Book Review – *Cormac McCarthy's Violent Destinies: The Poetics of Determinism and Fatalism*, Edited by Brad Bannon and John Vanderheide.

Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2017, 349 pp., £62.50.

Sarah McCreedy

School of English, University College Cork

Previous essay collections concerning popular American writer Cormac McCarthy have often been organised around a more generalist approach to his work, encompassing essays on important topics such as religion, philosophy and style. However, as academic scholarship on McCarthy gained traction into the twenty-first century, more specific collections began to emerge, including Julian Murphet and Mark Steven's *Styles of Extinction* (2012), which was solely focused on McCarthy's Pulitzer-prize winning novel, *The Road* (2006). The subject of this review, *Cormac McCarthy's Violent Destinies: The Poetics of Determinism and Fatalism* (2017), further charts new territory in the currently thriving field of McCarthy Studies, offering the first dedicated collection of essays on the issues of determinism and fatalism in McCarthy's fiction.

Following a lively foreword from long-established McCarthy scholar Rick Wallach, co-editors Brad Bannon and John Vanderheide (2017) stress the thematic importance of determinism and fatalism in their introduction. Determinism and fatalism constitute a subfield in McCarthy Studies: their presence is always felt in critical readings of the texts, even when it is more implicit than explicit. The editors then provide useful definitions of these themes. Determinism advocates that all events are necessary, that free will is ultimately an illusion. On the other hand, fatalism is described as "the notion that certain events have been determined and will come to pass one way or another" (2017, p. 5). The subject matter of this collection may be specific, but these broad definitions give the contributing writers much to work with.

The first essay does well to engage the collection's preoccupations with aesthetic movements, particularly given literary naturalism's long debated associations with determinism, (more so than fatalism, as we learned from Zola's founding text on naturalism, *Le Roman Experimental* (1893))

and chance. In his reading of the first novel of The Border Trilogy, *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), James R. Giles establishes novel connections between naturalism, romanticism, and the American West, coining the term "Romantic Naturalism." Naturalism is a useful, and indeed under-examined, lens in which to view McCarthy. Giles's consideration of the strength in McCarthy's blended and hybrid forms speaks to both naturalism's adaptive influence, as well as the effect of McCarthy's diverse range of influences. Furthermore, Giles's examination of the character Alfonsa in *All the Pretty Horses* (1992) as a "naturalistic agent" who reinforces the patriarchal order to which she has been subject provides a welcome engagement with McCarthy's often overlooked yet evidently complex female characters. Later in the collection, contributing editor Vanderheide also and notably deals with issues of gender in a nuanced, intersectional approach to the issue of fate in *Suttree* (1979).

McCarthy's violent landscapes, and the diabolical figures that occupy them, unavoidably raise questions of ethics. The collection broadly engages the texts with many philosophical heavyweights (Nietzsche, Heidegger, Spinoza, to name but a few) in order to traverse these questions in conjunction with determinism and fatalism. Chapter Two is no exception, as Woods Nash situates *Child of God* (1973) in relation to John Locke, arguing that the central character, Lester Ballard, lives not within the Lockean social contract, but "the apolitical or prepolitical condition of human beings" (2017, p. 43): the state of nature. Ballard is far from the sole practitioner of violence in this novel, and Nash illuminates these complexities by assessing the distinctions between "lawful" and extralegal forms of violence, in a world where Locke's Christian God is nowhere to be found.

Nash admits that he does not extend his reading to Jay Ellis's level of victimization when considering Ballard, but his essay nevertheless prompts us to reflect on notions of identification with this grotesque figure. A later essay in Chapter 5 undertakes an argument that could, at least from its description, be thought to uphold a potentially sympathetic view of violent characters. In this Chapter, Adrian Mioc claims that two of McCarthy's most memorable antagonists, Judge Holden of *Blood Meridian* (1985) and Anton Chigurh of *No Country for Old Men* (2005), can be viewed as ethical. In contrast to Nash's essay, which situates Ballard in relation to overwhelming social forces of determinism, Mioc examines Holden beyond "duration," a being with no stable identity and, therefore, one who exists outside of any clear-cut notion of morality. Meanwhile, Chigurh aligns his actions with determinism: his lack of free will absolves him of moral

responsibility. Chigurh is described as "a man of his word" (2017, p. 133), whose Spinozian commitment to the causal chain of events culminates in "teachable" moments for his victims, such as Wells and Carla Jean. Any observant reader of *No Country for Old Men* (2005) would be careful to avoid taking Chigurh's self-aggrandizing philosophy at face value.

Whilst Mioc's essay raises questions about the notion of freedom in its relation to the embodied self or a higher good that Nietzsche would refer to as "essence," in Chapter 3, Denis L. Sansom claims that, in opposition to libertarian ideals, moral agency always acts in tension with the material world. In this essay, Sansom finds teachers not in Chigurh or Holden, but in the various instructive figures who appear throughout the course of the Border Trilogy. Sansom makes an important distinction here: McCarthy's Teachers offer *interpretations* of reality, rather than descriptions of it. Thus, we can gain several insights on humanity from the Border Trilogy, many of which return to the tensions inherent within McCarthy's body of work: between good and evil and between determinism and destiny, but these "cannot give a plausible explanation of the full human experience" (2017, p. 86).

The emerging tension between a higher order (divine or otherwise) and the material world marks a consistent thread throughout *Violent Destinies*. Chapter 4 sees Rasmus R. Simonsen trace a challenging philosophical path centred around the interconnections between objectivity and subjectivity in *The Road* (2006). This essay can be placed alongside the work of scholars such as Raymond Malewitz, adding to existent discussion on objects and their use in the McCarthy oeuvre, as well as their relation to American identity, modernity, and nation-building. Simonsen is interested in how an object loses its previously established conformity in a post-apocalyptic world where batteries become acid goo and where the last remaining can of Coca-Cola loses its meaning as a potent symbol of capitalist consumer desire. What becomes of American gun culture after the social world has ended? The revolver *demands* the man's engagement—out of desperation rather than desire—as he attempts to fight for his and, more importantly, his son's survival. Thus, the man and the boy's interactions with objects throughout the novel affects the "narratological reality," further complicating the pair's sense of agency in this highly circumscribed universe.

Despite Simonsen's intervention, *Violent Destinies* is, as a whole, more generously weighted to McCarthy's earlier works. Of course, the Southern Gothic affiliated violence and depravity of *Child of God* (1973) or *Outer Dark* (1968) is markedly thought provoking in the affect of its prose, and *Blood Meridian* (1985) (which is focused on in four out of the eleven essays) has long been

perceived as McCarthy's most accomplished work. Nonetheless, further attention to *The Road (*which is read widely across third-level contemporary fiction courses, and was recently introduced to high-school programmes across the U.S.), as well as inclusion of other later works that transcend the genre of the novel such as *The Sunset Limited* (2006) or *The Counselor* (2013), would have been very welcome in this contemporary volume. There is much to be said about determinism and fatalism in McCarthy's post-9/11, late-capitalist fictional worlds. Many scholars have read these later works as progressively complex with regard to the issue of free will, particularly given McCarthy's own evolving personal, philosophical, and scientific sensibilities.[1]

This quibble aside, this is a comprehensive, astute collection of essays that adds challenging new ground to the field of McCarthy Studies. These writings thoughtfully uncover and evaluate tensions in McCarthy's body of fiction. The crises of this fiction, be they existential, social, or universal, defy resolution. Nonetheless, as is evidenced here, further enquiry into understanding these texts continues to offer potential to the areas of literary criticism and theory, as well as to interdisciplinary readings that incorporate fields as diverse as ecology, theology, science, linguistics, psychology, and, of course, philosophy. With an evidently broad range of influences, it is no surprise that McCarthy's fiction continues to invite scholarly interest, particularly given the increasingly uncertain times in which we live.

Sarah McCreedy is a PhD candidate in the School of English at University College Cork. Her thesis, which explores the resurgence of American literary naturalism in twenty-first-century American fiction as a response to neoliberalism, is funded by the Government of Ireland Postgraduate Scholarship. She is also a postgraduate representative for the Irish Association for American Studies.

1. See Jane Elliott's (2013) work on Suffering Agency. This new paradigm, which Elliott traces across several works of contemporary (American) aesthetics, explores the ways in which subjects such as the man in *The Road* are 'suffering agents'—those who must make choices that are both "imposed and appalling" (p. 84). Presented with options such as self-amputation or cannibalism in order to avoid death, every choice is agonised; every outcome is undesirable. In my own research, I map this theoretical framework onto the resurgence of naturalism in twenty-first-century American fiction.

Works Cited

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