

GHOST LIGHT. THE STRANGE FABRIC OF REALITY IN CORMAC MCCARTHY'S *THE PASSENGER*

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Abstract: Cormac McCarthy's swan song touches upon the motifs of his whole career, from Melvillian ambition to Southern Gothic imagery, and from western tropes to apocalyptic foreboding. Nevertheless, *The Passenger* (2022) is his most arcane and abstract work. This is due not only to the amount of scientific knowledge around which McCarthy builds his plot, but also to the specific issues that the main characters tackle philosophically, such as one's moral responsibility and capacity to forgive, transgressions in science and in the private life, the nature of reality and the degree to which poetic language may capture it.

Keywords: art and science, forbidden knowledge, the Manhattan Project, Cormac McCarthy, *The Passenger*

1. Introduction: landscape and melancholia

The Passenger (2022), Cormac McCarthy's last and long-awaited novel, has the stylistic eloquence of his previous books, but there is no doubt that it will remain his most abstract work. Albeit less violent than the western novels that have made McCarthy famous, *The Passenger* is no less apocalyptic in its leanings. If the pace of the story might be described as low-key, the vision of the universe and of the place the humans have in this world sustains a deep pessimism, a pessimism that addresses both personal undoing and cosmic holocaust. The main protagonists' efforts to reckon with their own lives are weaved into the narrative and made transparent through scientific ruminations, moral torment, reveries, and hallucinations meant to underline that the very fabric of the universe is beyond our understanding. This obvious premise imbues the novel with a sententiousness which would be terrible in a writer with fewer rhetorical skills than McCarthy, as would be his poetic descriptions of nature, if nature were not the very canvas on which his character's emotions – or lack of emotions – become recognizable to us.

Nature is never a mere background in Cormac McCarthy's novels. The landscape does not serve the sole purpose of locating the characters and their actions; it takes part in the action. McCarthy is the heir to Romantic aesthetics in that the descriptions become philosophical reflections on the cognitive processes and on the emotions that make possible a particular reflection on nature. Angus Fletcher (2006: 51, 53) states that, unlike European poets and novelists for whom nature description is a display of "a wild and disordered *accumulation*" circumscribed as Kant's

idea of the sublime, the American writers, due to the unprecedented scale of their environment, must deal with the landscape's intrusion upon the imagination (idem: 52) According to Fletcher, the American poets and novelists describe the nondescript because their minds and their stylistic means strive to order a chaos of perceptions caused by the large scale:

Clearly, one aim of descriptive glamour and gothic mysteries in verbally drawn landscape was to permit the novel to use actual settings whose gothic disarray was in fact organized so as to provide fictional effects, as if the real could formalize the wildness of the imagined. When nature intrudes upon description, as if it were a demiurgic author who insists on being sublime, the reader is led to adopt a new and quite skeptical view of description. (Fletcher 2006: 52-53)

McCarthy's descriptions of nature are never neutral. They sustain thoughts, sensations, and shadows of human life flickering on rocks or in the prairie. And our reading of McCarthy's descriptions is skeptical as long as we pay attention to his sophisticated rhetoric. Commenting on the horrors of *Blood Meridian, or, the Evening Redness in the West* (1985), Steven Shaviro finds the pessimism of the book in the "incessant horizontal movements" of the characters through the landscape, in weather changes, and "topological displacements" meant to maintain a feeling of never-ending war. Shaviro (2009: 11) concludes correctly: "For there can be no alienation when there is no originary state for us to be alienated from".

When compared with *Blood Meridian*, *The Passenger* feels like chamber music, slow paced, affectionate, and restrained. Although it does not show human cruelty from close range, the feeling of violent alienation pervades *The Passenger* even more than its companion novel, *Stella Maris* (2022). Georg Guillemin (2009: 52) notices that, in McCarthy's writings, the obsession with death and mortality that shapes his narrative melancholia "originates in the biblical image of the agonized prophet on the hill who watches the world from afar on its course toward ruin". My aim is to prove that the pessimism and the Gothic tropes in *The Passenger* are related to the main protagonist being aware of the many transgressions in his family and, by extension, the transgressions – moral, epistemological, political – of the generations who survived the Second World War. *The Passenger* tackles an old conundrum regarding forbidden knowledge: how much should be forbidden?

2. Another kind of cautionary tale

The not quite plot driven story of *The Passenger* relies on Cormac McCarthy's fully orchestrated cadences, which confer a predestined-like credibility to his hero's designs, on loquacious dialogues, ripe with colloquialisms, but also verging on mathematical arcane topics, and on the nightmarish imagery, where the disturbing detail of gothic inspiration accommodates an even more disturbing tender disposition. *The Passenger* opens in a frozen landscape:

It had snowed lightly in the night and her frozen hair was gold and crystalline and her eyes were frozen cold and hard as stones. One of her yellow boots had fallen off and stood in the snow beneath her. The shape of her coat lay dusted in the snow

where she'd dropped it and she wore only a white dress and she hung among the bare gray poles of the winter trees with her head bowed and her hands turned slightly outward like those of certain ecumenical statues whose attitude asks that their history be considered. That the deep foundation of the world be considered where it has its being in the sorrow of her creatures. The hunter knelt and stogged his rifle upright in the snow beside him and took off his gloves and let them fall and folded his hands one upon the other. He thought that he should pray but he'd no prayer for such a thing. He bowed his head. Tower of Ivory, he said. House of Gold. [...] When he opened his eyes he saw a small shape half buried in the snow and he leaned and dusted away the snow and picked up a gold chain that held a steel key, a whitegold ring. [...] (McCarthy 2022a: 3)

One notices immediately the eerie fairy tale topoi, such as the golden hair, a hunter without distinct features, the evocation of an Ivory Tower, a mysterious key on a gold chain. These familiar motifs turn out to be something else when the narrator compares the woman's posture to "ecumenical statues" and when, at the end of the description, mentions the detail – thus adding a little bit of colour in an otherwise white and sepulchral landscape – that the hanged woman in the woods carefully provided herself with a red sash, meant to make her body easy to discover. (ibid.) She chose to kill herself during the Christmas holiday.

The woman is Alicia Western, math prodigy and mental institutions patient, who loved only one man in her entire short life; her own brother, Bobby. McCarthy, chose to let Alicia be mainly a ghost in *The Passenger*, where we know her from Bobby's broodings and reminiscences, but also through her own mental theater, populated by the quasi-demonic Thalidomide Kid with an egg-shaped head and seal flippers instead of hands, and his cohort – the "horts" she calls them – of grotesque entertainers. Alicia Western is diagnosed with a list of afflictions – schizophrenia, autism, psychopathy –, but, as Michael Gorra (2022) notices in his review, none fits. Alicia is given a full voice – not a very convincing one, unfortunately – in *Stella Maris*, where one can find more about her abilities and her troubled mind during the therapy sessions with a psychiatrist named Dr. Cohen.

She seems to be a Platonist mathematician from the school of Kurt Gödel and Alexandre Grothendieck, having a gnostic sensibility. She likes to toy – sometimes skeptically – with the idea that "mathematical objects exist independently of human thought" (McCarthy 2022b: 64), while her less scientific intuitions make her guess that what ultimately escapes human understanding are not pure forms, but pure horror. She states that "at the core of reality lies a deep and eternal demonium." (idem: 152) Alicia's belief that every one of us is alone in the world and that the universe has been evolving in darkness and silence without the need of an intelligent observer (idem: 40) echoes strangely a similar tenet upheld by the frightening Judge Holden in *Blood Meridian* (McCarthy 2001: 245): "Even in this world more things exist without our knowledge than with it and the order in creation which you see is that which you have put there, like a string in a maze, so that you shall not lose your way".

Being an allegorist, Cormac McCarthy makes Alicia a hieratic presence in *The Passenger*. She has the consistency of thought itself and is mainly a sensual apparition in her brother's memories. McCarthy draws on Catholic iconography – Alicia's golden hair shines like an aura, we see her among her classmates at St Mary's,

their patent leather shoes and prayer books all white etc. (McCarthy 2022a: 188) – but also on pagan imagery, such as that of the chthonian and hellish Medea, whom Alicia played as a teen, walking along black smoking kerosene footlights, wearing a gown improvised from sheeting and a crown of woodbine. (idem: 178-179) Alicia is to Bobby what Beatrice is to Dante, the very reason of his journey, except that in *The Passenger* there is no Paradise waiting at the end. Besides, she does not become a fully accomplished character. As Joy Williams (2023) put it, “Alicia is the sturdy vessel for McCarthy’s thinking. Perhaps too sturdy a vessel”.

The second opening of the novel takes place about ten years after her death, during the early 1980s, in New Orleans, where Bobby Western, a Caltech dropout and former racing driver, has a job as a salvage diver. He and his co-workers try to figure out the bizarre state of a sunken Lockheed JetStar with no signs of crash: the fuselage seems intact, there is no fuel spill in the water, the pilots and the seven passengers in their neat suits look as if they had been already dead at the impact. The third-person descriptions and the lively exchanges between the divers furnish us with lots of technical terms and professional points of view on the state of things, jargon control being one of Bobby’s gifts, no matter what field his knowledge is needed for: planes, guns, oil rigs, motor racing, numismatics, violins, history, string theory, survival techniques. Often, as has always been the case in McCarthy’s fiction, the character and the narrator “virtually share a point of view.” (Guillemin 2009: 55)

A part of the board panel was taken out, and the pilot’s flight bag is nowhere to be found, although nobody seems to have reached the plane before the salvage team. Soon, Bobby receives a visit from agents – are they FBI or something else? – who question him about a missing eighth passenger. The premise might look like a rewriting of *No Country for Old Men* (2005) – an unaccounted killing spree, a missing bag, the wrong man in the wrong place, a dogged pursuer –, but it is far from it. The double opening of *The Passenger* does not build up to a resolution of the two mysteries – Alicia’s suicide motivation, the missing person’s enigma, respectively. It establishes Bobby Western’s solitary pace instead. As his name suggests, he is another “lone and lonesome cowboy” perpetually on the move (Tom LeClair 2023), the typical McCarthy hero, at least since *Blood Meridian* and the Border Trilogy. Harassed by agents, and soon by the IRS (Internal Revenue Service) for suspicion over an undeclared inheritance, Bobby starts to change locations and stays as far from the authorities as possible. He is no less an outlaw than his friends – the con man John Sheddan, the private detective Kline, the sly bartender Janice, the affectionate transgender Debussy Fields – and his many acquaintances among the marginals of New Orleans make his aims not very difficult to accomplish. However, this time the story is not action driven, but boasts a peripatetic and loquacious energy. A boisterous dialectic which usually takes place between convivial interlocutors, jokes, ironies, and digressions alleviates the sense of suffocation and drowning – in water, in remorse, in the enigma of life itself – that pervades Bobby’s strategic evasions and ruminations. It is not the clues pertaining to the eighth passenger’s disappearance that fall into place, but random details concerning Bobby Western’s distress: his father’s stance toward the bombing of Hiroshima, his sister’s incestuous love for him – which he staved off cautiously –, the degree to which his moral actions are in accordance with his sense of reality, and of course, his fear of death.

Bobby Western shares some hard to miss features with Suttree, the outcast whose name gives the title to Cormac McCarthy's 1979 novel. Cornelius Suttree is a fisherman who lives on a decrepit houseboat in Knoxville and roams the shores of the Tennessee River with his no less destitute friends and acquaintances. In the opening of the book, Suttree watches a rescue team taking out from the water the disfigured body of a man who committed suicide. The detail that sticks most dramatically to his mind is the dead man's still running watch (McCarthy 2010: 11, 15). The aquatic motif, thoroughly analyzed by Jay Ellis in relation to Suttree's alcoholism, is also symbolically rich: the river provides fish and turtles to the main characters, but it also drowns them, floods their lodgings, topples dams and so on. (Ellis 2006: 141) Like Suttree's father, who brought his own contribution to the destruction of the environment and the disruptions of human lives along the Tennessee River, Bobby Western's father was involved in a project with planetary consequences: the making of the first atomic bomb.

Calling at Kline's office, in the hope that the detective will help him with a new identity, Bobby Western mentions a childhood incident when, during wintertime, he found a beautiful Laird-Turner Meteor racing plane, which had crashed in the woods of Tennessee. The pilot, "slumped over in the cockpit" (McCarthy 2022a: 217), was the first dead man he had ever seen and the view scared Bobby terribly. Not so much, though, as to stop him taking a souvenir from the crash site, namely a square piece of linen from the fuselage with the number 22 on it. (idem: 219) He used to keep that yellow linen on the wall of his room, in his maternal grandmother's house, like a sports pennant or a poster. (idem: 170) Numbers are significant in McCarthy's novels not because of their purported symbolism, but for the way they stick to the characters' – and by extension, to the readers' – minds. For instance, the unnamed cataclysm in *The Road* takes place at 1:17. (McCarthy 2007: 52) Considering the frequent mentioning of the unconscious in *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris*, that early experience could be a psychoanalytical explanation for Bobby's coping with the fear of death after finding the sunken plane off the coast of New Orleans. The coincidence is so obvious, that Kline grasps it on the spot:

Coming upon airplanes with bodies in them I'm going to say is a fairly unusual experience. But for you it seems to be commonplace.

Commonplace.

Statistically speaking. Multiple millions of times more than the average citizen might experience.

Am I supposed to be superstitious?

Deep sea diving. Car racing. What. A love of hazard?

I don't know. (McCarthy 2022a: 219)

There are other childhood memories which give weight to Bobby's subsequent decisions and his sense of personal loss. At sixteen, he took part in a competition for the State Science Fair. His project was a complex study of a pond close to his grandmother's house, the meticulous drawing of "every visible creature in that habitat" from gnats and arachnids to fish and birds:

Like Audubon he'd had to draw the great blue heron leaning over the water because it was too big for the paper. Two hundred and seventy-three creatures with their Latin names on three forty foot rolls of construction paper. It had taken him two years to do and it didn't win. (McCarthy 2022a: 164)

The link between art and science is the gist of the book. Conspicuous connections between events coalesce poetically in the story of Bobby Western's life, but one is left to ponder the hidden causality of his many decisions, because a full causality may be intuited only, not proven. Bobby and the reader share the illusion that the present situation might somehow be apprehended through a correct reevaluation of the past. McCarthy's pastoral vision used to sustain a "melancholy equanimity", that is "a pessimistic indifference" that bestowed "an egalitarian existential status on all terrestrial phenomena alike." (Guillemin 2009: 54) This time, the main protagonist's melancholy does not equate to atavistic abilities, mythical features such as horse breaking, as in *All the Pretty Horses* (1992) or wolves taming, as in *The Crossing* (1994), but to the history of the twentieth century.

Born in a Jewish family, Bobby Western understands that "the forces of history which had ushered his troubled life into the tapestry were those of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, the sister events that sealed forever the fate of the West." (Cormac McCarthy 2022a: 165) The Manhattan Project made possible his and his younger sister's parents meeting. Their father, a reputed physicist and friend of Oppenheimer, did not regret the Hiroshima bombing and even had a strange view on the catastrophic event, considering it less humiliating for Japan than a straight defeat, a way to give the reconstruction of Japan an unexpected meaning. (McCarthy 2022b: 61) His children's scientific gifts are heavy with this moral burden. There is a constant transition in the novel between the urgencies of daily life – all those enlivened activities and abilities that Bobby boasts – and the abstract reality of the world as described by quantum physics and especially by the uncertainty principle that basically states that we see only those aspects of reality we choose to observe. In Werner Heisenberg's own words, (qtd. in Egginton 2023: 79, 115), "we have to remember that what we observe is not nature in itself but nature exposed to our own method of questioning."

Following Immanuel Kant's critical stance on the image we make of the world – namely that we are an important part of the reality we observe –, Heisenberg thought that scientists must always take into consideration the limits of the human cognitive faculties. William Egginton sums up this conviction – which Heisenberg secretly elaborated during the war, when he was involved in Germany's nuclear program, in the "Manuscript of 1942", published posthumously – in a clear phrase: "By presuming we know the ultimate nature of reality, we limit our ability to understand." (Egginton 2023: 25) Heisenberg also confronted the scientific establishment, and especially the particle physicists – who proved that the laws of classical mechanics did not work for quantum mechanics – with the same issue with which Ludwig Wittgenstein puzzled the philosophers: the limits of language. "Science translates reality into thought and humans need language to think", but at the quantic level the physicist has to deal with the impossibility of a complete description of reality. (idem: 22-23)

The Passenger sustains the tension between the prophetic and omniscient narrative voice that sermonizes gnomically – “All of history a rehearsal for its own extinction” (McCarthy 2022a: 369) – and the main characters’ beliefs and attitudes that contradict precisely this aspiration to ultimate knowledge. While living like a hermit on the dunes south of Bay St Louis, in the hope of escaping the authorities, Bobby Western meets during a stormy night the hallucination of his dead sister, the Thalidomide Kid himself. In the strange dialogue that ensues in this uncanny and improbable stroll on the beach, the Kid makes clear to Bobby some things about Alicia’s mind:

She knew that in the end you really cant know. You cant get hold of the world. You can only draw a picture. Whether it’s a bull on the wall of a cave or a partial differential equation it’s all the same thing. (McCarthy 2022a: 279)

Another source of conflict in the novel resides in the way McCarthy conceives his characters’ choices as opposed to the necessity that their story must feel like accomplished destinies, round and meaningful. In science, the antinomy between freedom and deterministic laws comes down in the end to acknowledging that our cognition tends to order the world dichotomically – which is an epistemological trap – and that the antinomy “emerges from the very tools we use to study and understand the cosmos.” (Egginton 2023: 210) But the novelist does not do science. She or he is a storyteller or, like Cormac McCarthy, a writer of parables which accommodate the paradox of the ancient oracles: fate is ordained by gods, yet the individual’s choices are not. Thus, fate can be averted to the degree to which a particular person understands that her or his character and actions drive the prophetic answer. (Stoneman 2011: 23) The classicist Richard Stoneman notices that the first poetic forms and the religious impulses were indistinguishable in times of old:

Oracles always work in stories, because that is what it is to be a story. As Henry James wrote, we don’t scruple to invent portents after the event, because that is how we make stories of the series of events that constitute our lives. (Stoneman 2011: 13)

Perhaps this conundrum – namely his ambition to take a complex scientific stance on the most difficult questions concerning the universe and human life while preserving his allegorical designs and religious rhetoric – determined Cormac McCarthy to split his final work in two. *The Passenger* is the typical McCarthy novel: poetic, mannish, mythical, character driven, an ode to solitude. The therapy sessions of *Stella Maris*, which should have been Alicia Western’s story, lack context and character focus, but tackle the scientific and ethical problems related to the fast advancement of knowledge and technology during the last hundred years and to the catastrophes of the twentieth century. Bringing Alicia’s mathematical obsessions into Bobby Western’s story would have ruined the oracular style and the enigma of *The Passenger*. That is why, in the latter, she is either an ill child, or an angelic apparition in dreams and hallucinations, rather than the institutionalized hard-core scientist that Dr. Cohen encounters at the Stella Maris psychiatric facility.

Myths, wisdom literature, and ancient philosophies teach us that humans are granted only partial knowledge of the world, and that unbridled curiosity brings disaster upon those who are guilty of hubris. The discrepancy between our desire to know everything and the limits of what we can fathom is the subject of Roger Shattuck's book, *Forbidden Knowledge*. Shattuck (1997: 29) uses a French word taken from Montaigne and Pascal – *portée*, that is one's reach, the capacity and the limit that defines a particular character – and archangel Raphael's advice to Adam in Book VIII of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, "be lowly wise", (idem: 66, 73) in order to criticize the Faustian and Frankenstein-like excesses of the nowadays ethos. Shattuck does not oppose the advancement of knowledge. He just reminds us of some ancient and modern cautionary tales about the perils of knowledge unchecked by moral reflection. Debunking the idea of "pure research" (the disinterested pursuit of truth) as just a modern myth (idem: 224-225) the scientists enjoy telling themselves, Roger Shattuck choses the Manhattan Project as an example of Frankenstein-like hubris.

J. Robert Oppenheimer seems today a figure out of a Greek tragedy, a "fedora wearing Prometheus", both "hero and scapegoat", a man able to justify rationally the manufacturing and the employing of the bomb. (idem: 174-175) However, in his 1947 MIT lecture, while stressing the value of disinterested research, Oppenheimer also spoke about how physicists had "known sin". This time, Shattuck (1997: 175-176) notices that Oppenheimer, a nonreligious scientist, used a religious term to make clear to his colleagues the difference between scientific knowledge and moral knowledge.

In *The Passenger* Cormac McCarthy employs Oppenheimer's dilemma as an artistic means. Bobby Western spends one night in a motel outside Midland, Texas, close to a refinery. Although it is freezing cold outside, the flames, the oil wells, the diesel trucks, and the creatures slithering in the desert make the place look postapocalyptic. Landscape perception and thinking become the same cognitive process:

The trucks grew fewer. No wind. Silence. The little carpet colored vipers coiled out there in the dark. The abyss of the past into which the world is falling. Everything vanishing as if it had never been. We would hardly wish to know ourselves again as once we were and yet we mourn the days. He'd thought of his father little in recent years. He thought of him now. (McCarthy 2022a: 310)

He thought of his father who considered that the dropping of the bomb was a factor of progress for Japan, a fresh start for reconstruction. Bobby never finds his father's grave, but remembers him on his deathbed, still obsessed with abstractions and fascinated by his boss' intellect:

They sat in the winter sun in the hospital window at Berkeley. His father wore a plastic nametag on his wrist. He'd grown a wispy white beard and he kept touching it. Oppenheimer, he said. It would be Oppenheimer. He would answer your questions before you asked them. You could take a problem you'd been working on for weeks and he would sit there puffing on his pipe while you put your work up on the board and he'd look at it for a minute and say: Yes. I think I see how we can do this. And get up and erase your work and put up the right equations and sit down and smile at you. (McCarthy 2022a: 370-371)

In Cormac McCarthy's novels the sons often inherit the burden to sort out the mistakes of their fathers who were poised to set the world straight. After a get-together with detective Kline, Bobby ponders obliquely the father-son relationship remembering the Manhattan Project-related documents that his father used to hide from the family:

In the coming night he thought that men would band together in the hills. Feeding their small fires with the deeds and the covenants and the poetry of their fathers. Documents they'd no gift to read in a cold to loot men of their souls. (McCarthy 2022a: 289)

It is a poetic description indeed, yet the cold does not refer to air temperature, but to knowledge without heart. The degree to which Bobby Western's father acknowledged sin, in the sense Oppenheimer gave to the word in his 1947 lecture, remains one of the unanswered questions of *The Passenger*.

3. Conclusion: a final metonymy

Instantly recognizable as a Cormac McCarthy novel due to its setting, character types, cinematic tropes, and Biblical rhetoric, *The Passenger* also stands apart in McCarthy's canon as a dark fiction, heavy with the history of science and rich in – sometimes abstruse – ethical reflections. The deep pessimism of the book resides in the disproportion between what Bobby Western calls “ghost light”, namely the light that stays constantly on in every theatre when they are empty, a metonymy and a feeble reassurance that the world will never be completely vacated (McCarthy 2022a: 375-376) and the blinding light of nuclear annihilation. *The Passenger* is an accomplished novel which gives prominence to the importance of artistic expression in a culture that has become fond of information technology and scientific truth. As Roger Shattuck put it,

We are often taught to deal with ideas as the highest form of knowledge. But the process of abstraction by which we form ideas out of observed experience eliminates two essential aspects of life [...]: time and individual people acting as agents. At their purest, ideas are disembodied and timeless. We need ideas to reason logically and to explore the fog of uncertainty that surrounds the immediate encounter with daily living. Equally, we need stories to embody the medium of time in which human character takes shape and reveals itself to us, and in which we discover our own mortality. (Shattuck 1997: 9)

Among the contemporary American writers, Cormac McCarthy is perhaps the one who made us most aware of our mortality with his virtuosic prose that, despite its apocalyptic overtones, strongly affirms life.

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