

ANALYSIS

THE STYLE OF CORMAC MCCARTHY

(1933-2023)

“The formal peculiarity that [James] Lilley identifies as ‘a startling array of precise nouns’ is further defined by [David] Holloway as a technique by which ‘a proportion of the individual nouns that accumulate in any given passage are laced together with their own verbs and adjectives’ in order to focus the point of view on the ‘phenomenological exclusivity of the objects described.’ Holloway cites the following passage to illustrate how the narrator of *Blood Meridian* relies heavily on the use of similes that do not just operate as similes but accumulate until all narrative detail seems to be equidistant from the reader in a ‘superabundance of objects on view’: ‘They rode for days through the rain and they rode through rain and hail and rain again. In that gray storm light they crossed a flooded plain with the footed shapes of the horses reflected in the water among clouds and mountains and the riders slumped forward and rightly skeptic of the shimmering cities on the distant shore of that sea whereon they trod miraculous....’

The sheer materiality of things (water, grassland, bones) alternates with imaginary impressions (the mirage, the associations of blood and toy). What the narration achieves by foregoing the use of sub-clauses and proper punctuation is a suspension of temporal and spatial definition that recalls the effect of parataxis...The narration proceeds in a manner almost cinematographic--frame by frame, pan altering with zoom, alternating angles--retarding the interpretative function of the narrator: plain, horse shapes, riders, fata morgana, grasslands, birds, single bird, flooded plain. [Dana] Phillips argues that the syntax of *Blood Meridian* overcomes the limits of perspective ‘as if the sentence had been written by a transparent eyeball that has learned how not to be Emersonian’....

The following example of the novel’s use of microcosmic emblems illustrates how the choppy syntax of ‘film stills’ narration neutralizes narrative distance to the point of indiscriminateness. The technique implies an egalitarian intention on a secondary level, which again is an allegorical one. This meta-narrative emerges as the perspective shifts from the riders’ progress to one rider, to an object, to his reflection on the object, back to the riders progress, to their environment, to a deadly confrontation without having built up to it: ‘They rode on into the mountains and their way took them through high pine forests, wind in the trees, lonely birdcalls....’

Out of the seven sentences of this paragraph, four start with reiterations of ‘They rode.’ Two of the three remaining sentences are grammatically incomplete and should be sub-clauses of the preceding sentence. Although the scalp hunters are introduced as the grammatical subject in most clauses, the sentences are so devoted to the contemplation of nature that even the clause describing Glanton’s scrutiny of the aspen leaf ties his personal reflection into the narrative...contemplation of material nature. As it allocates equal syntactic valence for all subjects, the narrative voice insinuates the existential equality of humans, domestic animals, wild animals, and inanimate nature. Consequently, the confrontation with the bear--despite its sense of drama--is not privileged over the contemplation of the aspen leaf. Passages such as this one--eroding anthropocentric meaning--abound in *Blood Meridian*.”

Georg Guillemin
The Pastoral Vision of Cormac McCarthy
(Texas A & M 2004) 76-78

“McCarthy’s words have the credibility of knowable working objects. Tap them and they ring true.... He knows all the registers of storytelling, from truncated plain talk to unpunctuated ruminative rap, nighthawk cattle songs to country-western ballads to Mexican folk corridos, inventive cursing to low poker humor, sexual come-ons to scatological broken lyrics....His is not parlor, academic, or clerical diction, but a working register of common idioms.”

Kenneth Lincoln
Cormac McCarthy: American Canticles
(Palgrave Macmillan 2009) 236

“Although many scenes in *Blood Meridian* are minimalist in style and journalistic in quality, the most memorable and disturbing are poetic. They are layered with an overt artistry drawing on aesthetic motifs common to the novel, and understanding the role of representation, the generative transformation of violence into beauty, is critical to comprehending McCarthy’s philosophical and ethical purpose as an author.”

Steven Frye, ed.
“*Blood Meridian* and the Poetics of Violence”
The Cambridge Companion to Cormac McCarthy
(Cambridge U 2013) 108

“The most astute of McCarthy’s many careful readers may be his translators, textual countersigners par excellence, because they must be so finely attuned to his stylistic voice in translating his every word, phrase, and sentence. Francois Hirsch, one of his French translators, adds that they must also share his love of language: ‘I would like to make it very clear that translating Cormac McCarthy would not be even thinkable without being in love with language, with words, with their color, their dark, mesmerizing power. Why? The answer is simple. Because Cormac is poetry. Epic, lyrical, whatever you call it, it is Poetry.’ This love of language may indeed be the most pervasive influence on McCarthy’s ‘stylistics,’ which Geoffrey Leech and Mick Short define generally as ‘the study of language as used in literary texts, with the aim of relating it to its artistic functions.’

For example, in establishing and foreshadowing central McCarthy motifs and themes, the first line of his first novel, *The Orchard Keeper*, illustrates this connection between language and artistic functions: ‘For some time now the road had been deserted, white and scorching yet, though the sun was already reddening the western sky.’ Syntactically, this is a complex sentence, with an adverbial phrase of time (‘for some time now’), a subject (‘the road’), a passive past perfect verb (‘had been deserted’), a compound adverbial phrase (‘white and scorching yet’) modifying ‘road,’ and a subordinate clause (‘though the sun was already reddening the western sky’). Of a total of twenty-two words, seventeen have only one syllable (77%), two have two syllables (9%), and the remaining three have three syllables (14%). With the exception of ‘deserted,’ which is of Latin origin, and ‘reddening,’ which is an Early Modern English combination of ‘red’ and ‘en’ from the seventeenth century, all the other words are Anglo-Saxon. By using single-syllable Anglo-Saxon words in a complex syntactic structure, McCarthy creates a sentence built with the most basic materials in the English language but one which also embodies linguistic complexities that relate to key thematic issues.

For example, the sentence’s tripartite division alludes to past time (‘for some time...the road had been deserted’), present time (‘now...white and scorching yet’), and future time (‘though the sun was already reddening the western sky’), a temporal combination which occurs throughout McCarthy’s writing as if to emphasize the timelessness of his descriptive prose. Further, the sentence’s dominate motifs--the road, the deserted landscape in which the hitchhiker Kenneth Rattner will appear in the sentence following, and the sunset--all allude to later McCarthy texts, passages, and themes: *The Road*; *Blood Meridian*; *The Sunset Limited*; the ending to *All the Pretty Horses* with John Grady riding off into the sunset, as well as numerous other sunset scenes; itinerant loners out on the road; hot and barren landscapes; contrasting light and dark imagery; and so forth. McCarthy’s stylistic and thematic vision clearly begins with this opening to his very first novel, in which the ordinary is cobbled together to produce the extraordinary--a whole of his work contained within one portentous sentence.

Most McCarthy scholars have made general stylistic observations on his work in connection with other issues under investigation, while a smaller number have done more detailed analyses of his style, but in one way or another, two stylistic elements have emerged as foundational: syntax that varies in length and complexity according to narrative and thematic contexts and diction that appropriates and creates words from multiple sources. Because McCarthy builds his larger narratives on his sentence-level and word-level stylistics, our paying careful attention to their operations can yield productive insights into the more global issues playing out in his writing.

This interrogation of the microcosmic elements of McCarthy's style to reveal the macrocosmic must begin with the famous 'optical democracy' passage from *Blood Meridian*, which has functioned as a kind of critical gloss for his descriptive writing in general, which tends to privilege coordination rather than subordination in laying out textual landscapes to avoid hierarchical relationships among their component parts. 'In the neuter austerity of that terrain all phenomena were bequeathed a strange equality...' Here McCarthy lists everything the eye can see, giving each detail equal weight, cataloguing 'nor spider nor stone nor blade of grass,' using only the coordinating conjunction 'nor' to emphasize a holistic apprehension of the entire phenomenological scene item-by-item. 'A man and a rock' become a democratic compound subject as McCarthy makes humans and natural objects equal both optically and syntactically. Thus, his lists also function according to a 'linguistic democracy.' *Suttree*, for example, opens with a long epigraph addressing 'Dear friend'--a *doppelganger* for his readers--which takes that friend on an introductory night journey through Knoxville replete with characteristic McCarthy descriptive catalogues....

McCarthy gives the impression of sentences by collecting a series of fragments composed of noun phrases and prepositional phrases, modified by adjectival phrases and clauses, and by marking these fragments with periods. These fragments, like the phenomena they represent, share equal descriptive billing. Holloway explains that by circumventing 'the notion of syntactic structure as that which elaborates or encodes meaning,' McCarthy creates 'a language that simply accumulates impressions of nature, piling more of the same...until the language itself seems to acquire a living presence that matches--rather than mediates--the solidity of the narrated scene.' In other words, McCarthy aspires to a style that embodies the phenomenological solidity of the signified within the signifier without the anxiety of attempting to bridge the representational gap between them--so his words can function like things...[Compare Gertrude Stein] Even McCarthy's basic narrative style--simple sentences strung together with 'and' to form a lengthy sentence--has the qualities of a list...The lack of hierarchy in McCarthy's coordination does not privilege any of the listed items...

McCarthy often lists noun phrases, prepositional phrases, and even main clauses without imposing hierarchical relationships among them. His minimal use of punctuation, especially the lack of quotation marks to set dialogue apart from narrative, also adds to this leveling effect. All these stylistic moves reflect a postmodern anti-hegemonic sensibility. At times, however, he leaves his simpler narrative style...to create sentences that stand out in a marked way. When his descriptions turn philosophical, poetical, or lyrical, the syntax changes and becomes more complex, as in the following sentence from the end of *All the Pretty Horses*: 'There were few cattle in that country because it was barren country indeed yet he came at evening upon a solitary bull rolling in the dust against the bloodied sunset like an animal in sacrificial torment.' The style of this passage, featuring subordination ('because...') and metaphor ('like...'), contrasts with previous sentences, giving it prominence. Krimml comments that the more marked style 'require[s] more effort and slow[s] down the reader's processing of thought, thus making these passages doubly noticeable and more difficult to skim past...The length and complexity of the sentences literally, almost physically, constrain the reader to find meaning.'

Rhetorical dialogue, spoken by powerful characters such as the Duena Alfonsa from *All the Pretty Horses* or Judge Holden from *Blood Meridian*, and philosophical discourse, spoken by such sages as the Mormon ex-priest in *The Crossing*, also share these features of McCarthy's marked style. This marked style empowers the narrator or speaker with a certain hegemonic authority over the discourse, although counter-discourse and the transitory nature of language itself tend to undercut that power as well, underscoring the necessity of close reading to unpack the subtleties of these exchanges. McCarthy's diction also requires our best efforts to reproduce his meaning. He fills out his word-hoard by appropriating words from local dialects, different languages, specialty terms, and archaic language....

According to his translators, who needed his help to understand his vast vocabulary, McCarthy draws his words from many sources, including the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *Black's Law Dictionary*, and warfare handbooks of the nineteenth century. He uses Spanish and other languages with no translation. As a result, Krimml argues that readers must 'draw heavily on memory, inference, or dictionary....The words themselves, like the syntax, constrain the reader to spend more time and effort on interpreting the text and thereby to feel the weight of meaning more heavily.' In addition, McCarthy's diction contributes to...the

‘living presence’ texture of McCarthy’s style, whether it be the untranslated Spanish, such as ‘huerfano’ from *The Crossing*; the accurate regional term, such as ‘stob’ from *Suttree*; or the exact archaic word, such as ‘haruspices’ in *Child of God*. Occurring in the midst of a reported conversation between Billy Parham and an old man, one of McCarthy’s standard prophetic sages, ‘huerfano’ stands out as the only Spanish word in the passage, its translation not being given until later when Billy denies being an orphan, to which denial the old man reaffirms his initial assessment, underscoring the true gravity of the term for Billy, who learns later than his parents are, indeed, dead.

Describing Suttree’s tying up his skiff to a ‘stob,’ a southern term for a short straight piece of wood, lends regional authenticity to the novel’s Knoxville setting. Using ‘haruspices,’ soothsayers or prophets who examine the entrails of sacrificed animals to determine the will of the gods, in reference to the medical students who dissect Lester Ballard’s body, opens up again the mystery of his monstrous necrophilia set against his nonironic status as a child of God. All these terms function as a kind of hypertext, opening up McCarthy’s text to expanded interpretive possibilities for readers who pursue the necessary thought and research. Further, the archaic words, much like the geological strata, fossils, and petroglyphs in McCarthy’s descriptive passages, embed the past within the present, giving the impression of language’s timeless immanence in his texts.

McCarthy’s writing provides ample evidence of his immense vocabulary, including many words of his own creation, such as in *Blood Meridian*. He makes new compounds by combining already existing words, such as ‘rawhidecovered’; he creates new words from already existing morphemes, such as ‘bepopulate’ or ‘enhearsed’; he makes nouns into verbs, such as ‘skylight’; he blends parts of two words to make a new word, such as ‘scurvid’ from ‘scurvy’ and ‘rabid’; and he outrightly coins new words, such as ‘sleard’ or ‘awap.’ This word-creation enhances his status as a postmodern artistic *bricoleur*, one who cobbles together his texts from the multiple and varied language resources available to him, and distinguishes him as a rival to Shakespeare in introducing new words to English. In their concordance, for example, Christopher Forbis, Wes Morgan, and John Sepich report that McCarthy uses 30,069 different words in all of his novels, with 13,384 occurring only once.

According to one of his Spanish translators, Michael Scott Doyle, reading McCarthy requires a fundamental rethinking of language, a ‘re-Englishing.’ In *The Road*, representing the unplugged, stripped-down acoustic version of his style, McCarthy interrogates the very meaning of language in a world full of empty signifiers--that is, a world with names for a multitude of things which no longer exist outside of memory and books--a world on the literal verge of the posthuman, never mind the postmodern. McCarthy’s stylistic range and virtuosity--from the rich rococo of *Suttree* to the austere restraint of *The Road*--creates a unique signature among contemporary writers.”

Phillip A. Snyder and Delys W. Snyder
“Modernism, Postmodernism, and Language: McCarthy’s Style”
The Cambridge Companion to Cormac McCarthy
ed. Steven Frye
(Cambridge U 2013) 31-36

Michael Hollister (2014)