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Visions of This Time

Marie-Reine Pugh

In Cormac McCarthy's novel *No Country for Old Men*, Sheriff Ed Tom Bell is neither the protagonist nor the hero. He fails to protect his community from the violent hitman Anton Chigurh, he fails to catch him, he fails to save Llewelyn Moss and Moss's wife, and he fails his grandfather's legacy as a lawman. Yet McCarthy chooses Bell's voice to mark the progress of the story and sets it apart by presenting it in italics. Additionally, Bell's first-person narratives mark the beginning and ending of the novel, and the beginning of every chapter. To dismiss Bell's narratives as the ramblings of a nostalgic old man belies their function, both for the novel and for the character. Bell's voice acts like that of a seer: he cannot change the course of fate, but by the end he has a vision of the past, present, and future.

Although an imperfect seer, he emerges from his struggles standing in the middle of the times, neither too old to understand the world nor too young to see the past—"a man of this time" (McCarthy 279). Throughout the text, Bell seems trapped between a nostalgic view of the past inherited from the "old timers," his memories of the collective, and his own personal memories, which are filled with feelings of failure and guilt (64). His first-person narratives reveal the struggle between the two extremes, between his personal memories and his memories of the collective. In the end, Bell is able to settle in a less conflicted place, a place mediated by his closest relations—his family—where he can exist without overindulging in the destructive excesses of either extreme.

Despite the change that Bell's narratives undergo throughout the novel, some critics of *No Country for Old Men* interpret the nostalgia present as a reason for dismissing both Bell's narratives and Bell himself. Erika Spoden, in her exploration of the Vietnam War in the novel, describes him simply as "a World War II veteran who embodies the past" (76). According to Francisco Collado-Rodríguez, who focuses specifically on trauma and storytelling in his criticism of the novel, "[Bell's] melancholic approach to life defeats his will. . . and he [succumbs] to the miseries presented in his own pessimistic and apocalyptic understanding of the American situation" (59). Even Jay Ellis, in his exhaustive study of McCarthy's novels, comes to a similar conclusion. He states: "Bell's rants may sound like those of a grumpy old man, but their frustration center son nostalgia for a world of impossible safety" (260). I do not contest that Bell is, at times, nostalgic, nor do I find these readings of the novel without merit. However, there is more than one kind of nostalgia, and if we focus on how memory works in Bell's narratives, a different and perhaps more valuable purpose for Bell emerges.

Most critics have not delved into how memory and nostalgia function within Bell's first-person narratives. In his comparison between the Coen brothers' film adaptation and McCarthy's novel, John Cant recognizes the significance of Bell's narratives, stating: "[McCarthy's] novels are noted for the manner in which the internal consciousness and psychological motivation of characters is absent. . . This alone gives this thread [Bell's narratives] a special significance" (94). While openly lamenting the loss of Bell's unique and revealing monologues in the film adaptation (95), Cant does not offer further insight on their role in the novel.

Similarly, in his article on untold bible stories in various McCarthy novels, Richard Walsh highlights Bell's importance as a character by naming him "the story's most significant commentator," but he also reduces the importance and possibility of Bell's vision to "nostalgic, homespun wisdom" (342). Walsh remarks pointedly: "they are not the divinely explanatory and restorative speech of the prologue and epilogue of the book of Job" (344). Bell's vision may not be redemptive, but this should not preclude the fact that Bell has vision, or the closest thing to it in the novel's godless, violent landscape. He arrives at this clarity after struggling with the weaknesses inherent in memory.

Memory scholars classify memory as either from the collective or the individual, with few allowances between the two, and these opposing theories are necessary in understanding the pitfalls of Bell's

memories. For Maurice Halbwachs, the father of collective memory, “to remember, we need others. . . [N]ot only is the type of memory we possess not derivable in any fashion from experience in the first person singular, in fact the order of derivation is the other way around” (Ricœur 120). From our earliest moments of life as children, learning from our parents, to our later interactions as adults living under codified societal expectations, external forces narrativize our memories and our sense of the past.

Conversely, historian David Lowenthal defines memory in the following terms: “The remembered past is both individual and collective. But,” he continues, “as a form of awareness, memory is wholly and intensely personal. . . We recall only our own experiences at first hand, and the past we remember is innately our own” (194). We all have memories that include other people or that are about others, but unlike Halbwachs, Lowenthal foregrounds the individual’s mind as the space where the past resides: we remember within ourselves what we experienced as individuals, and this memory of the past can only belong to or come from our individual selves.

As occurs with Bell, the weaknesses of both types of memory can distort our view of the past and taint the present and future. In Halbwachs’ theory, “the influence of the social setting [becomes] imperceptible to us” (122). In other words, while our experience of memory certainly does not feel collective, the collective still has an influence on what we remember and how we remember it. Bell relies on his memories of his collective—of old timer lawmen, of his small Texas town, and of his settler ancestors—as a refuge from his private memories. But this is not without consequence. In Bell’s case, the influence of the collective has a nostalgic drag on his memories. When remembering the old timers, he tells the reader: “The old time concern that the sheriffs had for their people has been watered down some. You cant help but feel it” (McCarthy 63). Bell perceives the past through his memories of the collective, in this instance, the old timers, and although the memories are his own, the past he sees is filtered through this group’s influence on him, which he does not question. At least, not until the end of the novel.

Like the unseen influence of collective memory, personal memories also have a weakness, but this weakness manifests itself more painfully for Bell than the nostalgia triggered by memories of the collective. This is why he is driven to think about the group rather than about himself, even when such comparisons lead him to long for a by-gone past over the present. Per Lowenthal: “The uniquely personal nature of memory. . . flaws its communication of the past.

Doubts assail us about a memory that is only private” (Lowenthal 196). In Bell’s case, rather than leading to self-doubt about the truthfulness of his memories, his personal memories make him blind to his own prejudices against himself. For instance, he muses: “People complain about the bad things that happen to em that they dont deserve but they seldom mention the good. About what they done to deserve them things. I dont recall that I ever give the good Lord all that much cause to smile on me. But he did” (91). Ironically, he criticizes others for what he is guilty of doing. He is unable to see how he could be worthy of the happiness he has gained, saying: “Me I was always lucky” (91). Consequently, he feels uncomfortable in his private memory space because it is only filled with proof of his unworthiness.

Bell’s struggle between different types of memories manifests itself in his narrative flights. He takes refuge from his guilt-ridden private memories in memories of the collective, fleeing out of fear of digging too deeply into his private experiences. On remembering an execution, he says: “It aint somethin I would like to have to see again. . .The ones that really ought to be on death row will never make it” (62). As a lawman, he is responsible for those criminals who roam free and witnessing executions serves as a reminder of all the ones still at large. From this disturbing memory he shifts abruptly to remembering the previous generation of sheriffs, saying: “I always liked to hear about the old timers. Never missed a chance to do so” (64). Later in the novel Bell begins to speak about his undeserved medals, but quickly changes the subject to speak of his fellow soldiers. He first says, bitterly: “I was supposed to be a war hero and I lost a whole squadron of men. They died and I got a medal. . .There aint a day I dont remember it” (195). His personal past haunts his present, so he takes refuge in what seem to be safer memories of the collective. He continues: “Some boys I know come back they went on to school up at Austin on the GI bill, they had hard things to say about their people” (195). And this sets off the memory of a teacher questionnaire from the thirties, which only serves to compare the failures of the present to the attractive veneer of the past (195). He refuses to stay in his personal memory, hopping from the present to the past, from individual to the collective. Even though both kinds of memories are flawed, Bell’s memories of the collective lead him to dwell on former prosperity, a more comfortable place to occupy than the painful memories of his personal failures.

In these moments, when Bell’s focus turns from the present to the past specifically to value the past over the present, he does succumb to nostalgia. However, nostalgia has more than one voice. In its modern manifestation,

Svetlana Boym defines nostalgia as “a mourning. . .for the loss of an enchanted world with clear borders and values” (8). She categorizes this nostalgic longing into two “tendencies,” restorative and reflective nostalgia, meant to act “not [as] absolute types, but rather. . .ways of giving shape and meaning to longing” (8, 41). Boym explicitly links restorative nostalgia with the collective, specifying that “it builds on the sense of loss in community and cohesion and offers a comforting collective script for individual longing” (42). As seen previously, critics of the novel seem to have pegged Bell as a nostalgic, and I would suggest that the type of nostalgia they seem to be sensing approaches restorative nostalgia. In some respects, this view is supported by Bell’s nostalgic turn to memories of the collective. For instance, when he remembers the old timer sheriffs, he expresses a sense of loss of values between their time and his—this certainly seems to fit with Boym’s definition of restorative nostalgia (McCarthy 63). On the other hand, although restorative nostalgia characterizes some of Bell’s reminiscences, it should not be considered as the prime feeling he expresses but as a symptom of his struggle between the different types of memory.

Just as Bell’s memories of the collective lead him to restorative nostalgia, his acceptance of his personal memories by the end of the novel leads him to a different manifestation of nostalgia. In the beginning of the novel, he says: “We lost a girl but I wont talk about that” (90). By the end, he makes this honest confession: “I dont make excuses for the way I think. Not no more. I talk to my daughter. . .I dont care how that sounds” (285). This sounds much more like “reflective nostalgia,” restorative nostalgia’s contemplative opposite, where “longing and critical thinking are not opposed to one another” (49–50). His feelings towards the past and the present vacillate between the two tendencies of nostalgia as a result of his flight between personal memory and memory of the collective, and as the plot progresses, Bell continues to seek a more independent and complex way to narrate his experiences.

Bell escapes the reductive influences of restorative nostalgia and the weaknesses of memory through his interactions with his family. According to phenomenologist Paul Ricœur, Bell’s family, or in Ricœur’s terms, his close relations, can close the gap between personal and collective memory because “[t]hese close relations occupy the middle-ground between the self and the ‘they’” (132). Our close relations literally share the same memories as we do, like the collective, but unlike memories of the general, impersonal collective, they do not deny us who we are individually. Ricœur continues: “my close relations are those who approve of my existence and whose existence I approve of in the

reciprocity and equality of esteem” (132). They provide outside reference without negating the self. Bell finds balance in his closest relations—his deceased daughter, his wife, his uncle Ellis—and is able to rely on them to come to a better understanding of his worth and of the world around him.

His interaction with his Uncle Ellis especially demonstrates how close relations can defuse extremes in memory to eventually bring clarity. In a conversation with Bell, his uncle acts as a mitigating influence, pulling him back from the brink of his own dark thoughts when necessary and pushing him to question the idealized collective memories of his grandfather (and the other old timer lawmen that he constantly compares himself to, by extension) (278–79). And it is in a subsequent reminiscence of this conversation, in a first-person narrative, when he ceases to idealize the past. He muses: “I thought about my family and about [Uncle Ellis] out there in his wheelchair in the old house and it just seemed to me that this country has got a strange kind of history and a damned bloody one too” (284). The present may be bloody, but now Bell can finally admit that the past has been no different. He also gains perspective on his personal worth. Later when thinking of his father, he concedes: “As the world might look at it I suppose I was a better man” (308).

His close relations enable him to have this clearer vision, enabling him to acknowledge his limitations and the change that has come over him at the beginning of the novel, like a prophet announcing his vision in retrospect. Certainly, this vision includes knowledge of evil, of the “living prophet of destruction”—Chigurh has prompted his change (4). This is also a place of clarity and self-knowledge that is unprecedented for Bell. At the end of his opening remarks, he tells the reader unequivocally: “It aint just bein older. . . I think a man would have to put his soul at hazard. And I wont do that. I think now that maybe I never would” (4). He has been able to gain perspective on his own experiences and memories, and divorce himself from the determinative and subsuming influence of his memories of the collective. What follows in his first-person narratives is an increasingly visionary testimony born out of navigating the pressures of memory and the changing times.

Some critics of the novel have likewise linked Bell to the prophetic, though not through his memories. Walsh does not find “divine speech” in Bell’s narratives, but he does call the novel “a new, slightly twisted biblical story of life among the demons” (344). Ellis coins the phrase “the Old Man book” to describe Bell’s italicized musings, and compares Bell to Jeremiah of the Old Testament, both in tone and tenor (227, 243). Lydia Cooper’s critical volume on McCarthy

most closely links Bell's unease in the present to his potential as a visionary, stating: "Bell, haunted by prophetic visions of hope, looks into the future and the past in order to construct a sense, however elusive, of transcendence" (123). Though untraditionally, Bell's culminating vision and his privileged narration seem to fit him with the mantel of a prophet.

We should resist the urge, however, to classify him so easily as a prophet and thereby classify all his narratives as liturgy, gospel, or determinative—he is not so simply or dogmatically defined. Bell himself seems to invite this mantel, making grim pronouncements on the future throughout the novel. In the middle of novel, he reflects: "I know as certain as death that there aint nothing short of the second comin of Christ that can slow this train" (159). His clarity of thought and vision only comes after his experiences in the plot and his struggle with his memory. Only then does he consciously reflect on his ability to see, telling the reader, "I've been forced to look at it again and I've been forced to look at myself" (296). Consequently, to call him a prophet outright only makes smooth what has proven to be a fraught and conflicted narrative journey. The title "prophet" also connotes a privileged connection to deity, being chosen or elect, which the novel lacks. Rather, Bell could more aptly be called a seer or, to go even further and strip the deterministic and religious connotations that this word also carries, a "see-er," as in "one who sees or beholds" ("see-er"). This may seem like a negligible quibble, but it more accurately represents Bell's ultimate decision not to engage the enemy, unlike a prophet of God, while also emphasizing that he is finally able to see himself and the world around him.

Like most of McCarthy's novels, *No Country for Old Men* ends on an unresolved note. Despite his final clarity, will Bell inevitably grow too old and out of touch to see, like the old people he describes as looking "like they woke up and they dont know how they got where they're at" (304)? Bell leaves us with one last vision. He describes a dream, where his father passes him in the snow on horseback, carrying a horn with fire, going on ahead of him to light a fire (309). These are Bell's closing words: "And in the dream I knew that he was goin on ahead and that he was fixin to make a fire somewhere out there in all that dark and all that cold and I knew that whenever I got there he would be there" (309). According to Edwin T. Arnold, a noted McCarthy scholar, "in the world of McCarthy, the only true destination is death" (11). Eventually, we all cease to see when we pass into complete obsolescence, but perhaps it does not really matter how dark or how cold we have been on the journey. The fire is ready, and someone we love is there.

The complexity in Bell's narratives should prompt a deeper analysis of his culminating vision. We should listen to him more closely when he tells us: "I'm not the man of an older time they say I am. I wish I was. I'm a man of this time" (279). This short study of memory in Bell's first-person narratives reinforces his importance both as a character and as a structure for the novel. His narratives reveal that private memories and memories of the collective can denature time, tainting the present with guilt and shame, the past with undeserved prosperity. Despite his obvious failures, the memories of those close to him help Bell attain a sense of stability and clarity. As a seer, he provides the reader with a vision of the world of the novel—a world that has always been bloody and violent, but also a world where those closest to us carve out a place where we can rest.

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