

## **Saving Sheriff Bell: Derrida, McCarthy and the Opening of Mercantile Ethics in *No Country for Old Men*.**

**Abstract:** This article examines Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*. Herein I argue that rather than seeing McCarthy's novel as a paean to a lost conservatism, there is a subtler philosophical reading available. Utilizing Jacques Derrida's account of ethics and responsibility, I show that McCarthy offers a very rich account of ethical deliberation. On the surface, the novel presents a putative conservative ethics, where Sheriff Bell laments the current state of social laws and yearns for the simplicity of natural justice. Chigurh represents the logical conclusion of natural law, where morals are consistent with the natural, predictable, and mechanical laws of nature. The moral fulcrum of the novel dwells in the deepening wisdom of Bell in the face of Chigurh's mechanization and naturalization of ethics. McCarthy's philosophical and ethical insight in *No Country for Old Men* emerges from showing how the central protagonist Sheriff Bell struggles to exist beyond the good and evil he faces in the guise of the psychopath Chigurh's relentless rationalism. I conclude that McCarthy philosophically demonstrates the density and flawed nature of ethical decision-making, one that requires civil disobedience at the heart of the law.

**Keywords: Cormac McCarthy, Philosophy, Ethics, Derrida.**

### **Introduction**

In Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* (McCarthy 2005), Sheriff Bell blames the moral barbarism of his age on a 'breakdown in mercantile ethics' (304). This enigmatic phrase belies a simple ethical logic: the just is connected to the marketplace; if one does good things one expects a just reward. Exchange dictates moral certainty. When Sheriff Bell faces Anton Chigurh, he is confronted with an entirely different moral logic, one which empties his character of conservative dispositions and ethical habits. All that was important to Bell is eroded, and he is left struggling to conceptualize an alternative ethics. The strength of McCarthy's insight into ethical life lays in illuminating what happens to a conservative character when they must carry on making ethical valuations after their foundations are ripped asunder.<sup>1</sup> McCarthy's philosophical and ethical insight in *No Country for Old Men* is Nietzschean, showing Bell struggling to exist beyond good and evil.

This essay also offers a novel account of how McCarthy conceives of ethical questions and decisions. McCarthy, I argue, offers acute insight into the tragic nature of decisions, where values emerge in conjunction with an inevitably violent world. To support this argument, I use the work of Jacques Derrida on ethical decision-making. Derrida's work is valuable because it shows that ethical decisions are more than autonomous and isolated. Derrida helps us understand *No Country for Old Men*, particularly by giving context to decision-making at the intersection of a contested past and future, and the tension between regulated and unpredictable codes of behavior. The moral force of *No Country for Old Men* emerges in the breakdown in similarity between Bell and Chigurh. While Bell and Chigurh are both avatars of certainty, it is Bell who is confronted with an existential crisis of values. Bell's uncertainties reveal a more profound moral wisdom than it initially appears. This allows us to see Bell, and the novel itself, as being open to a reading that takes on Derrida's alternative ethical trajectory, one that is open, contingent and exposed to radical uncertainty.

My reading requires a reframing of the critical consensus on the character of Chigurh. In opposition to some conventional accounts of Chigurh as a chaotic figure, I argue instead that this dominant character should not be understood as a harbinger of chaos but instead as a purveyor of order and certainty. Chigurh is a rationalist and a mechanist, dedicated to calculable and programmatic decisions. Chigurh functions as a foil to the deepening ethical development of Sheriff Bell. The more Bell becomes uncertain, the more Chigurh clings irrationally to his entrenched rationalism. Additionally, this reading is important, as it allows us to resist the temptation to see how the backdrop to the novel – the drug war of the American southwest – is not reducible, nor can it be combatted by the simple “mercantile ethics” for which Bell yearns. The unendurable suffering and violence that McCarthy is at pains to reveal as the by-product of the illegal drug war stands in stark contrast to the rational, corporate efficiency of the illegal drugs trade. The drug war is an idealist, immaterial site of mercantile exchange, which obscures violence, suffering, and the brutal historical reality of the narcotic trade. Chigurh represents the smooth

efficiency, and natural inevitability of corporate exchange. Bell, on the other hand, begins with a lament for the cozy circularity, and face-to-face reciprocity of mercantile ethics, but moves to a position which recognizes the utter contingency of the world, and the ethical priorities which emerge when faced with vicious forms of capital exchange.

This analysis builds in a significant way on existing McCarthy scholarship. Many influential McCarthy critics have rejected a naïve conservative reading of McCarthy. This is evident in very important readings of McCarthy's work. Raymond Malewitz in *The Practice of Misuse* argues forcefully that *No Country for Old Men* presents an implicit critique of the rugged consumerism of neoliberalism. For Malewitz, the 'rugged individualism' of the mythic American west transforms into a 'rugged consumerism,' where self-reliance is no longer materially grounded, but is instead amounts a mere commercial performance of a lost authentic self-reliance (Malewitz, 158-164). The characters tragically inhabit a dehistoricized world, unable to see that such a world leads to a 'conceptual imprisonment' (178). Most notably, David Holloway in *The Late Modernism of Cormac McCarthy* has argued that McCarthy's work makes manifest attempts to dehistoricize ethical, political, and economic exchange. While *No Country for Old Men* succeeded Holloway's work, his analysis remains salient since the characters of the novel inhabit a dehistoricized world, unable to illuminate any ethical alternative to the automatized circularity of capitalist production. Therefore, it is necessary, to see this text as one of the strongest within McCarthy's *oeuvre* for dealing with philosophical problems pertaining to ethical decision-making. Bell represents McCarthy's attempt, albeit a pessimistic one, to think an ethical alternative to the seemingly inescapable certainty of capitalist exchange. Building on the above scholarship, this article will develop a historically and materially based ethics. This is crucial for understanding McCarthy's novel, and for understanding the ethical and philosophical stakes of his work more generally. What is important to understand, is that the novel stages a move beyond the closed circularity of 'mercantile ethics' of Chigurh towards a more nuanced theory of ethics based on the deepening

moral uncertainty of Bell, as he begins to grasp the concrete and historical consequences of the rampant capitalism of the illegal drug wars. The austere and rational violence Chigurh represents is not desirable for McCarthy, but is always possible, and thus ethical decisions for McCarthy inevitably remain entwined with a necessary confrontation with violence. In the last analysis, I argue McCarthy's ethical vision is not wholly conservative but denotes the necessary sacrifice of one's customs, traditions, and mores, as represented by Moss and Bell; deeper ethical comprehension becomes possible when, paradoxically, the contingency of one's communal ethics becomes visible. The virtue of Sheriff Bell is precisely that he does not remain entrenched in existing social mores. *No Country for Old Men* articulates something generically human, an ethics that necessarily transcends cherished values, identity, and communal belonging.

### **Derrida, McCarthy, and the Paradox of Decision**

Derrida's reading of the ethical decision, principally in *The Gift of Death* and his essay 'Force of Law,' offers an instructive account of ethical decisions. Derrida explains the conditions of an ethical decision, i.e. what must be the case for an ethical decision to be ethical in the first place. The ethical decision is radically split; a decision cannot guarantee the ultimate success or failure of its intended outcomes. If a decision is to be ethical from its inception, it must be structurally contingent. This means that any ethical decision is open to corruption or perversion from the outset. If this were not the case, then the ethical decision could not become responsive to particular ethical situations. This is also why, for Derrida, an ethical decision in pursuit of justice remains incalculable, since the good can never decisively upend the bad (Derrida, 'Force of Law', 257). Bell and Moss reflect this logic in *No Country for Old Men*, as a just decision can always be usurped by other possible outcomes.

For Derrida, the: "...idea of justice is always very close to the bad, even to the worst for it can always be re-appropriated by the most perverse calculation." (257). The law, as represented in the novel by Bell, and following Derrida's logic, is structurally obliged to incessantly reconsider

itself in terms of how it is previously calculated ('Force of Law', 251). As I will develop, Chigurh is a figure of the law, of the calculable, of a rational accounting, where everything is counted and determined in advance. He is risk-averse to the excesses of capitalism and the risks the pursuit of unchecked profit: "The prospect of outsized profits leads people to exaggerate their own capabilities." (McCarthy, 253) Chigurh is a figure of unambiguous control; his ethical decisions are configured towards ensuring the past is the same as the present and is the same as the future. Bell, despite his obvious conservatism, represents the domain of the incalculable. As Derrida suggests, all ethical decisions are haunted by a temporal duration, haunted by the past and future communities: an ethical decision cannot be reduced to the purely present. What is valuable about Derrida's reading of the ethical decision is that it helps show the transition from the law to justice as manifested through the development of Bell's character. Bell begins as a figure of law and authority; the origin of that authority is a fictional sham for Bell by the end. Due to his non-confrontation with Chigurh, he moves towards a figure of justice as Derrida understands it. The achievement of Bell is that he reaches a more profound ethical knowledge, one that sees justice as a form of promise. Ethical decisions must retain a sense of possibility, rather than for Chigurh, where future and past are only ever a reproduction of the present. As Derrida says: "The Future loses the openness, the coming of the other (who comes) without which there is no justice; and the future can always reproduce the present, announce itself or present itself as a future present in the modified form of the present" (Derrida, 'Force of Law' 256).

Chigurh endorses what Derrida calls the calculable; his ethics are methodical, instrumental, and systematic. Chigurh encapsulates Derrida's logic of the calculable, where an ethical decision is valuable only if instrumental, only if reproducing a predetermined program. For example, when murdering Carla Jean, Chigurh says: "You can say 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." (McCarthy, 260] What distinguishes Chigurh is that he is unethical *because* he has a rational

preordained code. When Derrida examines the status of responsibility, he argues that the structure of a responsible decision is not calculable. If a responsible decision were to be prearranged in advance, then it is simply not ethical. The philosophical point is elementary; ethical decisions need to be about more than themselves if they are to relate to others and the world. As Chigurh's decision is not ethical when he murders Carla Jean, there is no rational reason for him to "...second say the world". (260)

An authentic ethical decision is therefore not easy to come by. The opposite is true for Chigurh whose principles are exceptionally easy to enact. What stops us drawing equivalence between the weird rational relativism of Chigurh, and Bell's ethical uncertainty, is that Bell remains a figure who is unable to take for granted any of the values he inhabits; he undergoes what Derrida calls "...the test and ordeal of the undecidable." (Derrida, 'Force of Law' 252) Bell, confronting his cowardice in the war, the sheer luck he perceives in marrying Loretta, and the fear which facing Chigurh represents, is certainly a conservative, but one at the intersection of the calculable and the incalculable. This demonstrates McCarthy's nuanced philosophical understanding of what an ethical decision requires, and matches the inevitable degree of undecidability which Derrida asserts haunts all decision: "A decision that would not go through the test or ordeal of the undecidable would not be a free decision; it would be the programmable application or the continuous unfolding of a calculable process" (Derrida, 'Force of Law' 252). The rules that so enamor Chigurh, are specifically those which Bell transgresses in his vacillation between the calculable and the incalculable. McCarthy demonstrates through the characters of Moss and Bell, that while rules and regulations certainly exist, they only become ethical once they stop being rule bound. What disturbs Bell the lawman throughout the novel, is the inadequacy of the law for justice, or as Derrida puts it: "At no moment, it seems, can a decision be said to be presently and fully just: either it has not yet been made according to a rule, and nothing allows on to call it just, or it has already followed a rule – whether given, received, confirmed, preserved or reinvented –which, in its turn, nothing

guarantees absolutely.”(253) If there is a necessary sacrifice of rules as a precondition for ethical life, then Bell corresponds to Derrida’s logic.

In *The Gift of Death* Derrida, commenting on Søren Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*, argues it is exactly because a responsible decision is inflected with uncertainty from beginning to end that it is ethical in the first place. The example Derrida gives is Kierkegaard’s reading of the biblical story of Abraham. For Kierkegaard, Abraham represents the sacrifice of the ethical world for the affirmation of the religious and transcendent, or in Kierkegaardian terms, the shift from the ethical and universal sphere of existence to the leap to the religious sphere of existence. Derrida agrees with Kierkegaard to a point; the story of Abraham reveals the structural necessity of sacrifice and disobedience for ethical decision-making. To be ethical, the moral rules, traditions, and customs one inhabits, become contingent for a real ethical decision to take place. Put simply, civil disobedience is essential for ethical decision-making.

The story of Abraham has such resonance, as it demonstrates the necessity of violence for ethics. Derrida is not prescribing violence – he is arguing that violence and sacrifice are inherent to ethical decisions. As such, all the moral rules upon which we count, with which we calculate, are sacrificed in the lived experienced of ethical dilemmas. While Derrida sees Kierkegaard’s account of Abraham as valuable, he questions Kierkegaard’s transition from the ethical and universal sphere to a religious one (Derrida, *Learning to Live Finally* 51). For Kierkegaard, the radical abyss presented by the Biblical story allows reconciliation with faith, and this faith invariably leads to recompense, namely the return of Isaac. As such, God can be counted on to save Isaac. Derrida famously suggests that the deeper wisdom in the Bible story reveals that ethics is radically paradoxical rather than religious. Ethical paradoxes are universal not religious where “*tout autre est tout autre*” – every other is wholly other (Derrida, *The Gift of Death* 84-88). As Adam Kelly shows, for Derrida the power of the Biblical story resides in seeing Abraham as the “...exemplary everyman, faced with the choice between incompatible demands (Kelly 34).”

Thus, ethical decisions must take place without the solace and comfort of one's communal belonging. A responsible decision only takes place when one's loyalty to one's community is undermined. Considering this, the covenant between father and son we witness at the end of the novel, where Bell dreams of his father's promise, represents Bell's haunting by the persistence, and survival of human resilience in the proximity of relentless violence. Bell finds that behind all our pretensions, our value judgments, and moral codes, lies uncertainty, but an uncertainty bound to survival [*survivance*], promise and affirmation. For Derrida, such survival is "...an originary concept that constitutes the very structure of what we call existence, *Dasein*, if you will. We are structurally survivors, marked by this structure of the trace and of the testament (Derrida, *Learning to Live Finally* 51)." For Derrida, any notion of: "...responsibility, of decision, or of duty are condemned *a priori* to paradox scandal and aporia. Paradox, scandal and aporia are themselves nothing other than sacrifice, the revelation of conceptual thinking at its limit, at its death and finitude (Derrida, *The Gift of Death* 69)." Crucially, Bell's ethical quandaries reveal a fundamental paradox: our ethical decision introduces both an irretrievable violence into ethical life, as well as affirmation and tenacity. As Derrida shows, an ethical decision cannot be mere convenience nor programmatic. This is the position of Anton Chigurh.

## **Section 2: Anton Chigurh and the Calculable Order of Decision**

How can we interpret the enigmatic Chigurh as an ethical decision-maker? On the surface, Chigurh is a calculating, merciless and relentless psychopath. He is an archetypal Angel of Death destabilizing Bell's very local sense of justice and fairness. McCarthy defines Chigurh preternaturally. He is real, existing alongside this world, yet wholly not of it. He is "...a true and living prophet of destruction,' a man who "...by his own admission has no soul (3-4)." Within the novel's wider geo-political context, Chigurh is the *telos* of the American drug war, a by-product of ruthless profiteering, and the hedonistic instrumentalism of drug cartels and their consumers. Despite his fellow hitman, Carson Wells suggesting he: "...has principles. Principles that even



transcend money or drugs,” his aesthetic remains dark and nihilistic (153). Chigurh devotes himself to the creative power of negation, exalting in the deterministic concatenations of cause and effect.

Conventionally, scholarly wisdom emphasizes that Chigurh is an agent of fortune and chaos, dispensing life, and death on a mere flip of a coin, to which Sheriff Bell is a sober and measured contrast. Chigurh is often regarded as an incarnation of chaos theory, a Mephistophelian reminder of the power of chaos over order, his coin-toss a cosmic conduit for ‘material chaos.’<sup>2</sup> For Richard B. Woodward, Chigurh is a byword for moral disorder and: “A symbol of the terrifying randomness that in the author's view governs the universe...” (Woodward, ‘Bernard Madoff and Anton Chigurh’).]

Rather than characterizing Chigurh as an agent of pure chance and destruction, I argue Chigurh represents order. He is more representative of a hyper-rationalism and ruthless efficiency, than an anarchic moral vacuum. In this way, he corresponds firmly to what Derrida calls the ‘calculable.’ Chigurh represents a moral absence *because* of his commitment to the calculable, to order and to determinism, not despite it, whereas Bell is best described as the figure who must go through the necessary human trial of what Derrida calls ‘impossible’ and competing ethical demands. It is Chigurh’s moral hyper-rationalism that leads Bell to re-evaluate his longstanding beliefs, and gain a more enriched sense of ethics by the end of the text.

The most obvious symbol of Chigurh’s instrumentalism is his means of dispatching his victims. His weapon of choice is a captive bolt-pistol or cattle stun-gun, dispensing instantaneous death. A cattle gun is used in industrial meat production, providing an easy and efficient way to kill animals. The cattle gun operates on several symbolic registers. Firstly, it acts as a punctuation mark, separating the act of death from what comes before and after. In *No Country for Old Men* McCarthy describes its action as being accompanied by a “pneumatic hiss and click (7).” Already, Chigurh diminishes the possibility his victims’ decisions might involve a negotiation between past and future; his inhumanness discards any narrative span of the victims. He is indifferent to the

possibility humans can live their past, present and future, and instead prefers to reduce them to the immediate present. Secondly, the cattle gun has a brute physicality, forcing a direct equivalence between human and animal worlds. For Chigurh, people cannot elevate themselves above the determinism of the mechanical world. Thirdly, the cattle gun reveals the clear rationality and logic of his murders; Chigurh is devoted to mechanized death. The cattle gun is a means to an end, a fitting instrumental weapon reducing all ethical possibilities to an instantaneous now. Finally, and most importantly, the cattle gun displays Chigurh's philosophical voluntarism.<sup>3</sup> In philosophical terms, Chigurh is what would be called a naïve realist. He thinks the world is as he perceives it, and his perception is one of the deterministic organization of physical matter.<sup>4</sup> Chigurh's decisions are only ever reflections of causal precedents that determine each act. He remains indifferent to the real risk human beings face when making ethical decisions.

McCarthy shows Chigurh is unethical because he diminishes victims of their incalculability, i.e. the existential fact that human events have promise, or may experience themselves otherwise. His mechanistic moral code is without what Derrida sees as the uncertainty of the decision, as an ethical decision necessarily disrupts "...both the freedom and the will of every subject – surprise in a word the very subjectivity of the subject..." (Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship* 68) Chigurh's moral code is unethical because it attempts to avoid unpredictability, and attempts to be absolutely determined. As Carla Jean pleads for her life towards the end of the novel, she tells Chigurh, "You don't have to. You don't. You don't," but for Chigurh there can be no other way (257-258). The only thing that can truly offer salvation to humans is choice; a choice that coincides with the way the world has mechanically come to be at that moment – hence the coin toss. Within Chigurh's perverse logic, he requires humans to endorse the mechanical reality of choice, and a choice that affirms things can be no other way. The choice of a coin toss which Chigurh offers his victims is a mechanized and determined choice; it is not a human choice, one that involves uncertainty with a view of possible consequences. Chigurh's logic cannot be

discerned by Carla Jean, and from her perspective Chigurh will be responsible for her murder: “You make it like it was the coin. But you’re the one (258).”

Carla Jean cannot disentangle herself from the chain of choices and consequences that brought Chigurh to her home. Choice, for Carla Jean, in a very human way, entails surviving with the uncertainty of its consequences, as well as the possibility that things might be otherwise. Chigurh reverses this procedure, as for him certainty and instrumentality govern all choice; in the most rational way possible, choice is an adornment of the determinism of the mechanical world. Chigurh says as much. Prior to murdering Wells, he argues: “I wanted to see if I could extricate myself through an act of will. Because I believe that one can. That such a thing is possible. But it was a foolish thing to do. A vain thing to do (174-175).” Interrogating his own voluntarism, Chigurh clearly determines that an act of will cannot elevate one beyond the brute physics of the material world. As such, Chigurh is the truly conservative and nihilistic figure of the novel, not Sheriff Bell. For Chigurh, the choices we take, the attempts to change our lives or the world for the better, are always predestined to fail. The choice Chigurh offers is not a meaningful choice – it is aimed at conserving the way things are, and undermining any possibility that an ethical decision might promise progress. In this way, Chigurh is the true conservative cynic, a loathsome fatalist that represents the nihilistic leveling of all possible ethical alternatives.

Chigurh’s character, rather than being cast as a chaotic figure, should thus be considered as radically rational. Every effect follows a predetermined cause; every means is an instrument to some end. What distinguishes the dysfunctional rationality of Chigurh’s moral code is his inability to discriminate between objects in the world and human decisions or values. For McCarthy, Chigurh manifests himself through his control of and engagement with the physical world, and this world is an instrument to be manipulated to his will. This physicalism is why he cannot distinguish the life of a human from that of a thing. The vanity of humans for Chigurh is that we think choice can save us, making us exceptional and separate from the rest of the world. This is underlined in

his altercation with the shopkeeper, where he proposes: “Anything can be an instrument...Small things. Things you wouldnt even notice (57).”

The obvious symbol of Chigurh’s commitment to determinism over ethics, is the coin he uses to offer his victims an alternative. The coin Chigurh uses prior to dispensing victims represents a culmination of calculable determination. The coin is a cosmic conduit of order, control, and the acceptance of the physical determinism of nature. Therefore, a coin is apt for Chigurh, as it is evacuated of any symbolic value, and is merely interchangeable with the rest of the physical world. Interestingly, Chigurh tells the shopkeeper not to put the coin in his pocket, as he would not be able to tell the difference with other coins:

He picked the coin from his wrist and handed it across.

What do I want with that?

Take it. It’s your lucky coin.

I don’t need it.

Yes you do. Take it

The man took the coin. I got to close now, he said.

Don’t put it in your pocket.

Sir?

Don’t put it in your pocket.

Where do you want me to put?

Don’t put it in your pocket. You wont know which one it is.(57)

At first glance, this might seem like he is telling the shopkeeper that *that* coin is special and exceptional, and ought to be treasured, having more value than other coins. However, the coin that Chigurh uses does not denote fortune or luck, instead it denotes probability, interminable cost/benefit analysis, the elimination of contingency and risk from decisions, and a sovereign certitude over the hazardous reality of life. It is Chigurh’s decision to invest the coin with power and value, and it remains his decision that the shop-keeper live or dies. There is nothing uncertain

about it. The coin-toss confirms Chigurh's preternatural superiority as the most invulnerable man in the world, someone who does not see the coin as an agent of chaos or luck, but of the control of the order inherent in all things. As Wells is reminded: "“Somewhere in the world is the most invincible man. Just as somewhere is the most vulnerable...That's a belief that you have? No. It's called statistics (141).”

A coin, just as much as Chigurh, represents the abolition of the lived history of his victims. The coin toss Chigurh offers his victims is a reduction of the narrative and developmental arc of ethical decision-making. The coin crystallizes all past and future moments in the chain of cause and effect, cohering in a mechanical now point, no different to any other moment in history. The coin is thus not a symbol of disorder and chaos, but precisely the opposite. For Chigurh, the truth of the world resides in the ability to separate the act from the thing: “You see the problem. To separate the act from the thing. As if the parts of some moment in history might be interchangeable with some other moment (57).” Any object within the world can be subject to an ‘accounting.’ Chigurh's code is on the side of the object, rather than the existential act, with humans being indistinguishable from other objects. Chigurh's fatalism emerges from his unquestioning acceptance of the way the world is, and his scientific adherence to the obdurate determinism of nature. His victims are as interchangeable as money, reduced to the isolated and discrete moment of a coin toss. What is most tragic about this logic is that his victims become disconnected from the arc of their temporal life and everyday decisions, becoming concentrated in a single now point. Chigurh denudes victims of their imminent possibilities, their lost past, as well as any meaningful present: “I'm talking about your life. In which now everything can be seen at once (175).”

Chigurh's voluntarism is fascistic; his destructive powers are shorthand for conventional homogeneity, rather than contingency and chaos. Combining destruction and uniformity underlines Chigurh's weird confluence of choice and determinism. Put through the lens of Derrida's account of ethics, Chigurh represents the precise opposite of what an ethical decision is. If an ethical

decision requires both promise and uncertainty, then Chigurh willfully reduces the future and past to the present of a single moment. If an ethical decision is to be ethical, it must take place at the intersection of the past, present and future. Chigurh nullifies any sense that an ethical decision can develop. He cannot elevate himself above the ebb and flow of history. Notably, Chigurh never wears a seatbelt, as he is a master of fate and fortune. However, Chigurh ultimately discovers he is as subject to chance events as anybody, when a car accidentally hits him at an intersection (260). In summary, we can discern McCarthy's distinct philosophical position on the status of ethical decisions. Chigurh's moral code emerges from the reduction of the human to the brute physicality of the world. Any ethical decision is only an expression of the mechanical *logos* of the causes and effects of the material world. Chigurh is a calculating machine presenting an absolute ethical negation that reduces the human being to a mere mechanical present.

### **Llewellyn Moss and the Tragedy of Renewal**

The novel itself is set in 1980, a threshold year, a punctuation mark between past and future, where America is still experiencing generational tension between the old and young in the aftermath of the Vietnam War.<sup>5</sup> Ronald Regan's election as President represents an uneasy accommodation between a modernizing capitalism and a nostalgic return to the Mythic West. Moss and Bell are veterans of two different wars, and McCarthy elaborates their generational disconnection. The decisions of characters serve to isolate themselves from others, and they are immiserated due to their separation from the collective fate and historical possibility of generational struggles. Jay Ellis astutely shows how the form of the novel expresses fraught dialogue between past, present and future. (Ellis 32) The different narratives represent stories of a 'young man' and 'old man,' of disconnected worlds existing apprehensively alongside each other. Consolidating Ellis's analysis, the novel works as a negotiation of generational anxieties. The novel is understood best as staging the elongated experience of both Bell and Moss in tandem. The three central protagonists, within their own context represents the past (Bell), the future (Moss/Carla

Jean/Hitchhiker), and the present (Chigurh). The tragedy of the novel resides in the inability of central characters to comprehend how their decisions are part of a shared tradition, as well as a shared future – except for Chigurh, for whom every choice remains tied to a determined present.

Moss's character is remarkably typical of the traditional Cowboy. He is a rugged individual, independent and self-sustaining, at ease with the borderless desert. He adheres to a chivalric code of honor, as demonstrated by his return to the scene where he leaves a man dying. Moss is also a liminal figure; he exists inside and outside the law. He is loyal and caring, yet also a maverick who transgresses the law of the jungle, as well as the law of the State by stealing money from a drug deal gone wrong. The tragedy of his character is simple. Moss commits the cardinal sin of American mercantile ethics: he tries to get something for nothing.

The function of Moss in this scene is exceptionally important. As a liminal figure Moss, is torn between different ethical possibilities. On the one hand, he is a symbol of the type of ethical decision-making that Derrida outlines. On the other hand, stealing the money entangles Moss within the inevitable cycle of exchange and violence that characterizes the drug trade. After stealing the money, Moss's decision to return to the scene where he has left the cartel member dying can be decisively read alongside Derrida's understanding of the ethical decision. Moss's guilt, and his subsequent decision to perform an act of kindness, inevitably puts his own life at risk, putting himself in the impossible situation of rectifying his theft of the money. McCarthy injects the narrative of Moss with the type of uncertainty, risk and contingency necessary for the taking place of an authentic ethical decision as Derrida outlines it.

Unfortunately, for Moss it is too late: his fate is already preordained for the fatal encounter with Chigurh. Moss represents a version of Bell, tempted by the false promise of the unlimited rewards and exchange of the drugs trade. As with Chigurh, Moss acts as a foil for illuminating Bell's moral development, and functionally within the novel he serves to illuminate the ethical uncertainty that Bell is slowly exposed to as the novel unfolds. Moss tragically oscillates between

Bell and the world of Chigurh. The dominating decision Moss takes is of course to take the money. Moss makes a mistake and must live uncertainly with the consequences. Strikingly, the decision to take the money enters Moss into the circularity of exchange and thus overlaps with Chigurh's moral aesthetic. Moss's decision crystallizes into something exceptional and immune from the movement of history as well other people: "His whole life was sitting there in front of him. Day after day from dawn til dark until he was dead. All of it cooked down into forty pounds of paper in a satchel (McCarthy, 17-18)."<sup>6</sup> The point is clear, Moss is tempted by security and certainty: life can simply crystallize into a single choice. This choice is salvation, a radical decision that illuminates all the things that have gone and are to come. Moss says to himself: "You have to take this seriously. You can't treat it like luck (23)." This is not fate; it cannot be any other way. This is a fatal error, as he is imposing meaning upon an event that is senseless. At any rate, Moss's initial voluntarism is moot, as later in the novel we see a tracking device in the satchel of money. McCarthy presents Moss as tragically human. He makes a mistake, he experiences guilt, and he tries to rectify his initial mistake by returning to the dying man with water. Again, Derrida's analysis of the ethical decision is relevant. The idea that seduces Moss, is that he can willfully choose and transform his existence so that previous and future selves become irrelevant. As Derrida shows, the freedom of the ethical decision is something anxious and tortured, which befits Moss's decision to return to help the cartel member. The ethical force of the novel is evident in Bell, and to a lesser extent Moss, since ethical possibility becomes more visible when communal consensus is exposed to uncertainty and violence. An ethical decision must require the following of a rule, in the sense that a decision is right and lawful, but on the other hand, an ethical choice also needs to be re-evaluated in newer contexts. This is not the case for Chigurh also, since if one judges an ethical decision as strictly adhering to a determinate code, then one becomes what Derrida calls a 'calculating machine (Derrida, 'Force of Law' 252).'



The enigma of the law requires it to be transgressed and conserved at the same time. Tragically, at the point where Moss steals the money from the cartel, he cannot discern that ethical decisions are both regulated and unregulated, both inside and outside the law at the same time. Moss's tragic decision to take the money is an attempt to elevate his decision above the interplay of rule and sacrifice, in a doomed attempt at absolute self-creation. The choice of theft is designed to generate infinite possibilities and the further choices money can offer to Moss.<sup>7</sup> While Moss and Bell waver between the predictable and the unpredictable, this is not the case for Chigurh. Moss's tragedy is that he does not have a future. What differentiates Moss from Chigurh is that absolute choice cannot wholly tempt Moss, or his later realization that one cannot remake one's life *ex nihilo*.

His initial seduction by the possibilities money offers is tempered by his kindness, and the grim reality where: "Everybody's huntin me (231)." In a philosophical discussion with the Hitchhiker, Moss fully realizes the consequences of his initial decision. He rejects the thinking that one arrives at one's current position in an act of self-creation which transcends history. He rejects the idea "that you got there without taking anything with you (227)." His hitchhiker is going to California, the American paragon of ambition, renewal, escape and regeneration. In philosophical terms, Moss repudiates the idea of *tabula rasa* or the possibility of completely 'startin over (227).' Any renewal of the self is entangled with the historical genesis and sacrifices of one's character:

It's not about knowin where you are. It's about thinkin you got there without takin anything with you. Your notions about startin over. Or anybody's. You don't start over. That's what it's about. Ever step you take is forever. You cant make it go away. None of it...You think when you wake up in the morning yesterday don't count. But yesterday is all that does count. What else is there? Your life is made out of the days it's made out of. Nothin else. (227)

Once he realizes the true nature of decision, he dies. In Moss's conversation with Chigurh on the telephone, the call that ultimately condemns Carla Jean to death, Moss realizes not just the meaninglessness of his initial choice, but the fact any choice will not save either him or Carla Jean

from Chigurh's distorted rationalism. Moss, while injured, allows himself one last feeble defiant outburst: "I'm goin to bring you something all right, Moss said. I've decided to make you a special project of mine (185)."

McCarthy distinguishes Moss from Chigurh by showing the inevitable erosion of Moss's autonomy; Moss's character develops in the novel from a rugged individual to one utterly dependent on others, such as Wells, the Hitchhiker, the boys who sell him clothes, or the fellow veteran who allows him back over the border. Moss comes to see that the free choice he grabbed with rampant opportunism in the desert, offers a corrupted version of human freedom, one bringing misery in its aftermath. Choice cannot save Moss. McCarthy uses Moss to show that a choice is only ethical once it is not wholly individual. The only character wholly self-determining is Chigurh, whereas Moss only attains a paltry degree of self-determination, a self-determination painfully mitigated by the wider context of a more developed and profounder dependence on others, as well as the world in general. Is it possible to extend this combination of determination and dependency, to a figure as supposedly conservative and recalcitrant as Bell?

### **Sherriff Bell and the Sacrifice of Ethics**

Bell comes closer to ethical decision-making because he undergoes an ordeal of renunciation, an inescapable sacrifice and renunciation of those things he holds dear: ethical belonging; the Myths of the American West; the values and manners he constantly reiterates throughout the novel. It is only because his convictions and traditions are exposed to a violent uncertainty that his ethical deliberations are more insightful. Stephen Tatum envisages a similar context, and a helpful critique of the limitations of mercantile ethics, in his incisive exploration of *No Country for Old Men* in relation to the *narcocorrido*. For Tatum, despite Bell's inchoate protestations about the loss of 'mercantile ethics,' manners, and customs, the ethical foundation of the novel emerges from the deepening wisdom Bell accumulates from facing down the uncertainties he is exposed to through the illegal narcotics trade. Thus, Bell's internal narration conflicts with the reality of the external

world; Bell's cognitive world itself is subject to uncertainty, with Bell attempting to impose stability on the chaos of the world (Tatum, 80). What is significant in Tatum's reading, for my analysis, is that it shows that Bell's virtue solely defined by a recalcitrant mindset whose sole purpose is a return to the nostalgic lost past of mercantile ethics. This is because embedded within the formal organization of the novel is the contingency of Bell's moral psychology, or as Tatum argues: "Bell's abiding narrative desire is to produce a narrative explanation that will make disjunctive things and events in space and time cohere." (Tatum 80) This desire is never satiated within *No Country for Old Men*, since with Chigurh Bell confronts the absolute irrationality of certainty, which creates a "cognitive paralysis" in which Bell acknowledging his own finitude. (Tatum, 93)

Bell is a typical McCarthy character; he is a cowboy out of time. As with characters in *The Border Trilogy*, Bell fails to cope with modernization, perceiving time-honored values waning in the face of wanton violence. At the outset, Bell is obstinate in lamenting the diminishment of a Golden Age, and rendered useless in the face of the intractable ruthlessness of Chigurh. As with other McCarthy characters such as the Kid, Suttree or Culla, he is radically flawed, haunted by his cowardice in World War II, and the manufactured heroism he is feted with on his return. Like Moss, he is a veteran of war, as well as a threshold figure existing in the world of past, and present, but at home in neither. As the name 'Bell' suggests, he is both fixed and out of time, a punctuating character at the end of a period, crystallized in a present moment between a time that is gone and a time to come, an alarm and a warning of a lost future. Bell sees his world transfigured in an irretrievable way. As befitting his conservatism, Bell is rooted in the past, resistant to change and thus unable to imagine an alternative future. Bell is proud of the fact that he was Sheriff at the same time as his grandfather. He takes pride in generational continuity; he yearns for the immutable, whilst valuing the coincidence of the past and present (90). Elsewhere, Bell describes 'truth'. "It dont move about from place to place and it dont change from time to time. You cant

corrupt it any more than you can salt salt. You cant corrupt it because that's what it is (123).” Truth is something elemental, irreducible, and is clearly more eminent than the narrative and stories Bell considers trivial. There are deeper truths than the vicissitudes of human affairs and any change happening to human beings is secondary to the primary truth of the past. Here Bell is drawn as an arch-conservative: “But I think it goes deeper than that. It is community and it is respect, of course, but the dead have more claims on you than you might want to admit or you even might know about and them claims can be very strong indeed. Very strong indeed (124).”

However, the ethical force of the novel depends on Bell's inherent conservatism being exposed to risk and uncertainty. While on the surface Bell makes a strong claim to the truth of tradition, this is undermined through his persistent ignorance. One of his most oft-repeated refrains throughout the book is ‘I don't know.’ The value of McCarthy's story arc is the extent to which Bell manages to surpass his rootedness in the past. The ethical insight McCarthy achieves in the novel emerges through the opening of the conservative mind. Bell's philosophical enlightenment emerges from the non-confrontation with Chigurh, who makes manifest the fallibility of his conservatism. Bell's ethical development materializes when his certainty about the deeper order to the universe is undermined. Chigurh injects a radical uncertainty into his existence, forcing him to reevaluate the structure of his existing values. This is what distinguishes Bell from Chigurh, and what makes Chigurh psychopathic. Chigurh is a solipsist, who accepts his subjective view of the universe as objective, whereas Bell's subjective view of the universe exist alongside doubts about the objective nature of the world. Bell's character is ultimately Socratic, where ignorance is essential to the constitution of truth. For example, Wells offers a damning appraisal of Bell's limited knowledge: “He's a redneck sheriff in a hick town in a hick county. In a hick state (157).” The contrast between the slick, knowing Wells, and the supposedly backward and ignorant Bell, foregrounds Bell's deepening wisdom that ethical knowledge irretrievably coexists with violence

and uncertainty. As we saw with Derrida's reading of Abraham, ethical life becomes more visible when contested and open the sacrifice of pre-existing customs.

Notwithstanding Chigurh, many of the central characters in *No Country for Old Men* begin in a state of knowing and proceed to states of unknowing. This dynamic can be seen in Bell's conversation with Carla Jean, where he extols and explains the virtues of a youthful marriage, in which account the decision to marry his wife, remains steadfast, and is immune to "...every dumb thing I ever done (133)." Carla Jean challenges this sentiment, suggesting "Nineteen is old enough to know that if you have got something that means the world to you it's all that more likely it'll get took away (134)." Bell responds that he is no stranger to this idea. The ethical dimension of these sentiments reveals what is purposeful and meaningful is dependent on the potential threat of their removal; meaning and purpose are inextricably tied to loss. The ethical and philosophical purpose of his character reveals the split nature of the ethical decision. Bell's ultimate decision not to confront Chigurh reveals to him a sense of connection between past, present, and future, with Bell struggling to come to terms with the reality that ethics is precarious and fragile, with a very weak guarantee of value.

Bell reveals the extent conservative characters have the capacity to overcome their own dull rationality, and realize that things exist beyond family, locale, and community. What is valuable can only be sustained in the face of contingency. As Bell acknowledges: "We dedicate ourselves anew daily. Something like that. I think I'm going to commence dedicatin myself twice daily (168)." Therefore, an ethical decision does not subscribe to immutable truths independent of humans. Nor must we argue does Bell subscribe to a liberal choice of an autonomous self. Instead, ethical decisions are precarious, demanding sustenance and application. Dedication can only draw sustenance from that which is uncertain, and those things that are worth sticking to are not immune from challenge, indecision, and ambiguity. Bell becomes conscious that ethical choice is not about ownership of choice. As Lydia Cooper puts it, what Bell realizes through the experience of

violence, is that the only ethical identity worth having emerges through "...unrelenting commitment to being in relationship with other people. (Cooper 52)"

The nuance of Bell's character arises from the extent his conservatism is negated. As the novel progresses, many supposed lynchpins of his conservatism are on hollow ground. His war heroism is a sham to the extent he thinks he stole his own life (278). Any guarantee of salvation is spurned in the face of the superior enemy that is Chigurh, he loses belief in an American Golden age, World War II creates traumas and generational strife between 'rednecks' and GI's intellectualized by the GI Bill (195). It could be argued his anxieties represent a banal type of conservatism, i.e. a profound skepticism about human nature. But this misrecognizes the extent Bell's character is stripped of his identity as the novel progresses. As well as the fact that he does not deem himself worthy of his community, he is stripped of his assurance of how others perceive him. It is not simply the case that America had a Golden Age, when mercantile ethics were flourishing and now things have turned foul. Chigurh instigates a radical stripping of Bell's subjectivity to the extent that Bell's folksiness is dimly transcended and opened to the universal dilemmas of human decisions.

In what could be taken as a critical broadside against liberal America, Bell makes an argument against cultural relativism: "...anybody that cant tell the difference between rapin and murderin people and chewin gum has a whole lot bigger of a problem than what I've got (196)." This is undeniably posed in conservative terms, but the rejection of rape and murder is not restricted to conservatism. The nostalgic assumption that things were just simply better in the past is impossible and radically negated. In Bell's inchoate way, he recognizes a universal appeal beyond the narrow logic of family, loyalty and community. He is trying to find some fundamentals which transcend particular historical periods, and connect different generations in a common humanity. The generational dysfunction brought about by the GI Bill, as well as the Sixties, means culture is

more fractious, and Bell is trying to heal the rifts between the past, present and future. In one of the most telling scenes in the book, Bell argues with a lady who is pro-choice at a University:

I don't like the way this country is headed. I want my granddaughter to be able to have an abortion. And I said well mam I don't think you got any worries about the way the country is headed. The way I see it goin I dont have much doubt but what she'll be able to have an abortion. I'm going to say that not only will she be able to have an abortion, she'll be able to have you put to sleep. Which pretty much ended the conversation. (197)

This denotes obvious conservative anxiety about cultures of death. Early in the novel, Bell is alarmed at the cheapening of life, reflecting on a child being chucked in a waste disposal. However, we need to read this in a subtler way, which sees both the mother and Bell exposed to, and needing to transcend, each other's moral certainties. Abortion ought not to be literally read as Bell's personal objection to abortion. It should instead be understood as an indicator of generational disharmony, of the disjoining of the future from the present, as well as the necessarily unpredictable ordeal that is required to transcend the polarization of American culture wars. Given Bell and Loretta have lost a child, abortion represents a more fundamental philosophical point. It is not about the ethics of abortion *per se*, but as a metaphor for lost potential, and futurity.<sup>8</sup> The unsubtle equivalence Bell draws between euthanasia and abortion is not about the ethics of these issues, but expresses a fear on Bell's part about the intimate relation between rational choice and death.

*No Country for Old Men* peters out, and intentionally so. Formally, the novel is *High Noon* without the shoot-out. Bell is wholly unresolved, attempting to deepen his character with an investigation of Mammon. This signifies a deepening of his character, one which allows him to surpass his engrained conservatism and attempt to see the economic conditions of a fallen world. The philosophical difference between Chigurh and Bell rests on McCarthy embedding a chronic fallibility within Bell's knowledge. Paradoxically, Bell's ignorance of the real world allows him to grasp something fundamental, and that is the radical contingency of human existence. In the last analysis, Bell becomes Nietzschean, confronting the inevitable breakdown in '...mercantile ethics that leaves people settin out in the desert dead in their vehicles and by then it is too late (304).'"

Bell realizes that the moral code he inhabited all his life, is sacrificed to a rabid capitalism and a cultural narcotization induced by the illegal drug industry. By the end, Bell has a more enriched sense of ethical decision-making, realizing ethics require a deeper logic than the rational certainties of reward and payment, or the idea that morality is something that can be predetermined, and accounted for as a balanced economic exchange. Bell sees how “we’ve been bought with our own money (302).” This is in direct opposition to Chigurh whose ‘accounting is scrupulous (259).’ Bell’s ethical epistemology is one divested of self-reliance, as well as the humiliating destabilizing he receives in his failure to defeat Chigurh. By the end of the novel, Bell enters a state of Socratic wisdom, where his ethical refrain is one of uncertainty:

Money that can buy whole countries. It done has. Can it buy this one? I don’t think so. But it will put you in bed with people you ought not to be there with. It’s not even a law enforcement problem I doubt that it ever was. There’s always been narcotics. But people don’t just up and decide to dope themselves for no reason. By the millions. I don’t have no answer about that. In particular I don’t have no answer to take heart from (303).

Bell reaches terminal and abject defeat, after confronting economic forces beyond his capacity to comprehend. He demonstrates the position that ethical life is more valuable when exposed to loss. It is *because* decisions take place at the intersection of past, present and future, and precisely because, as Derrida has shown, the truest ethical decision demands the desertion of one’s cultural affiliation and loyalty that allows ethical wisdom to take place. Bell sees beyond the calculable exchange of mercantile ethics, remaining a survivor who has not earned his trauma.

What type of choice does *No Country for Old Men* reveal as an ethical decision? It is important to note that the ethical choice McCarthy has his characters live through is not consumerist choice. Such choices are easy, such as choosing between the different options on a McDonald’s menu. The type of choice McCarthy philosophically presents in *No Country for Old Men* is not the supposed liberation of consumer choice. This is very clear from Bell’s chastisement of those who consume drugs from the drug wars, for clearly playing their part in perpetuating



suffering. Ethical decisions as Derrida shows are not easy, they are difficult and require a profound sacrifice of the "...law of the home (*oikos*), of the hearth, of what is one's own or proper, of the private, of the love and affection of one's kin (Derrida, *The Gift of Death* 95)." Consumerist choice does not offer any meaningful connection with tradition or its sacrifice, nor does it offer any aspiration towards a different future. Such choice is not liberation, but an imprisonment in the hedonism of the now. Consumption is only an ethical choice tied to the present, and remains ahistorical, effortlessly luxuriating in the pleasures of the senses without recognition of tradition, value, and future aspiration. Bell offers us a different type of choice, an existential one, one where ethical decisions are cognizant of the world they are embedded in, whilst understanding the demands and burden of one's own limitations. Ultimately, Moss tragically cannot carry on to the future, leaving Bell offering a complex alternative to Chigurh. Chigurh is ultimately a feeble existentialist, who reduces all decisions to a rational self-authenticating choice that can be determined and controlled.<sup>9</sup> However, the irony is that by the close of the novel, the conservative Bell has the deeper understanding of existentialism.

The end of the novel sees McCarthy align Bell with some opaque symbolism. Like *Suttree*, *No Country for Old Men* ends with water symbolism. Bell reflects on the significance of an ancient stone water trough.

But this man had set down with a hammer and chisel and carved out a stone water trough to last ten thousand years. Why was that? What was it that he had faith in? It wasn't that nothin would change. Which is what you might think, I suppose. He had to know better'n that. I've thought about it a good deal. I thought about it after I left there with that house blown to pieces. I'm goin to say that water trough is there yet. It would of took something to move it, I can tell you that. So I think about him settin there with his hammer and his chisel, maybe just a hour or two after supper, I dont know. And I have to say that the only thing I can think of is that there was some sort of promise in his heart. (301)

Specifically, Bell asks what type of decision it takes to carve a well out of rock with a chisel. A few things occur here. Firstly, stone and rock express Bell's appreciation for achieving something fundamental and durable. Secondly, Bell admires something deeper than the instrumental function

of the water trough. Bell admires the capacity for continuity that the water trough offers, the sustenance it gives across the span of generations. Thirdly, while this desire for continuity could be read as a conservative nostalgia, it is more accurate to see that any reification of the past undermined by Bell's suggestion that the original maker of the trough was too wise to think that '...nothin would change (307).' Finally, the wisdom Bell takes from this elemental symbol is that any type of faith, like the trough makers, is not faith in an immutable truth which transcends history, but a faith that sustains itself alongside the finite uncertainties of history. As such, Bell is Nietzschean by the end of the novel, realizing that the sincerest ethical decision is one that can only willfully be steadfast in the face of the struggles of history. One can resort to the rabid and mechanistic rationalism of Chigurh, or one can struggle to elevate oneself alongside the brute material world as Bell tries to do.

## **Conclusion**

*No Country for Old Men* begins and ends with a promise, a promise full of certainty and inevitability. The promise on the opening pages is Bell's witness to death and condemnation: "I sent one boy to the gas chamber at Huntsville. One and only one. My arrest and my testimony (3)." Here Bell's decision is coldly nihilistic, and instrumentalist, condemning a murdering boy to death. By the final pages of the novel, he dreams of a covenant with his father: "And in the dream I know that he was goin on ahead and he was fixin to make a fire somewhere out there in all that dark and all that cold and I know that whenever I got there he would be there. And then I woke up (309)." The dream from his father is significant because it shows Bell simultaneously relying on an interpretation of the past along with an open futurity. The dream stands for a covenant of the past, present and future. By the close of the novel, the spark of fire in the wasteland, in the context of a father and son, as with *The Road*, shows that moral wisdom requires the intimacy of truth, ethics and uncertainty; the dream signifies the impossible and infinitely demanding task of finding a

common humanity beyond the moral certainties of different generations. With water and fire, birth and death, McCarthy shows ethical life enriched with ambiguity.

The importance of *No Country for Old Men* for understanding the ethical and philosophical stakes of McCarthy's novels cannot be overstated enough. The rationalism and borderline totalitarianism of Chigurh's certainty illuminates the burdensome recognition by Bell of human frailties and uncertainties, and with this recognition comes the ability to understand the struggles and suffering of fellow humans in their anxious attempts to be builders of a common world. McCarthy is self-consciously offering a different type of materialism, an elemental one, differing radically from the certainty and hyper-rationalism of Chigurh's mechanistic materialism. McCarthy offers the gloomy and fraught ethical decision-making of Bell as a palliative to Chigurh's schizoid binary of free will and determinism. Chigurh's instrumentalism and efficiency point to the 'easiness' of his decisions; Bell's ethical illumination is onerous. The difference between Bell and Moss against Chigurh is that their existence is deeply enmeshed in the concrete and material world; they have an ability to reflect and deliberate on their decisions, their outcomes, and the lived consequences of their actions for better or for worse. This type of ethical deliberation is impossible for Chigurh, as his immaterial rationalism dictates no meaning or purpose which can be attached to such reflections. What McCarthy demonstrates philosophically, is the density and flawed nature of ethical decision making. An ethical decision requires the complication of the moral habits, loyalties and cultural affiliations which embeds oneself in a moral community. An authentic ethical decision necessitates that humans survive, and carry on with the burden of their choices and consequences. In this way, *No Country for Old Men* typifies McCarthy's unworking of the Emersonian individualism that plays such a decisive role in the formation of American identity. The decisions of Sheriff Bell articulate a temporal ethics, one defined by endurance in the face of loss, as well as the inherent necessity of civil disobedience at the heart of the law in this

lawmaker. The ethical achievement of Bell, despite his cowardice and ignorance, is the integration of loss into his ethical vision in the face of the relentless moral vacuum which Chigurh represents.

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<sup>1</sup>There is speculation that McCarthy's work has become progressively more conservative. *No Country for Old Men* is supposedly representative of this trend. For example, F.H. Buckley places the novel in *National Review's* ten great conservative novels, citing the novel's scepticism of human perfectibility, its view of a flawed humanity, and the resolution these find in grace. For a good summary of McCarthy's purported conservatism, See Woodson, Linda. 'Materiality, Moral Responsibility, and Determinism in *No Country for Old Men*' (8). For a persuasive and vigorous critique of McCarthy's conservatism see David Cremean.

<sup>2</sup> Chigurh is commonly considered a figure of chaos. Benjamin Mangrum cites Chigurh as representative of a deterministic order of material chaos. (117). For Lydia Cooper, he is: "...an arbitrary wrecker-of-havoc like Native

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American tricksters.” (49). John Cant sees Chigurh as a figure of ‘implacable chaos (95).’ Dennis Cuthcins characterises Chigurh as a synthesis of fate and determinism (158). Stephen Frye notes the role of chaos theory as a principle motivator for Chigurh. Although, Frye offers a subtle deviation, acknowledging the symbiosis of order and chance: “From his point of view, consistent with chaos theory, an irreducibly complex matrix of cause and effect has brought them both to the present moment, and though chance governs the fall of the coin, it is a chance mitigated by all the intricate consequential moments that precede it. Even the portentous fortune in the toss is circumscribed by time and previous events.” (162).

3 Voluntarism argues that acts of will transcend intellect, embodiment, and emotions.

4 Naïve realism, often a pejorative term in philosophy, claims we perceive objects via our senses as they really are, via the experience of physical laws such as cause and effect, matter, size, and shape.

5 Moss, Wells, Bell and Chigurh are all ex-military. This book is about the Vietnam War fallout. For example, see Erika Spoden’s “Let There Be Blood: The Vein of Vietnam in *No Country for Old Men*,” for a good account of how the novel raises questions of inter-generational conflict.

6 McCarthy’s novels are often concerned with the loss of history, or what David Holloway calls, following Frederic Jameson, in the context of *Blood Meridian*, the ‘waning of history’ where there is crisis in a ‘living dialectical continuum of past, present and future’ (58).

7 For example, Moss briefly revels in consumerism, using bloodstained dollar bills to buy clothes and labels he likes (190,191), as well as using the money to bribe a wary taxi driver to take him to Mexico (186).

8 Bell is taunted by an inmate on death row: “Where do they find somebody like you? Have they got you in diapers yet? I shot that son of a bitch right between the eyes and drug him back to his care by the hair of the head and set the car on fire and burned him to grease.” (297) This obscene symbolic mix of birth and death confronts Bell with a cavalier disrespect for possibility

9 About the film adaptation, see Enda McCaffrey’s “Crimes of passion, Freedom and a Clash of Sartrean Moralities in the Coen Brothers’ *No Country for Old Men*” for a good account of how Chigurh represents a limited existentialism.