that in constructing the two main characters, he "set [him]self certain problems and solved them for the interest of the

thing" (1962: 20). If this sounds as though Zola is advocating that artists disavow control over their creations, then this is at least supported by a sincerely held belief in the opportunities to discover elements of human behaviour granted by the contemporary sciences. In 'The Experimental Novel', Zola argues that naturalist writers must,

> bring into our studies of nature and man the decisive tool of the experimental method. In one word, we should operate on the characters, the passions, on the human and social data, in the same way that the chemist and the physicist operate on inanimate beings, and as the psychologist operates on living beings. Determinism dominates everything. It is scientific investigation, it is experimental reasoning. (1965: 277)

Zola thus attempts nothing less than to reorient literature away from romanticism, in favour of a strictly scientific form of experimentation into the deterministic underpinnings of the universe in general, and human behaviour in particular.

One key component of both European and American naturalism is thus their basis in a deterministic understanding of the universe, which produces a conception of humans who are able to exercise, at best, only highly circumscribed free will. In naturalism, this often manifests as a highly pessimistic – sometimes nihilistic – worldview: protagonists of naturalism are typically dominated or overwhelmed by forces greater than themselves and outside their control. American naturalism has often been understood as less fully committed to a mechanistically deterministic universe than its European counterpart. This is partly because of its basis in a cultural formation produced from a different set of industrial and social circumstances, alongside more simple resistance to the idea that European naturalist doctrines translate straightforwardly into American culture. Eric Carl Link, for example, observes that "Zola's strict rejection of romanticism, his call for purely objective scientific documentation and observation, and his positivism do not characterize much naturalistic

narrative, especially in America" (2004: 7). This is maybe overstating American naturalism's disavowal of the scientific method and its commitment to a deterministic worldview, especially as it discounts the differences between the several periodic revivals of American naturalism. And so while nineteenth- and twentieth-century forms of American naturalism were less committed to determinism, a characteristic in sympathy with its openness to the incorporation of other discourses and forms, determinism has nevertheless always been a strong component of the form, even in America. Indeed, more recent resurgent forms of naturalism in American are arguably more committed to determinism than any form of naturalism, European or American, since Zola. This most recent resurgence – which has influenced American artistic production in the period between the events of September 11th, 2001, and the election of Donald Trump as President – arguably seems more deterministic as it reflects a sense that in neoliberal America individuals' choices are diminished, and that behaviour is thus determined.[1] This increased level of determinism is also significant given another key implication underpinning this essay: namely, that if determinism means characters lack free will, then they are not responsible for their actions, and therefore cannot be held morally to account. This is a crucial observation in terms of the ideology of twenty-first-century American naturalism; as discussed below, there are particular reasons deriving from the political and cultural landscape of twenty-first-century America for individuals to be reluctant to assume personal responsibility.

It is necessary to ask what significance the particular characteristics of American naturalism might hold for McCarthy's relationship with the form, and how these manifest in his work. Firstly, we should consider the influence of the romance form on the American novel tradition, which from Richard Chase's mid-twentieth-century criticism onwards has been identified as more closely allied to romanticism than the classic realist text of nineteenth-century Europe. This is also true of American naturalism, which has been mapped

onto romanticism just as fully as it has onto realism. Tellingly, this is a link made precisely in the context of McCarthy's work; Stephen Frye, one of the most enduring and dedicated of McCarthy's critics, employs the term "romantic naturalism" (2007: 48) in order to describe *The Crossing*. Key components of this romantic naturalism in McCarthy and elsewhere are a reduced commitment both to detailed realist representation and to determinism, otherwise crucial elements of the naturalism of Zola and the Europeans. In McCarthy's twentieth-century novels, where naturalism is generally a less prominent discourse than in the later works, it indeed tends to be subordinate to mythic, symbolic, or anti-realist elements more commonly identified with romanticism. A realist determinism is, at least in these earlier works, clearly a lesser concern.

American naturalism's weaker philosophical rigour – especially in terms of determinism – in comparison to the theoretical zeal of Zola and the Europeans, has further implications. One result is that American naturalism has been, as Keith Newlin describes it, "an adaptive genre" (5), more amenable to assimilation alongside other forms, discourses, ideologies, and philosophies. This looser commitment to determinism meant that American naturalism could be incorporated within other forms – Newlin, for example, foregrounds its close relationship with melodrama – and accommodated alongside other ideas. American naturalism thus becomes a more hybrid form, where determinism is seen in tandem with other key elements, such as "reformism, sensationalism, and persistent assertion of human free will" (Howard 40). Consequently, naturalism in America has a proven longevity compared to its European counterpart. This is partly because although naturalism has its roots in a particular cultural moment – most notably the late nineteenth-century emergence of evolutionary theory – in America in particular it has itself evolved and adapted to other circumstances, producing periodic resurgences of literary interest in its forms and ideas. Often, these resurgences can be partly attributed to artists' perception of "living in a perilous

time, a period of change and uncertainty …. Naturalism is a literary form that struggles to accommodate that sense of discomfort and danger" (Howard ix). If this is true, then given the vicissitudes of life in the United States in the early twenty-first century the re-emergence of naturalism should not only be no surprise, but actually expected.

If we accept that twenty-first-century America has witnessed a resurgence of what might be termed neo-naturalism, it is necessary to account for the cultural conditions that have helped to bring this about. Firstly, one should be cautious regarding naturalism's validity in the world of the late-twentieth and twenty-first centuries. After all, having learned lessons from postmodernism we might be sceptical regarding not only the capacity of language to reflect, rather than construct, reality, but also both biological and environmental determinism. That "environment" is now understood as a socially constructed notion, for example, means that naturalist art needs to relate to the late capitalist world in an arguably more sophisticated way compared to how it engaged with late nineteenth-century industrialised America. Nevertheless, particular tenets of naturalism are strongly detectable in a significant group of American works from the first decades of the twenty-first century. The ideologies of these texts are highly revealing. A key element in this respect is the greatly diminished capacity for free will in neo-naturalism, which is frequently more deterministic – indeed, more congruent with the doctrines of Zola – than earlier forms of American naturalism. This may be attributable to a number of cultural conditions, such as the perceived lack of agency endured by the majority of the American population in a society driven by neoliberal economics. Another factor may be the way in which the subject of a deterministic universe is not free to choose, and is therefore popularly taken to be absolved from moral judgement. This is crucial to the early twenty-first-century American social, political, and cultural context, wherein, post-9/11 we witness the construction of a sense of collective trauma which was shaped by the Bush administration and mass media into a sense of shared

victimhood (see Gibbs 120-5). This process enables the ideological construction of an acted upon and victimised America, therefore blameless for actions it takes as a consequence. In terms of foreign policy these actions include the "War on Terror", extensive and continuing forays into the Middle East, and the use of drones as mechanisms of terror. Domestic measures include the curbing of civil liberties in laws such as the Patriot Act, and neoliberal economic policies producing ever starker inequalities of wealth. For perpetrators or supporters of acts such as these, it may be useful to conceive of the self as acting in response to more or less overwhelming forces, as a means of abnegating moral responsibility. It is this essay's argument that such a stance (or a critique of this position) is detectable in the neo-naturalist cultural production of this period.

Broadly stated, there is a significant body of cultural production which engages in various ways with a political stance which seeks to position twenty-first-century Americans – as individuals and collectively – as victims, prey to overwhelming exterior forces, and therefore devoid of moral responsibility. Alongside McCarthy's stronger relationship with naturalism during this period, naturalist fiction, or works containing prominent naturalist elements, includes texts as diverse as Philipp Meyer's *American Rust*, Annie Proulx's *Barkskins*, plus a number of her short stories, Lionel Shriver's *Big Brother* and *The Mandibles*, Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America*, Paul Auster's *Man in the Dark*, Jess Walter's *The Financial Lives of the Poets*, and Dave Eggers' *Your Fathers, Where Are They? And the Prophets, Do They Live Forever?*[2] Somewhat simplifying, for reasons of clarity, these overtly deterministic neo-naturalist texts, featuring protagonists who are the victims of forces beyond their control and therefore morally blameless for their actions, strike a particular attitude towards this ideology of victimhood, depending in large part on the level of sympathy the text encourages towards its protagonist(s). Such texts thus offer either tacit support or a critique of a wider American self-conception as victim, depending on the

political stance of the writer or, in the case of films and TV, the production team and company involved. This diverse array of cultural products includes McCarthy's two major twenty-first-century novels, *No Country* and *The Road*.[3] These novels can clearly be conceived as part of this broader neo-naturalist trend – albeit with a complex political relationship to the form – especially their incorporation of a more overtly deterministic framework than McCarthy's earlier forays into naturalism. Before examining the two novels, however, we should trace naturalism-oriented criticism of McCarthy's earlier work, and consider the ways in which these texts draw, albeit less overtly, on ideas and discourses associated with naturalism. Certainly, a number of critical interpretations note naturalism as an element in McCarthy's writing, even though it is not generally understood as dominant. If naturalism is usually seen in tandem with other forms and discourses in American writing, this is strongly the case in McCarthy's work, where it sits alongside, for example, Gnosticism, Nietzschean materialism, and existential Christianity. It is a typical move for critics to observe in each of McCarthy's novels this complex blend of discourses, forms, registers, and ideologies, Frye perhaps putting it best when referring to McCarthy as "a consummate aesthetic alchemist" (2013: 10).

McCarthy and Naturalism

For most critics, naturalism indeed tends to be one element among many in McCarthy's work, even if it is explicitly noted.[4] In his twentieth-century work, most critics agree, McCarthy produces hybrid texts, of which naturalism is frequently a significant component. Besides those naturalistic elements previously identified by critics, there are several others in McCarthy's twentieth-century work. His settings, for example, are archetypally naturalist: "primitive, wild, or stripped-down environments or landscapes" where society and civilisation barely, if at all, exist (Link 2013: 154). As in classic naturalism, humans are highly evolved animals, part of a natural world which is nevertheless implacable and cruel.

These environments are pertinent to all McCarthy's texts, but especially the setting of *The Road*, where humankind most vividly reverts to animal. In these unforgiving settings McCarthy's protagonists generally endure a downward narrative trajectory of degeneration familiar from earlier works of naturalism. These characters' striking lack of interiority may also be taken as a signal of naturalist influence. Aside from Sherriff Bell in *No Country*, and sporadic instances elsewhere in his oeuvre which include the Man in *The Road*, McCarthy does not allow access to the consciousness of his protagonists, despite the fact that his narrators, being invariably heterodiegetic, are potentially omniscient. As a result, the reader is more likely to understand characters' actions as being explicitly motivated by unwilled factors, especially those external to the self, that is, environmentally determined. As also reflected in their general inarticulacy and absence of a capacity for ethical contemplation, protagonists of McCarthy's novels, such as Culla Holme in *Outer Dark* or Lester Ballard in *Child of God*, are as archetypally naturalist as his settings. They are, moreover, almost exclusively from poor backgrounds, and subject to overwhelming forces and sequences of events outside their control, in other words, very much the direct descendants of the hapless characters of earlier generations of naturalism.

As an example, we might consider *The Crossing*, a novel whose sections concerning the wolf evoke Jack London's work. The behaviour of the protagonist Billy Parham demonstrates McCarthy's customary absence of explanatory interiority. Thus the motivation for his three journeys south across the border is vague and at best implied, rather than explicitly stated. One key effect of this is that Billy seems constantly more often acted upon than exercising agency, or at least this is how the reader perceives him, because of this lack of interiority. To be more precise regarding this issue of absent interiority, we might ask whether this is the purpose of McCarthy's literary technique of not dramatizing consciousness. That is, one of the key reasons McCarthy in general refuses to allow the

narrator access to his protagonists' thoughts and motivations, is to reinforce the sense that the characters he constructs are lacking in agency, and these acted-upon subjects, redolent of classic naturalism, are at the mercy of an implacable and overwhelming universe.

No Country for Old Men

The existence of naturalism as a discourse in McCarthy's work is clearly well established, but this essay's key question in relation to *No Country* and *The Road* is whether there is a change – in character, orientation, and strength – in McCarthy's use of naturalism post-9/11. That is, while deprived and damaged characters are an essential element in McCarthy's fiction from *The Orchard Keeper* (1965) on, it seems that the recent novels are constructed more overtly as experiments into the behaviour of humans confronted by dire circumstances. Firstly, it is not controversial to observe that the whole narrative arc and the key themes in *No Country* are philosophically linked to naturalism. To recall the earlier point regarding interiority, for example, this clearly applies to Moss in *No Country*, where it is never explicitly stated why he returns with water to the dying Mexican, an action which leads ultimately – in classic naturalistic fashion – to his downfall. Although the reader likely infers that Moss performs this act because of ethical impulses, this is never stated, and it is impossible to confirm, as we don't have access to his consciousness. As with other protagonists where McCarthy allows no interiority, Moss thus becomes something of a blank slate, apparently more acted upon or driven by impulse than enjoying active agency. This has implications for readers keen to make ethical judgements regarding characters, since as philosopher David Hume observed, intention is important in judging the morality others' actions. When we praise or condemn the morality of particular actions we are actually evaluating "the motives that produced them, and considering the actions as signs or indications of certain principles in the mind and temper" (qtd. in Norton 161). Specifically, Moss's lack of interiority, as with other of McCarthy's protagonists, prevents the reader from reaching moral judgements regarding his behaviour.

While *No Country* draws on elements of naturalism employed in McCarthy's earlier work, these elements are more prominent, with a particular exploration of the relationship between determinism and morality. This preoccupation emerges through the novel's focus on chance and fate as determining factors, which are embodied most prominently by Anton Chigurh. With his coin flips that determine whether a victim is to live or die, Chigurh ostensibly becomes this novel's agent of implacable determinism. The motif of the coin, Chigurh's chosen instrument of fate, , notwithstanding that it echoes and amplifies similar motifs in *Blood Meridian* and *All the Pretty Horses*, reinforces the novel's allusions to money and finance, and via them to the specific period in which it is set, at the start of Reaganism. Andrew Hoberek observes that this period setting encourages us to read *No Country* "as a fabular prehistory of the rise of the contemporary right" (490), an interpretation supported by the otherwise jarring scenes set in the corporate office block. Amongst other things, Chigurh's coin, and the preoccupation with money and finance help to reinforce the suggestion that rather than exclusively representing an exploration of universal evil, *No Country* is also rooted in a specific historical period, something, as noted above, almost universally true of naturalist fiction.

Partly through Chigurh's use of the coin, determinism often manifests in *No Country* as blind fate, a seemingly overwhelming force which strips characters of agency. This is a tendentious way of understanding determinism, which is not – as Zola was keen to observe – to be equated with fatalism. While determinism provides the conditions for certain phenomena and consequent behaviour, fatalism for Zola is inescapable: "the moment that we can act, and that we do act, on the determining cause of phenomena – by modifying their surroundings, for example – we cease to be fatalists" (1965: 281). In other words, determinism envisages phenomena having the potential to determine behaviour in specified ways, but this is not to be confused with the inexorable teleology of fate. In *No Country*,

however, determinism and fatalism become blurred and conflated in ways which have profound implications for readers' judgement of characters' actions. For example, late in the novel Moss claims to have been dragged into a situation outside his control (again, because of the one act of returning to give water to the dying Mexican): "Three weeks ago I was a law abidin citizen. Workin a nine to five job…. Things happen to you they happen. They dont ask first. They dont require your permission" (220). This shows most clearly the effect of McCarthy's denying characters interiority and thus motivation. In other words, although Moss can be said to have taken the decision to return to aid the Mexican – however much he felt compelled to do so – because of the way in which the text absents interiority and therefore agency from the scenario, Moss is presented as being acted upon, from which it is but a short step to the impression of overwhelmed victimhood.

Chigurh's position in this scenario is more complicated, on the one hand apparently acting as the novel's mysterious agent of implacable determinism, and on the other constantly insisting that his potential victims exercised choice in settling their own fate before they even encountered him. The novel's most conspicuous conflation of determinism and fatalism occurs in Chigurh's utterances, as revealed when one appreciates that the coin tosses which Chigurh presents as deterministic are in fact nothing of the sort. That is, the link between the originating cause – the coin toss – and the consequential action is wholly artificial, and existentially chosen by Chigurh. His presentation of the coin toss as stripping him of agency and therefore responsibility is thus entirely spurious. In his final confrontation with Moss's wife, Carla Jean, for example, Chigurh tells her, "Every moment in your life is a turning and every one a choosing. Somewhere you made a choice. All followed to this. The accounting is scrupulous. The shape is drawn" (259). Ostensibly, there is a very curious contradiction here between (limited) choice, chance and a non-negotiable, inevitable fate that the choices produce. Chigurh asserts that an originating choice determines characters' fates (this is

repeated in the scene where he confronts and then kills Carson Wells, the hitman assigned to deal with him). Thus he continues with Carla Jean: "When I came into your life your life was over. It had a beginning, a middle, and an end. This is the end. You can say that things could have turned out differently. That they could have been some other way. But what does that mean? They are not some other way. They are this way" (260). Through such reasoning – which is highly dubious at best – Chigurh is able to absolve himself of an active role and thus moral blame in the murders he perpetrates. In order to do so, however, he has had to conflate a destiny that he has in fact decided with factors that determined decisions a character made previously, which is clearly a questionable ideological manoeuvre.

There is therefore a problem when critics have taken Chigurh's reasoning at face value rather than, as James Wood witheringly dismissed it, "high-flown nonsense." With regard to Chigurh's refusal to call the coin for the gas station proprietor he is threatening, for example, Timothy Parrish, seems to concede Chigurh's insistence that "the man's fate is his to make" (73), as if Chigurh can legitimately employ an existential discourse in a deterministic world. Lydia Cooper is more sceptical of Chigurh's obfuscating rhetoric, describing how his "'principles' involve his absolute adherence to seemingly arbitrary promises, like a victim's life depending on a coin toss, and thus reflect Chigurh's allegiance to a world of rules that does not mesh with the rules of most civilized human societies" (2009: 48). While this suggests that although Chigurh's moral code is repugnant it is nevertheless coherent and consistent, Cooper does subsequently note how Chigurh constantly "lies and manipulates to accomplish his work" (2009: 51).

Frye is the critic who examines Chigurh's pronouncements at greatest length, and his reading is thus worth considering in detail. Certainly, Frye seems initially unconvinced by Chigurh's sophistry, describing it as "an inexplicable set of principles grounded in a vaguely articulated deterministic philosophy. Chigurh contends that his free choice to kill is mitigated

by an elaborate system of cause and effect that renders individual agency largely inconsequential" (2009: 156). In other words, Frye notes the inconsistency between the existentialist and deterministic discourses Chigurh switches between, and that this may even signal his "presumed insanity" (2009:160). It is therefore surprising that Frye also declares that Chigurh's "worldview is well considered and philosophically constituted" (Frye 2009:160), as particularly revealed, Frye suggests, in the final confrontation with Wells. This overlooks, however, the instrumental way in which Chigurh appropriates particular elements of determinism and distorts them into a form of fatalism in order to justify his actions.

Indeed, Frye eventually notes just how perverse is Chigurh's articulation of his theory of ineluctable fate based on earlier choices, since for Chigurh, "the fact that [he] could act out of free will, choosing not to kill, is from his point of view a comforting illusion devoid of truth" (2009:161). In other words, Chigurh performs a move now becoming familiar to us, whereby he absolves himself from potential accusations of moral blame by denying his own agency, using a mode of fatalism disguised as determinism. Chigurh's own disingenuousness regarding choice is revealed in the conversation with Wells, where he refers to his having been previously "hurt", and how this changed him to the extent that it is possible his philosophy regarding fate can be traced to this moment (173). As elsewhere, Chigurh posits himself as someone acted upon, as a victim of circumstances, not responsible for his actions. In contrast to later dealings with his victims it is noticeable that there is no reference in this scene to how his choices led him to his "hurt". Chigurh's argument in the scene with Carla Jean is similarly riddled with inconsistencies, not least since it entails settling upon an arbitrary starting point for the determinants which allegedly produced her fate, as well as discounting factors which may have determined that initial choice. Frye points out that Chigurh misleadingly "presents the coin toss as the one chance to chart the sequence differently and preserve [Carla Jean's] life. From his perspective, he is merely an actor in a

rigidly determined historical process" (2009:161). Thus Chigurh is simultaneously merely the agent of a force greater than himself, and yet he did not have to present Carla Jean with another chance, but in fact chose to do so. He thereby again speciously conflates determinism (as fatalism) with existentialism. During this scene although Chigurh accepts his role – conceived as largely passive – in the events, the situation overall is alleged to have originated in Carla Jean's choices. This is a judgement whose harshness is only exacerbated when one considers that it is actually her husband's choices that are predominantly responsible for her predicament. Through these fallacious pronouncements, the killer uses faux-deterministic arguments as an ideological tool to abnegate responsibility and deny his own agency. By interpreting a deterministic universe as a fatalistic one, Chigurh neatly places himself in a position entirely free of moral responsibility, thus sidestepping conventional western moral perspectives which would condemn his acts as evil.

To clarify what is at stake here, we might compare Chigurh's position to a particular contemporary context, specifically the renewed interest in the "Just World Hypothesis" (also known as the "Just World Fallacy"), a psychological concept concerning cognitive bias that encourages observers to blame the victims of particular events for their own fate, on the basis that the universe rewards and punishes fairly.[5] According to this ideology, sufferers – victims of traumatising experiences, for example – have somehow chosen the wrong path, and thereby brought their fate upon themselves. This cognitive bias is, as Claire Andre and Manuel Velasquez observe, "continually reinforced in the ubiquitous fairy tales, fables, comic books, cop shows and other morality tales of our culture, in which good is always rewarded and evil punished." Clearly, the Just World Hypothesis is entirely consistent with the perverse conflation of fatalism and determinism espoused by Chigurh. The ideology of Chigurh, which blames the victim for a fate of which he is the mere instrument, sits comfortably alongside other popular twenty-first-century neoliberal demands aimed at, for

example, justifying the shrinking of America's already limited social security system in the name of rugged individualism. In other words, neoliberal policies aimed at limiting welfare implicitly embrace the same underlying ideology as the Just World Hypothesis, that is, a belief in a fair universe inhabited by a populace deserving of their fates. Understanding Chigurh's ethical code as a version of the Just World Hypothesis enables us to see more clearly the ideological uses to which the latter might be put, in terms of morally justifying heinous actions by placing the responsibility for such acts upon their victims. According to this interpretation, Chigurh's embracing of a universe in which he is a mere agent, confirming the fate of others who have made their free choices, is an act of sheer opportunism. His worldview perverts determinism into a form of fatalism as a means of shifting the responsibility for the murders he perpetrates onto his victims. That the Just World Hypothesis is espoused using such sophistry, and by an arguably sociopathic character, should perhaps encourage us to read *No Country*, in part, as a critique of such ideologies.

Besides using the Just World Hypothesis, it should be noted that the peculiar juxtaposition of existential choice, determinism, and fatalism, can be reconciled through other forms of doublethink familiar in an American context. The ideologies of American Exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny, for example, similarly enable an American self-conception that reconciles elements of aggressive action and agency through deterministic thinking. On a more local level, under ideologies of American Exceptionalism the United States grants itself agency, while simultaneously locating its citizens as blameless victims. These are ideologies granting the US a kind of special licence, for example, to carry out aggressive acts in the name of self-preservation or the extension of democratic values. Such a perspective is reflected in the position of Chigurh in *No Country*, but also echoes through *The Road*. Looking further back historically, and appreciating the roots of these ideas in Puritanism and Calvinism, allows us to appreciate how notions of predestination were

reconciled with apparently contradictory worldviews, such as free will, to carry out "Godly" acts. In this sense, the kind of non-Manichean doublethink employed by Chigurh in *No Country* is less riven with contradiction than a non-American context may lead us to think. Ideologies such as American Exceptionalism are important in the twenty-first-century context of McCarthy's employment of naturalism, since to varying degrees they share the political will to resist moral responsibility through positing – when it is convenient to the self to do so – a deterministic universe. Drawing on ideologies such as these, and the Just World Fallacy, and working them through a contemporary naturalist form, enables McCarthy to explore contemporary American attitudes towards moral responsibility. One must constantly bear in mind, however, that Chigurh's fatalism is, to reiterate, a misrepresentation of determinism. While Chigurh is superficially a mouthpiece for naturalist ideologies in *No Country*, it is impossible to ignore that he misunderstands – wilfully or not – the determinism which is at naturalism's core. In this respect, *No Country* represents McCarthy's critique of those who would similarly misrepresent determinism as a way of escaping moral responsibility.

The Road

In *The Road*, determinism is again one discourse among many, including the novel's heavy religious coding, but we might also notice the changed tenor of naturalism compared to McCarthy's earlier work. Adam Mars-Jones's review described the novel as a "thought and feeling experiment," while Paul Sheehan similarly notes that "McCarthy poses a simple question: how much can be pared away from human existence for it still to qualify as 'life'?" (91) Both comments are clearly pertinent, since naturalism from Zola's "The Experimental Novel" onwards has been conceived as a form of enquiry into human behaviour, frequently, as in the case of *The Road*, pitting a subject against the overwhelming forces of the universe in order to see how much stress it can bear. *The Road* is in this sense a direct descendent of Zola's naturalist experimental doctrines, asking how much we can strip away from the world

and from its human inhabitants before they cease to be humans as we recognise them, or before they lose the will to live.

Determinism pervades this novel, where even the title (and constant references to the road within) implies straitened choices, and therefore an absence of free will. From the very beginning, elements of the narrative structure underscore the novel's emphasis on the restricted circumstances in which its protagonists dwell: "When he woke in the woods in the dark and the cold of the night he'd reach out and touch the child sleeping beside him" (1). The mode of iterative narration and the repetition of the definite article specify that these are routine occurrences, and that the protagonists are locked into particular and repetitive forms of behaviour. This opening is only reinforced by other narrative strategies, including the largely linear structure, with very occasional analepses. The narration also maintains a regular pace, with the occasional exception of a pause for some extremely detailed description, which is nevertheless a further typical feature of naturalist fiction. A concordance of the novel confirms the repetitiveness and restrictedness of the language used, both of which underline the protagonists' limited range of choices.[6] Given the extraordinarily wide vocabulary of McCarthy's other novels, this pared down language is clearly a deliberate strategy, designed to evoke the reduced circumstances endured by the Man and the Boy. Indeed, the diminution of available language – mirroring the world it describes – is even addressed, in the much-quoted passage describing an environment "shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true" (93). Language diminishes first around simple object labels, then concerning ideas, clearly demonstrating that options for humankind in the hostile environment of this novel's twilight of the Anthropocene have narrowed to a stark Sisyphean choice between suicide and a scavenged

continued existence. The novel's sparse language thus reinforces and complements the conventionally naturalistic narrative structure of the plot of decline.

Other elements reinforce McCarthy's extensive drawing on the form and content of naturalism in *The Road*. For example, the novel is replete with minutely detailed descriptions, often of ostensibly mundane items – such as the number of available bullets for the Man's pistol – which, in the harshly deterministic environment of this novel, suddenly assume life-or-death importance. The detailed descriptions of building and lighting a fire take this a stage further, not only emphasising how survival depends upon the success of this enterprise, but also thereby again specifically evoking Jack London, this time his celebrated naturalist short story, "To Build a Fire". As with that story's unnamed protagonist, the Man and Boy live in an environment wherein, "[i]f they got wet they would probably die" (14). Such small, seemingly insignificant elements become telling determinants of behaviour in this stripped-down environment. They explicitly evoke, moreover, classic texts, forms, and ideas from earlier iterations of American naturalism. The notion of the insignificant becoming significant indeed supplies a link between the two novels, thereby providing further potential illumination of McCarthy's perspective during their composition. In *No Country*, Chigurh's discourse to the shopkeeper notes that "just a coin … [n]othing special" can nevertheless become "an instrument" in the decision as to whether an encounter with Chigurh will result in fatality (57). Although the two novels thus share this classic naturalist fascination with the importance of minutiae, there is an important difference, as we shall see, between Chigurh artificially elevating this small detail and the authentic and innate life-or-death significance of such elements in *The Road*

These examples raise the question of how we should interpret McCarthy's stronger commitment to a deterministic universe in *The Road*. One important element in this regard is the apparent lack of choice facing the characters in the post-apocalyptic environment, a

feature underlined by some of these formal attributes. For example, when they approach a house which is later revealed to hold imprisoned amputees awaiting death and cannibalisation, the Boy is terrified and reluctant to go in, whereas his father insists, "We've got to find something to eat. We have no *choice*" (112, emphasis added). Later, when they discuss whether to venture into another house (this is affected by their earlier experience, and so the Boy is even more unwilling), the Man insists, "we *have to* take a look. There's *no place else to go*" (145, emphasis added). Interestingly, at this later point, choice – albeit limited – is now mapped onto a moral dichotomy: "This is it …. This is what the good guys do. They keep trying. They dont give up" (145). This is especially significant if, as is generally accepted, naturalism's deterministic universe strips agency and therefore removes a capacity for moral judgement. This exchange suggests that the furthest extent of ethical judgements in this straitened world are a kind of Hobbesian ethical egoism, or towards the more utilitarian end of Spinoza's philosophy, whereby "whatever is good is good in case it serves as a means to, or as a constituent of, perseverance in being. Bad things are bad in case they diminish or obstruct perseverance" (Youpa 243). In this case, despite their highly circumscribed free will, the Man insists that a moral imperative nevertheless pertains, albeit in this case with the ulterior motive of persuading the Boy to comply. After all, as Spinoza concedes, for beings lacking in freedom – and the Man and the Boy are perfect examples – just remaining alive "long enough to become free, or more free, may override the value of a particular act of honesty" (Youpa 255).

Later still, when deciding whether to risk eating some jars of preserved vegetables that they have found, the reader encounters this telling exchange:

> What do you think? the man said.
>
> I *think* we've got no *choice*. (221, emphasis added)

In other words, there is a limit to the determinism here: the Boy has the agency to consider, to think, almost in fact to choose, that they have no choice. The point here is that this is a novel which carefully considers notion of choice, but in which there are clear restrictions upon it, and elements in the environment that at times clearly determine behaviour. Moreover, the lack of choice is suggested to have clear ethical implications which draw on a tradition of naturalist fiction whereby readers are not positioned to pass moral judgement upon characters. Other perspectives might be brought to this passage to demonstrate its importance to the novel. A Frankfurt School reading, for example, would interpret the Boy's deciding that they have the freedom to recognise that they have no choice as evoking the false aura of choices offered by neoliberal capitalism. Again, this usefully ties the novel into the specific context of neoliberal capitalism, where choices are permitted but within severely restricted limits, and often with no truly desirable outcome. Neoliberalism indeed proffers such a doublethink regarding choice: for example, the free market operates similarly to the Just World Hypothesis, ideologically positing itself as fair and natural, while the individual is by contrast responsible for their choices. In reality, as laid starkly bare in the world of *The Road*, the system is so loaded and the alternatives so limited or undesirable, as to be not real choices but determined behaviour. On the other hand, acknowledged limits on freedom can be useful for the system to exonerate itself, as those in positions of power present themselves as being shackled into making inevitable, determined foreign and domestic policy choices, such as, respectively, overseas wars and economic austerity measures. And so while any semblance of a political system has been extinguished in the milieu of *The Road*, the ideological mystifications regarding connected phenomena such as the falsification of choice and moral responsibility survive from the neoliberal era in which the novel was written.

We should also consider this issue of morality insofar as it is affected by the degree of choice exercised in the Man's strenuous efforts to protect the Boy, sometimes taking the most

extreme measures. This should be extended, moreover, to consider *The Road* in the light of early twenty-first-century American discourse on the family. As a number of commentators have observed, most notably Richard Gray in *After the Fall: American Literature Since 9/11*, one widespread reaction to the events of 9/11 was a strong retrenchment of family values in the United States, in part as opposition to a perceived, if indistinct, threat. This family discourse is strongly linked to right-wing ideologies of religious fundamentalism in contemporary America, and thus reflects back into the religious imagery in the novel itself. Sheehan observes that the characterisation of the Man reflects this religious fundamentalism, since on the one hand, inwardly, he is Christ-like in caring for the Boy, while on the other, directed outwardly, he is vengeful and vindictive, an Old Testament God with regard to anyone who threatens them (103-5). The Man tells the Boy, for example, "[m]y job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God. I will kill anyone who touches you" (80). The Man's hypocrisy is apparent here, in that his purportedly divine but actually self-appointed duty of care apparently involves defying the Biblical Commandment not to kill. The man thus creates a false sense of purpose for himself, a point also noted by Tammis Thomas, who believes that the Man's positioning of the Boy as divine, and therefore of himself as defender of divinity, is an ideological means to justify his actually selfish actions as altruistic and loving, positing himself as a "Good Guy". This is significant insofar as the Man's protective mission derives, according to his perspective, from the necessities of circumstance. He acts as he does based on what he perceives to be determining forces, and though this a perception based – unlike Chigurh's specious use of deterministic discourse – on an act of good faith, it nevertheless significantly problematizes the Man's all-consuming protectiveness. In this way, he uses the same justifications for violent behaviour used by the US administration at the time McCarthy was writing this novel, those noted in *States of Exception* by Giorgio Agamben, wherein regimes deliberately operate in a state of emergency in order to curtail

civil liberties at home and conduct war abroad. The Man – like the US government – is able to plead special circumstances in order to present his actions in a more favourable – indeed, divinely inspired – light.

During course of the novel the Man kills twice to protect himself and the Boy, and is also merciless in his treatment of a man who attempts to steal their supplies, again evoking an "eye for an eye" Old Testament philosophy. He initially leaves this thief naked and shivering, before the Boy compels them at least to return his ragged clothing. The Boy is finally alienated by his father's behaviour, so that when the latter asserts, "I wasnt going to kill him," the Boy mutters, "But we did kill him" (278). *The Road* has divided critics in terms of its position with regard to the family, with a number of critics keen to take the Man's avowed protectiveness at face value. Notwithstanding the admittedly perilous world of this novel, however, the Man's vindictive treatment of any outsiders illustrates more clearly the dangers of extending isolationist "family values" rhetoric. This is never simplistic, however, since the insularity of the family is not straightforwardly opposed to its alternative, communities, given that community in *The Road* encompasses everything from the apparently benign group the Boy ultimately joins, to bands of marauding cannibals. In this respect, Cooper's reading is useful, since she not only observes that the Boy is more outward-looking ("other-focused" [2011: 233]) than the father, as the description above of the father's Old Testament attitude towards others suggests, but goes on to describe how, "[a]cting out ethical impulses, the boy will create a world in which ethical response is possible. Because the boy subsequently finds others, the narrative suggests that he is capable of finding what his father is not: goodness in other people" (2011: 233). The novel suggests that the Man is thus using deterministic elements in their existence as a means to portray his actions – no matter how apparently cruel – as determined, forced, and therefore either laudable or beyond moral judgement. The palpable if limited opposite effect of the Boy's innocence and his occasional objections are

crucial in casting doubt in the reader's mind regarding the Man's violently defensive behaviour. On the other hand, comparing Chigurh with the Man reveals the subtle variations in how McCarthy engages with the deterministic discourse of naturalism. In both novels a male character uses a deterministic justification for violent events. In *No Country*, however, Chigurh deliberately employs a form of fatalism erroneously masquerading as determinism, moreover as a means to justify innate violent sociopathic tendencies. In *The Road*, by contrast, the Man is apparently acting in good faith, and is motivated by a desperate need to protect his son from demonstrably real threats. The deeply provocative similarity of the result in both novels, suggesting that regardless of intention either course may lead to extreme violence, demonstrates the complexity of McCarthy's engagement with the conventions and ideologies of naturalism.

While it may seem peculiar to be discussing moral structures in the context of an ostensibly deterministic narrative, the question of ethics in these dire circumstances is nevertheless something continually pursued in *The Road*. Since this question of moral culpability is an issue the novel persistently raises in relation to the Man, we should consider further his simplistically Manichean ethical code, which the Boy absorbs, albeit far from unquestioningly. The Man tries to divide the remaining world population into "good guys" and "bad guys", and it is important to recall that the novel was written at a time when the American president, George W. Bush was doing very much the same thing. Even well before the Man's cruel treatment of the thief, he kills a cannibalistic predator, prompting the Boy to ask, "Are we still the good guys?" (81) Revealingly, when posed questions such as these by the Boy, the Man typically supplies evasive and/or simplistic responses, in a manner reminiscent of President Bush's discourse responding to the international situation in the wake of the 9/11 attacks.[7] The naturalist milieu of the novel is again crucial here, raising the question of the extent to which the protagonists' actions are determined by those harshest of

environments in which they dwell, and therefore the extent to which they are morally culpable for those actions. The key point here is that some post-9/11 neo-naturalist texts tacitly endorse a discourse which positions America as a victim, and thus valorise conservative ideologies including family values discourse (for example the TV serial *The Shield*, or other narratives of the beset white male such as Jess Walter's novel, *The Financial Lives of the Poets*). *The Road*, I would suggest, trains a broader perspective on the actors and the acted upon, and thus produces an arguably more convincing picture of global victimhood in the twenty-first century.

In this respect, finally, we should consider some of *The Road*'s descriptions of the world and its remaining inhabitants, although it should first be noted that this world is prefigured in *No Country*. Much of the earlier novel takes place in similarly barren landscape, and Moss's early experiences, as he returns to the now dead Mexican, lead him to feel "like something in a jar" (27), that is, an experimental subject, an experience which only intensifies as the novel progresses. Characters are, in classic naturalistic fashion, similarly confined and dehumanised in *The Road*. Early on, for example, we encounter "[c]reedless shells of men tottering down the causeways like migrants in a feverland. The frailty of everything revealed at last" (28). Such a conception of humanity is reinforced when we witness the reduction of human beings to mere animal bodies, for example those which the Man and Boy find in the back of a lorry: "Human bodies. Sprawled in every attitude. Dried and shrunken in their rotted clothes" (48), or the bestial man from the gang of cannibals who confronts them: "Eyes collared in cups of grime and deeply sunk. Like an animal inside a skull looking out the eyeholes" (65). Still later, our protagonists encounter the aforementioned amputee-prisoners: "Huddled against the back wall were naked people, male and female, all trying to hide, shielding their faces with their hands. On the mattress lay a man with his legs gone to the hip and the stumps of them blackened and burnt" (116). This episode, where a band of cannibals

is keeping other humans prisoner in a basement and hacking off pieces of them for food, sets up the clearest victimiser-victim dichotomy in the novel. Once more, the specificity encouraged by *The Road*'s naturalist form encourages us to relate such episodes to the post-9/11 and neo-colonial context of the novel's conception.[8] In this respect, *The Road*'s perspective on victimhood is strikingly global. Mark Steven's essay, comparing of the abject and animalistic condition of the humans in the post-apocalyptic setting of *The Road* to Giorgio Agamben's notion of *homo sacer*, the utterly dispossessed and disposable human subject, is useful here. Such an understanding of the remaining humans in *The Road* – or, indeed, some of the Mexican characters in *No Country* – works, certainly, on an allegorical level, but one also congruent with naturalism. The hopeless prisoners and other destitute humans of these novels are the equivalent of the contemporary so-called developing world's excluded, the *homo sacer*. Victimhood is not, as is often the case in contemporary American culture, confined to Americans. Instead, the predators, and here we should include even the Man and Boy, are ourselves, the implicated subjects and beneficiaries of capitalist imperialism. "The country … looted, ransacked, ravaged. Rifled of every crumb" (136-7) is perhaps closer to ours than we initially realise.

The ideological implications of McCarthy's engagement with naturalism in his twenty-first-century novels are fascinating, both in relation to the other discourses in his novels and to the broader contemporary American culture. Certainly, with regard to the question posed earlier, regarding whether there is a change in McCarthy's engagement with naturalism post-9/11, this essay has suggested that this is significantly the case. Indeed, both novels supply examples of McCarthy testing particular limits of naturalist philosophy dating back to Zola's writing. *No Country*, through the character of Chigurh, explores the extent to which existentialism might be reconciled with determinism, ultimately finding that this is not possible unless Zola's warnings against conflating determinism and fatalism are ignored. In

The Road, McCarthy constructs the most inhospitable environment possible in order to test just how far a naturalist experiment into human behaviour in extreme circumstances might be extended. In both novels, predominantly deterministic scenarios are used to frame key questions regarding moral issues pertinent to the period. In *No Country*, through Chigurh's illogical and hypocritical employment of a fatalistic notion of determinism, we see a critique of neoliberal notions of self-reliance and responsibility. Since this neoliberal discourse is espoused by a sociopathic assassin, it is perhaps wisest to treat it with scepticism. As for *The Road*, as we have seen, its attitude towards the family and to the dispossessed *homo sacer* places it convincingly as another post-9/11 American text that is more inclined to use neo-naturalism to critique than to endorse contemporary American self-conceptions, and neoliberal macro-politics.

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NOTES

[1] Reasons for taking 9/11 as a starting point to this period become clear during the course of this essay. Using Trump's election as an endpoint is simply a provisional measure.

[2] The resurgence in naturalism is also strongly reflected in the visual media of the period, including the films *There Will Be Blood*, *A History of Violence*, and *All Is Lost* (and, of course, the film adaptations of McCarthy's two novels discussed herein), and prominent television series such as *The Shield*, *The Wire*, *Dexter*, and *Breaking Bad*/*Better Call Saul*.

[3] *The Sunset Limited* is omitted for reasons of length, but also because its form is questionably novelistic. Nevertheless, it fits in with the overall thesis of the present essay, and also demonstrates marked naturalistic characteristics. The atheistic discourse of "White", for example, is clearly in sympathy with philosophies also present in naturalism.

[4] Eric Carl Link describes McCarthy as "a southern novelist. A western novelist. An author of the grotesque, the perverse, the extreme. He is also – to one degree or another – a contemporary literary naturalist" (2013: 150), Frye reads *The Crossing* as an exercise in "romantic naturalism", finding the novel "replete with passages reminiscent of those found in the naturalist novels of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries" (2007: 49). James Giles understands *Outer Dark* as an exercise in hybridity, "a gothic romance that incorporates ideas and motifs of literary naturalism" (95). Bill Hardwig is something of an exception, arguing that naturalist tendencies rather than comprising just one element among many are actually fundamental and foundational to McCarthy's fiction.

[5] For further discussion of the Just World Hypothesis see the short article by Andre and Velasquez, and Melvin J. Lerner's monograph, *The Belief in a Just World: A Fundamental Delusion* (New York: Plenum Press, 1980).

[6] See John Sepich's concordance for *The Road* at http://www.johnsepich.com/documents/a_concordance_to_the_road_241.pdf. This confirms, for example, that 'ash/ashes' appears 46 times, variations on 'dark' 88 times, and 'dead/death' 63 times.

[7] For example, Bush explaining the attacks of 9/11 as having happened "because we're the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world" ("Remarks"), or his declaration shortly before the war in Afghanistan that "either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists" ("Freedom and Fear").

[8] With regard to its genesis, Cooper notes that, "[t]he apocalypticism of *The Road* seems to be a response to an immediate and visceral fear of cataclysmic doom in the United States after the terrorist attacks on 9/11" (2011: 221), and goes onto mention Dianne Luce's assertion that McCarthy imagined the apocalyptic scenario while watching his son asleep, shortly after 9/11, and observation confirmed in McCarthy's interview with David Kushner.