

Doing, Not Reading: Cormac McCarthy on the Virtues and Dangers of Literature

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Abstract: Cormac McCarthy's latest two novels, *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road*, engage discussions regarding the purpose and value of literature, showing how reading promotes both virtuous and dangerous habits. As the current state of the academy requires that teachers and students of literature justify the worth of their discipline, McCarthy's novels offer some insights on this issue unexplored by thinkers such as Mortimer J. Adler, Anthony T. Kronman, and more recently, Alan Jacobs. By depicting worlds shadowed by inevitable evils that his characters have no hope of overcoming, McCarthy demonstrates how narrative potentially provides human beings with the inner resources to choose a good existence in a fatal situation.

Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* (2005) has several Dostoevskian moments when Sheriff Ed Tom Bell, like Ivan Karamazov of *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), despairs of life after reading too many newspaper articles about atrocities in the world. Reports of evil corrupt Ivan as he reads about a boy ripped apart by dogs and a girl whose parents imprison her in an outhouse and smear her face with excrement (Dostoevsky 242-43). Similarly, Bell reads about a couple who devise a nursing home ruse to kill and torture the elderly while cashing their social security checks. Although both McCarthy and Dostoevsky demonstrate the dangers of reading, they have different reasons for investigating the issue. Dostoevsky's concerns relate to theodicy: one needs to have the right foundation, the right set of ideas and beliefs, when the prevalence of evil shakes one's being. Ivan Karamazov, a professing nihilist, does not have a religious grounding to help him with the problem of evil, and thus he becomes an apostate.

For McCarthy, reading becomes dangerous when it promotes physical and spiritual stagnancy, a state particularly egregious according to the values of the Western novel, the literary tradition with which *No Country for Old Men* resonates. In *West of Everything*, Jane Tompkins succinctly draws attention to the cultural indictment against stagnancy in Westerns when she calls "Doing, not talking" a basic code celebrated in such novels (50). *No Country for Old Men* underscores the Western novel's tradition of subordinating words and ideas to action and movement by locating Sheriff Bell's failure in his inability to act, not in his unsuccessful attempts to arrest the novel's villain. Sheriff Bell's obsession with

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reading about crime, and thereby encountering the depravity of human nature, signifies his misguided fixation on words and ideas. This fixation subsequently paralyzes him, both spiritually and professionally, and results in his despair and retirement. With this bleak portrayal of a reader, McCarthy's fiction prompts his audience, particularly students and teachers of literature, to consider how reading has the potential to diminish, and implicitly to preserve, the humanity of individuals who encounter evil.

Like Ivan Karamazov, who puts great effort into his construction of philosophical indictments against the concept of a good God while disregarding his own development of virtue, Bell fixates on the horrors of the world rather than acting, either for himself or his community. Both men experience dismay at the problem of evil, and both consequently know, on some level, that their reactions to evil are destructive to their own souls.¹ Sheriff Bell is particularly aware of the detrimental effects of his reading and when he makes concessions that it has become an unhealthy habit. For example, Bell says his wife has stopped reading the newspaper and that "[s]he is probably right. She generally is," yet the vacillating language that his wife "is probably right" indicates his indifference to attempt a change in his life (40). Later, after Moss's death, Bell goes to a restaurant with a newspaper and searches for the report of the murder, eventually asking the waitress for the evening paper, to which she answers, "I dont know [...] I quit readin it" (246). Bell's reply indicates his obsession with the depravity of humankind and the resulting spiritual malaise that keeps him from changing his life and becoming more active: "I dont blame you. I would if I could," he says (246).

The evils to which the newspaper is witness overwhelm Sheriff Bell so that he becomes incapable of functioning in the world. He retires from his office, dejected that a homicide occurred under his watch and relieved he will not have to pursue the harrowing murderer, Anton Chigurh. Rather than rise to the challenge, Bell reads the newspaper and becomes depressed by the evil he sees. When the newsworthy story happens in his own community, he resigns, becoming stagnant. In his retirement, he will likely continue reading the newspaper and thus experiencing despair at the harshness of the world, which in turn, instigates and maintains his paralysis. Consequently, in the final scene of the book, Bell's

¹ Ivan's discomfort with his own reaction to evil appears after his recitation of "The Grand Inquisitor," of which his tirade against the abuse of children is a precursor. After he and Alyosha part, Ivan feels unsettled about his conversation with his brother. He says, "For so many years I was silent with the whole world and did not deign to speak, and suddenly I spewed out so much gibberish!" (265).

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monologue about a dream of his father confirms the great failure of his life: his loss of movement. In the dream, as the horseback Bell finds himself on a mountain pass, his father overtakes him while carrying fire in a horn. Bell's father is more mobile than him, and the fire, missing from Bell's hands, denotes his father's determination to endure and to advance in the face of evil. As he watches his father progress along the mountain pass with the symbolic horn of fire, Bell fittingly wakes up, hindering any opportunity he has to move and to follow.

Reading the newspaper prefigures Bell's encounter with Anton Chigurh, the event that leads to his defeated retirement. Because reading, rather than doing, plays a central part in undermining Sheriff Bell's humanity, this novel prompts a question teachers and administrators regularly engage but which may be unfamiliar to students: if reading makes a nihilist out of Ivan Karamazov and turns Sheriff Ed Tom Bell into a fatalist, is it a virtuous or worthwhile practice for human beings? Furthermore, given Bell's resignation at the end of the novel, does reading violate a quintessential American value expressed in the cowboy code, "Doing, not talking"? (Tompkins 50).

No Country for Old Men indeed casts Sheriff Bell's reading as the antithesis of the cowboy code of action; however, McCarthy's most recent novel, *The Road* (2006), suggests that narrative, whether oral or written, is a conduit for hope. Hope, particularly in the Christian tradition, is the theological virtue that provides the momentum a person needs to navigate life. Hopeful, one of the companions of the protagonist of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), is an indispensable part of the journey because hope personified makes possible the actual progression of the pilgrim. Hope, furthermore, functions as the preeminent virtue of Dante's *Purgatory*, the section of *The Divine Comedy* (1320) featuring the movement of souls toward perfection and union with God. McCarthy's aptly titled *The Road*, therefore, links the concepts of movement and hope by reintroducing the image of a traveler transporting fire from *No Country for Old Men* into his subsequent novel.

The Road, like *No Country for Old Men*, portrays movement as a virtue symbolized by the phrase "carrying the fire," an enjoinder of which the man and the boy frequently remind each other. *The Road* is a post-apocalyptic tale, one that depicts a world beyond reading, but not beyond narrative. At one point, the man finds newspapers from the old world, and he considers their subjects trivial (28). He tells the boy stories he learned in the deceased world, "Old stories of courage and justice as he remembered them" (41). From

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these stories, the boy derives his concept of "the good guys": as his father tells him, these are the people who have hope, who keep moving, and who "dont give up. They keep trying" (137). However, by the end of the novel, when the boy becomes disillusioned by these stories and the concepts of courage and justice they portray, he exposes the discrepancy between life and narrative, stating, "in the stories we're always helping people and we dont help people" (268). The boy eventually rejects his father's stories from the old world, refusing to listen or to tell them. In this dying world, books cease to be read, and, when the boy rejects the old stories, narrative also faces death. However, the underlying values of the "stories of courage and justice" continue to influence the boy's imagination and to inform his decisions. At the end, he continues to travel the road, carrying the fire and seeking human relationships. Although narrative fades in this dying world, the stories that supply hope have an ineffable existence within the boy. Narrative, therefore, survives as long as the boy continues to move. As his father tells him, "You need to keep going. You dont know what might be down the road. We were always lucky. You'll be lucky again" (278). The boy is indeed lucky again, as he returns to the road after his father's death and becomes part of a new family.

In *The Real American Dream: A Meditation on Hope* (1999), Andrew Delbanco writes about the human tradition of making a narrative of experience, concluding "[w]hen that story leads somewhere and thereby helps us navigate through life to its inevitable terminus in death, it gives us hope" (1). In *The Road*, the narrative of the "good guys" and the metaphor of "carrying the fire" give the boy hope to continue moving, even after he ceases to tell or refer to these sources of movement. In contrast, *No Country for Old Men* presents reading as dangerous because it produces despair and stagnancy. In *The Road*, the story about the end of the world, reading is nearly extinct, but narrative is among the last survivors because of its place in providing human beings with essential resources for progressing through life. The world itself of *The Road* is moving towards, in Delbanco's words, "its inevitable terminus in death"; consequently, newspapers have long lost their significance and the surviving narratives are "[o]ld stories of courage and justice," though these stories too are moving toward extinction (Delbanco 1; McCarthy 41).

In these different, seemingly contradictory depictions of reading and narrative in his two most recent novels, McCarthy considers which kinds of stories are good for human beings. *No Country for Old Men* suggests that factual representations of real life are at best

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benign for those who avoid them, and at worst, a path to despair for those who read and internalize them. In *The Road*, the stories that function as helpful or meaningful to the characters are not based on fact but derived from myths, expressing certain ageless ideas and principles. Like Pablo Picasso, who said that "Art is a lie that makes us realize truth," McCarthy's depiction of Sheriff Bell's reaction to the newspaper gestures toward the author's elevation of fiction as the kind of story that propels movement and by extension, the life-giving culture of humanity (3). McCarthy therefore participates in early discussions of novel-reading that call into question its seriousness as a genre, famously epitomized in the following dialogue from the British novelist George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871): "'Fred's studies are not very deep,' said Rosamond, rising with her mamma, 'he is only reading a novel'" (97). Contrary to critics who suggest that novel-reading is an act of escapism or sloth, McCarthy suggests that novels tend to promote human culture and are thus more essential to the survival of individuals and communities in extreme circumstances than journalism, history, and other factual representations of reality.²

Nevertheless, *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road* both present characters who have soul-shaking encounters with evil, thus providing readers with experiences not unlike those of Ivan Karamazov or Sheriff Bell when they open the newspaper. Anton Chigurh's stoic homicides, therefore, may prompt the same response in readers as Ivan's thoughts and feelings about the men and women who abuse children. Although McCarthy's depictions of reading allow for the possibility that his own work may bring his readers to devastating encounters with evil, his books nevertheless illustrate the significance of a governing narrative that propels its adherents toward movement. Consequently, Bell should have stopped reading the newspaper like his wife and waitress, remaining in his job and continuing to hunt Chigurh, even though he was certain to fail. In both *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road*, failure, death, and defeat are inevitable. Even with his new family, the boy walks upon an earth whose days are limited, and for Sheriff Bell, the prospect of his

² Nina Baym asserts in *Novels, Readers, and Reviewers* that "hostility to fiction was no less strong in England than in America" (13). She cites multiple sources, particularly from the nineteenth century, that disparaged the novel. For example, *Literary World* in 1848 printed, "the great vice of the age in literature is the novel," and in 1849, *Southern Literary Messenger* called novel-readers "an enormous class, who have neither leisure, nor inclination, for graver and more solid studies" (Baym 28). Additionally, novels were also blamed for the moral failures of women because they excite the imagination. As Catherine J. Golden remarks, novels were commonly thought to produce a "dangerous thrill" in readers that led to real-life indiscretions (24).

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own death at Chigurh's hand is less startling than the absolute anarchy he would witness, and fail to abate, in the process. The governing narrative, therefore, of these novels, and which the boy of *The Road* internalizes, is that life is movement. Life is symbolized by a present participle: it is "carrying" a vital element. Consequently, to stop and to remain still is death. Bell, as a result, goes to his "inevitable terminus" while still alive and without hope, a formidable image for similarly encumbered readers of evil (Delbanco 1).

As administrators, faculty, and students are increasingly asked to justify the study of the humanities, McCarthy's novels offer some insights regarding the worth of reading literature that push the debate beyond the discipline's ability to improve students' lives materially, intellectually, or morally.³ The advent of the novel, as discussed earlier, generated concerns regarding its seriousness and the potential moral perils readers faced for having their imaginations excited by fictional worlds. The prevailing discussions today, however, relate not to the seriousness of literary study but to its output, material or otherwise. In response to budget cuts and the high number of freshmen who begin college as business majors, many current defenses of English and other departments typically viewed as sites for less practical study tend to "[make] exorbitant claims for the benefits of a humanities-based education and for the wealth-creation and social-regeneration potential" of such fields, according to Eleonora Belfiore and Anna Upchurch in their recent book, *Humanities in the Twenty-First Century* (1). However, reading culture has been approached from a utilitarian stance even prior to the economic climate of the last decade, which has arguably changed the course of higher education in America.⁴

For example, the classic *How to Read a Book* (1972) by Mortimer J. Adler and Charles Van Doren assumes the reason one reads is for learning and knowledge, as the first chapter concludes with the enjoinder, "we must know how to make books teach us

³ A recent book that explores this problem is Ellen Mayock and Karla P. Zepeda's edited volume *Forging a Rewarding Career in the Humanities* (2014), which cites the economic crash of 2008 as one of the major forces behind such studies. In the introduction, the editors give a helpful overview of other recent studies that address "the durability of the humanities" in the academy (xiii). The internet has also hosted debates about the value of literature specifically, such as Annie Murphy Paul's piece "Reading Literature Makes Us Smarter and Nicer" which appeared in *Time* in 2013. Karen Swallow Prior continues and enhances Paul's argument in "How Reading Makes Us More Human" in *The Atlantic*.

⁴ Many recent arguments about the state of higher education point to the economic crash of 2008 as the major impetus for changes. One example is Zephyr Teachout's article for the *Washington Post* in 2009, which states that "Students starting school this year may be part of the last generation for which 'going to college' means packing up, getting a dorm room and listening to tenured professors." She subsequently predicts the "structural disintegration" of the current academy and the continuation and increase of online education.

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well" (15). Adler's and Van Doren's thesis is resonant of Puritanical ideals that suggest reading must have a particular end, the end being, in seventeenth and eighteenth century America, one's duty to God or moral improvement.⁵ Consequently, in the eighteenth century, Benjamin Franklin revised this end when he opted to forgo communal worship on Sundays in order to embark on his own reading projects with the expectation that it would aid his business endeavors. The assumption behind such Puritanical ideals and Franklin's secularized approach to reading, which *How to Read a Book* echoes, is that the activity needs to produce something, whether that product is better character, improved professional affairs, or mastery of a subject. Even Anthony T. Kronman's renowned *Education's End* (2007), which argues that the purpose of a liberal arts education is to help students discover "the meaning of life," promises a kind of personal mastery over one's thinking or convictions, providing the student with some answers for the present and guidance for the future (6). Kronman's plan for education in the humanities is indeed driven by a particular output reminiscent of Franklin, albeit an ambiguous one: the meaning of life, which nevertheless implies an incorporeal product.⁶

Recently, Alan Jacobs wrote *The Pleasures of Reading in an Age of Distraction* (2011), which functions, in part, as a rejoinder to thinkers such as Adler, Van Doren, and Franklin, by arguing against a utilitarian approach to reading, thus continuing in a similar vein as Kronman but arriving at a different conclusion. Jacobs states that the primary function of reading is pleasure, either instantaneous or delayed, and he encourages his audience to read whatever captures their hearts and minds for almost any reason (42).

⁵ See Max Weber's foundational text, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, for an explanation of the connection between Puritanism and the usefulness of all activities. Specifically, Weber quotes the Puritan Richard Baxter who calls novels "wastetimes," explaining that the consumption of cultural products was understood in terms of stewardship (146 n. 69). For example, a man must "give an account of every penny entrusted to him, and it is at least hazardous to spend any of it for a purpose which does not serve the glory of God but only one's own enjoyment" (89).

⁶ Weber himself considers Franklin's perspective part of the Protestant ethic because he uses the Bible to support his professional choices, and perhaps most importantly, because he casts earning an income as "the result and the expression of virtue and proficiency in a calling" (Weber 25). Although Weber's argument regarding Franklin's Protestant ethic is warranted, Franklin nevertheless represents America's growing distance from its religious heritage in the eighteenth century, signified by his resolve to read on Sunday rather than to attend church. In his autobiography, he writes that his father had required his presence at communal worship, and on his own he "still thought [it] a Duty; tho' I could not, as it seemed to me, afford the Time to practice it" (20). By rejecting both paternal and ecclesial authority in this matter, Franklin represents the sovereignty of the individual over religion. Moreover, Franklin's interpretation of his own pursuit of moral perfection emphasizes its secularity, as he writes to Lord Kames in 1760 that it "may therefore be of great Service to those who have not Faith" (258).

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While many educational institutions favor utilitarian perspectives on reading while anticipating that Jacobs's reading-for-pleasure concept is at least a byproduct of their curricula, McCarthy's exploration of reading occurs in a context beyond humanity's need for productivity, pleasure, or answers regarding the meaning of life. Rather, *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road* present characters and situations that require human beings to confront death and to consider the nature of the existence to which they are called when faced with their "inevitable terminus" (Delbanco 1). By bringing readers to the brink of survival and existence, McCarthy's books express what is essentially important about fiction, and ultimately narrative: it facilitates the movement a person needs to choose a good existence in a fatal situation.⁷

Furthermore, McCarthy's books assume a deeply American concept encapsulated in Tompkin's phrase that life is "Doing, not talking," at the same time that they complicate the question literature teachers ask regarding the significance of their craft. While not contradicting Adler's and Van Doren's Franklin-inflected perspective on reading, nor eschewing Kronman's lofty goals for education or Jacobs's mildly epicurean reading plan, McCarthy nevertheless reveals what the aforementioned arguments lack. Like Henry David Thoreau, McCarthy observes and presents human beings in extreme circumstances, and his exploration of reading and narrative echoes Thoreau's question about "the necessities of life," the basic material resources human beings need for survival (Thoreau 11). In the spirit of Thoreau, McCarthy focuses on what internal resources are essential to human beings, thus prompting the following question: what is the role of reading and narrative in worlds shadowed by villains like Anton Chigurh or which are literally dying? In these extreme circumstances, wherein reading for productivity, pleasure, or answers is a luxury, McCarthy communicates that narrative itself also carries the fire.

⁷ One of the most powerful examples of such a choice in McCarthy's work occurs near the end of *The Road*, when a thief steals the possessions of the boy and the man. While the man prudentially, and quite harshly, recovers their possessions and takes precautions to punish the offending man, the boy reprimands his father and shows mercy to the thief. The boy thus demonstrates his resolve to choose a good existence, which prioritizes mercy over justice, even to the point of sacrificing his own sources of survival, and by extension his own life, for such an existence (253-260).

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