



2016-03-01

“There is no God and we are his prophets”: The Visionary Potential of Memory and Nostalgia in Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road*

Marie Reine Pugh

Brigham Young University - Provo

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“There is no God and we are his prophets”: The Visionary Potential of
Memory and Nostalgia in Cormac McCarthy’s

No Country for Old Men and *The Road*

Marie-Reine Laura May Pugh

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Phillip Snyder, Chair
Trent Hickman
Dennis Cutchins

Department of English
Brigham Young University

March 2016

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ABSTRACT

“There is no God and we are his prophets”: The Visionary Potential of
Memory and Nostalgia in Cormac McCarthy’s
No Country for Old Men and *The Road*

Marie-Reine Laura May Pugh
Department of English, BYU
Master of Arts

Memory and nostalgia work in complex, paradoxical ways in Cormac McCarthy’s *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road*, both haunting the main protagonists, Sheriff Ed Tom Bell and the father, as well as bringing them to crucial realizations. These men give up the traditional hero role for the more meaningful and generative image of “carrying the fire,” which unites these two novels. Carrying the fire represents a memorial and nostalgic longing for home and family. Bell and the father attain this vision because of their obsession with the past, and because of their struggle with memory and nostalgia. Memory, for these characters, has both personal and collective dimensions. Nostalgia, likewise, has a dual function, following Svetlana Boym’s definition of nostalgics as being capable of restorative and reflective longing for the past. Family, or Paul Ricœur’s theory of close relations, bridges the gap between the conflicts of memory and nostalgia, acting as the means by which they understand this vision of carrying the fire while also embodying it. Additionally, the duality of both memory and nostalgia drive Bell and the father to seek for a prophetic vision, for stability in the past to deal with the threats in the present, which appears in the narrative structures of each novel.

Keywords: Cormac McCarthy, Sheriff Ed Tom Bell, the father, *The Road*, *No Country for Old Men*, nostalgia, memory, close relations, carrying the fire, culture, prophecy, vision, Maurice Halbwachs, David Lowenthal, Svetlana Boym, Paul Ricœur

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my committee, first and foremost, for their time, energy, patience and precious insight, as well as their many expressions of encouragement and support during this process. In particular, I want to thank Dr. Phillip Snyder for his enthusiasm and expertise on Cormac McCarthy, and for pushing me to be a better scholar; Dr. Trent Hickman for his seminar on memory theory, without which this project would not have come about; and Dr. Dennis Cutchins for his reader's perspective, making this a more cohesive argument. I would also like to thank my family for their support and love, especially my husband Sam for his unflagging optimism and calm during stressful and busy times.

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“There Is No God and We Are His Prophets”: The Visionary Potential of Memory and Nostalgia
in Cormac McCarthy’s *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road*

“[W]hen he rode past I seen he was carryin fire in a horn the way people used to do and I could see the horn from the light inside of it. 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.” (Cormac McCarthy, *No Country for Old Men* 309)

“You have to carry the fire.

I dont know how to.

Yes you do.

Is it real? The fire?

Yes it is.

Where is it? I dont know where it is.

Yes you do. It’s inside you. It was always there. I can see it.” (Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* 278-79)

The image of “carrying the fire” connects *No Country for Old Men* (2005) to *The Road* (2006), but the motif itself stems from a distant past, a memory of a home and of hope in a collective ethic. In *No Country*, Sheriff Ed Tom Bell dreams of being “back in older times,” his father riding ahead with a horn of fire (309). In *The Road*, the nameless father teaches his son the anachronistic phrase, recalling the world before the apocalypse. Though this image symbolizes hope, the events of both novels strain the possibility of there being any hope: Bell watches as cross-border violence threatens his community, and the father watches as post-apocalyptic lawlessness threatens his son. Their constant return to the past, including this nostalgic image of

carrying the fire, potentially marks them as memory-obsessed characters, distracted and unwilling to sacrifice all. However, nostalgia is more than a blind longing for the past. As defined by philosopher Svetlana Boym, nostalgia has both reflective and restorative tendencies; it can be generative, reconciling memory's fractures between personal (private) memory and collective (social) memory by recalling the basic human need for culture. Paradoxically, while memory's duality burdens Bell and the father with both the pressures of the collective and their own personal frailties, it also provides them with a reservoir of ancient images, including that of carrying the fire, to which they cling. The past itself acts as the voice of guidance, and rather than limiting their perspective, their anxiety in the present drives them to this search for revelation and prophetic guidance in the past. This search is mirrored in the narrative structures of each novel, which shows Bell and the father as both seeking out prophetic guidance and expressing the revelation that they find through their struggle with memory and nostalgia.

Bell's and the father's struggles with memory force them to rely on their close family, what phenomenologist and memory scholar Paul Ricœur calls close relations, which he suggests can mediate the destructive push and pull between personal and collective memory. Likewise, nostalgia reminds them that close human relationships are the only constant, the one thing worth carrying with you and passing on. Bell has his wife, and the father has his son. Neither man is willing put them at risk, even if it means giving up the role of the hero—Bell gives up on chasing the assassin Chigurh, and the father refuses to kill himself and his son despite their desperate circumstances. Nostalgia and memory lead Bell and the father to their final vision of carrying the fire: Bell realizes that the fire was given to him and that he must keep it safe, and the father realizes that, if he is to stay true to the ethic of carrying the fire, he must give it to his son. The flaws and weaknesses of the past make these men more perceptive to the needs of the present,

giving them an innate sense of the demands of living in seemingly hopeless and violent universes. The insight that carries from one novel to the next is this prophetic vision; they see the way forward because they look back.

Memory

Memory, as Bell and the father prove, is no fixed or reliable whole. While memory may seem to more obviously come from the individual and be purely personal, not all scholars agree. On the side of memory being personal, historian David Lowenthal defines memory as an individual process: “The remembered past is both individual and collective. But 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). To Lowenthal, it seems beside the point where memories originate, whether they are of private or shared experiences, since it is the I, the self “inviolable” (195), which does the actual remembering as well as the storing and the shaping of those memories. We all have memories that include other people or are about others, but 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. Our idiosyncratic perspective of events, our feelings, our thoughts—these are unique to each person, and as Lowenthal emphasizes, though we may share *about* them to others, we can never share those things exactly (195).

Conversely, for Maurice Halbwachs, originator of the idea of collective memory, memory is a social phenomenon: “it is in society that people normally acquire their memories,” he writes, and “[i]t is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories” (38). Halbwachs argues that memories are collective because from our earliest moments of life as children learning from our elders to our later interactions as adults living under codified

societal expectations, our memories and our sense of the past are narrativized by external forces. In essence, Lowenthal and Halbwachs have differing views of the individual mind, which are at the basis of the differences in their theories on memory. To Lowenthal, the individual is filled with passions, emotions, and thoughts that only belong to that person and that indelibly color memory, so much so that no other person's mind can duplicate that same self-influence on the past. To Halbwachs, the individual is much more open and vulnerable to external social narratives, thus allowing groups, or collectives, more power to govern memory. With *Bell and the father*, McCarthy paints characters that combine both kinds of influence—they both keenly feel the weight of their own thoughts and emotions while also being sensitive to the broader societal narratives they belong to—and so both theories must be considered when discussing these characters.

This tension between collective and personal memory, and the ways in which they distort past and taint the present and future, is what drives each novel. In collective memory, the distortion comes from the characters' reliance on external social narratives, what Halbwachs terms "collective frameworks," "to reconstruct an image of the past which is in accord, in each epoch, with the predominant thoughts of the society" (40). For Halbwachs, we cannot escape the presentness of our recollections of the past—in other words, we cannot escape the collective's influence when we recall past events. Worst still, we do not realize the collective's influence. As Halbwachs puts it, "memory gives us the illusion of living in the midst of groups which do not imprison us, which impose themselves on us only so far and so long as we accept them" (50). But, he suggests, the collective weighs in on every memory, defining and shaping our view of the past, whether we acknowledge it or not. In the case of personal memory, the sources of distortion are different. "The uniquely personal nature of memory not only condemns [memory]

to ultimate extinction but flaws its communication of the past. Doubts assail us about a memory that is only private” (Lowenthal 196). Because we have no outside reference to verify or justify our remembrances, personal memories make us much more vulnerable to personal recriminations, guilt, and uncertainty as to the truthfulness of an event. Consequently, personal memory becomes an unreliable, uncomfortable space. McCarthy’s characters must navigate between either extreme—between the pressures of the collective and their painful, uncertain personal memories—in their struggle to find stability and clarity.

In his first-person narratives, Bell struggles between his personal and collective memory, revealing a complexity in his attempts to make meaning of the present, a complexity that has largely been ignored by critics. According to Francisco Collado-Rodríguez, “[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). Richard Walsh likewise reduces Bell’s “soliloquies” to “nostalgic, homespun wisdom” (342). At first, Bell does take refuge in memories of the collective, fleeing from his guilt-ridden personal memories. When relating a personal memory of 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, and more importantly, as a sheriff, he is responsible for those criminals who roam free. Witnessing executions serves as a painful and self-recriminating reminder of all the ones still at large, all that ones Bell should have caught. From this disturbing memory, he shifts abruptly to his collective memory and the previous generation of sheriffs, saying: “I always liked to hear about the old timers. Never missed a chance to do so” (64). Bell replaces the more uncomfortable reminders of his shortcomings with memories of men who seemed to live in an era with more appreciation for their profession and less complications or moral ambiguity.

However, what Bell recalls is more along the lines of legends than true memories of real events, but he does not always notice the difference, perhaps because such collective memories do not tax him as much as his personal memories do.

Another example of his narrative flights is when Bell begins to speak about his undeserved medals, but quickly changes the subject. 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” (195). This observation sets off the collective 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. He continues, “a lot of the time ever when I say anything about how the world is goin to hell in a handbasket people will just sort of smile and tell me I’m gettin old” (196). Such narrative flights suggest an unwillingness to linger on the consequences of his actions (or inaction), but if we take memory’s weaknesses into account, Bell’s unwillingness to face up to his personal memories becomes less calculated and more a natural consequence of his inability to trust those self-critical personal memories—even though such memories could potentially break the collective’s spell. Collective memory whispers that “life was better back then,” but his own memories show him that there is no such thing as life without pain.

Due to the lack of outside perspective on his personal memories, however, Bell is unable to judge when his self-inflicted guilt is undeserved. He does not doubt whether his personal memories are real or not; rather he falls into the trap of not doubting them at all. 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. 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, but not without ignoring parts of himself that become so vital to his final choice—he may blame himself for what he sees as his cowardice but his avoidance of destruction is what enables him to carry the fire in the end.

The influence of the collective also taints Bell’s narratives, giving the illusion that he only has one kind of memory, expressing only a single, uncritical nostalgia. When remembering the old-timer sheriffs, he voices this view of the present: “The old time concern that the sheriffs had for their people is been watered down some. You cant help but feel it” (63). In this moment, Bell appears to buy completely into this conservative worldview—conservative in terms of right leaning politics and the conservation of the traditional values of “God, family, country”; the collective, represented by the old timers, filters his view of the past. Critics who pick up on this tone generalize about the rest of Bell’s narratives. Like Walsh, Jay Ellis concludes that Bell’s narratives only express the wish to restore the good old days: “Bell’s rants may sound like those of a grumpy old man, but their frustration center on nostalgia for a world of impossible safety” (260). Yet this moment where Bell expresses a conservative worldview is one of many; his narrative is multifaceted, even though his constant return to collective memories suggests that he only values those memories. He experiences both personal and collective memories, but he also treasures his place in the larger community. While he may not always question the wisdom of the collective, he goes through a significant change because of his struggle with his memory and interactions with his close family members. His nostalgia shifts from being unsuspecting of the

influence of the collective and avoiding uncomfortable personal memories to cherishing the fragmentation of his memories. Rather than insist on smoothing out the past to stabilize the present, he learns to see the gaps and brokenness of his experiences and personal memories as part of the human condition, as well as leading to a more critical view of the past.

By having characters shoulder the weight of both types of memory, McCarthy's narratives actively question an individual's obligations to the larger communal past as well as the community's artificial pressure on individual motivations, which pushes characters to reexamine their assumptions about their self-identity and greater purpose. In *The Road*, the father believes at times that his purpose is to save his son from the present, even if it means killing him to do so. The tension between his personal and collective memories helps him realize that this role is actually to pass on the fire to his son. The apocalypse not only dooms the planet and the human race, but it also destroys all collective frameworks, essentially stranding the father in a world devoid of social constructs or meaning. He has two choices: he can rely on a dead past or he can accept the cultural black hole of the post-apocalypse. Though critics acknowledge his determination to avoid the latter option, his incursions into the former are deemed a weakness. In her article on *The Road* and Plato's "Allegory of the Cave," Carole Juge states, "The father is so driven by old memories and dreams of ancient things that he himself is outdated. His aptitude to melancholia makes him incapable of wisdom" (25). Without any collective, all he has left is personal memory, torturing him with his failure to shield his family from the all-encompassing violence. His memories of his failure towards his wife, especially, and of their last conversation together plague him. "In his dream she was sick and he cared for her. The dream bore the look of sacrifice but he thought differently. He did not take care of her and she died alone somewhere in the dark and there is no dream no other waking world and there is no tale to tell" (32). No

wonder the past—and the collective he once knew—grips him so fiercely and becomes a haunting presence. Compared the present and his personal memories, his collective memories offer him visions of a much better time, when living meant more than hard-fought survival, and of a world filled with an abundance of hope and beauty.

The father does fail to completely banish his memories of the past, but only because the power of the collective extends far beyond its immediate temporal context. Halbwachs explains that even in “contemplative . . . or dreamlike memory,” as the father’s memories often present themselves, “[we] find ourselves among other human beings and in another human milieu, since our past is inhabited by the figures of those we used to know. In this sense, one can escape from a society only by opposing to it another society” (49). Unfortunately for the father, the only replacements for his pre-apocalyptic society are the cannibals, his son, or the dying world. He chooses his son, but his son is insufficient. Having been born after the apocalypse, he shares some of his father’s memories but not any of the memories from before the event. The only viable alternative to guard against memories of the past that make him vulnerable and the horror of the post-apocalypse that is so hard to bear is to try forget it all—or at least so it seems, at times, to the father. At the beginning of the novel, the father unequivocally expresses his suspicion of any positive memory or dream because he fears those memories will affect his vigilance: “He mistrusted all that. He said the right dreams for a man in peril were dreams of peril and all else was the call of languor and of death” (18). He feels that he must either relinquish the past completely and only focus on the grim, desolate present, or he will linger on the past and hope will taint him, leaving him powerless to protect his son. Forgetting the past becomes a necessary self-imposed exile, a defense against “the dreams so rich in color. How else would death call you?” (21) He warns his son of memory’s treachery, saying, “You forget what

you want to remember and you remember what you want to forget,” and when his son asks him about the world from before, he tells him: “There is no past” (12, 54). But the father is inconstant in his self-imposed forgetting; his perspective on memory shifts back and forth, incoherent with his own pronouncements. The father cannot forget because his collective memories are undeniably more meaningful and more powerful than the nothingness he tries to carve out in the present.

Although the father consciously tries to avoid thinking of the happiness and prosperity of the pre-apocalyptic past, the past proves to be as necessary as instinct. Juge concedes that “[h]is reminiscing is a self-imposed violence which still owns an inch of reality” (22). In other words, his reminiscing goes beyond escapism: his memories of the past can add meaning to the present. Often, the father fights bitterly against dreams, but he seems powerless to keep them completely at bay. In the same passage in which he details his mistrust of happy memories, his unconscious mind imposes glorious visions of the past, as if to rebel against such denials: “He dreamt of walking in a flowering wood where birds flew before them he and the child and the sky was aching blue but he was learning how to wake himself from such siren worlds. Lying there in the dark with the uncanny taste of a peach from some phantom orchard fading in his mouth” (*Road* 18). Later, when they come across his childhood home, the father cannot help narrating his past to his son, despite his former injunctions against it: “On cold winter nights when the electricity was out in a storm we would sit at the fire here, me and my sisters, doing our homework. The boy watched him. Watched shapes claiming him he could not see” (26). Collective memories impose context that may be meaningless now to the father and his son, but they also construct part of the father’s basic identity and his ethics—by extension, part of his son’s identity and his ethics, too. Although his son has no use for the meaning of words such as “neighborhood” (95),

he has clearly benefitted from the father's collective memories. When he asks his father about their "long term goals," his father asks him where he learned the phrase, to which his son responds: "You said it. . . . A long time ago" (160). After their confrontation with the cart thief, his son again surprises him by revealing how much of his father's ethics he has taken upon himself and made his own. "You're not the one who has to worry about everything," the father tells him; "Yes I am. . . . I am the one," his son replies (259). Additionally, the father's collective memories radiate with hope, with the message that goodness existed at one time and that it may again. When reminiscing about excursions to the lake for firewood with his uncle, the father muses, "This was the perfect day of his childhood. This the day to shape the days upon" (13). This day—not a day from apocalypse, but a day of quiet companionship—forms the father's core. The father may hate his memories, both personal and collective, because they remind him of what he has lost and because he longs to inhabit them, but without them, he would not be able to call up the image of "carrying the fire" and his son would have no ethical constant. Without his all of his memories, he would also not recognize the hope and the possibility for goodness in his son's future. This is the paradox of memory: it shows characters their weakest and most painful moments while also preserving the images that can anchor them to deep and meaningful traditions.

Close Relations

Rather than being symptomatic of their failure or obsolescence, personal and collective memory drive Bell and the father to the realization that their families hold the answer to the threats of the present. In his study of the tensions between personal and collective memory, Ricœur asks the following question: "Does there not exist an intermediate level of reference between the poles of individual memory and collective memory, where concrete exchanges

operate between the living memory of individual persons and the public memory of the communities to which we belong?” (131). Memory, Ricœur confirms, is not a stable whole, but neither is it neatly segregated territory between personal and collective. He suggests that our “close relations,” usually family members, “occupy the middle-ground between the self and the ‘they’” (132). Close relations create a middle ground between collective and personal memory because they literally share the same memories as we do, like the collective, but they do not deny us who we are individually. In fact, Ricœur explains, this is the very definition of relations: “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. Likewise, Bell and the father’s close family members play this vital mediating role.

Bell’s Uncle Ellis, for instance, acts as a mitigating influence, pulling him back from the brink of his own dark thoughts when necessary, and also pushing him to question the idealized collective memories of his grandfather—and by extension, the other old-timer lawmen to which Bell constantly compares himself. Of Bell’s mythical grandfather, Uncle Ellis says, “I could tell you some things about him that would change your mind. I knew him pretty good,” using his own memories to connect the collective memories that Bell has (279). Bell’s identity, his sense of duty towards his community, and his self-worth are inextricably tied to being a sheriff and being like his grandfather—both men were sheriffs at the same time and Bell even boasts, “I never did mind bein like him” (90). Yet, as he admits to his uncle, he did not act like his grandfather would have in the war, and the implication is that his grandfather would also have acted differently with Chigurh: he would have succeeded where Bell did not, or died trying. Because Uncle Ellis stands in an intermediate position both generationally and relationally by virtue of being the grandfather’s son, he has the authority of memory and of family to propose

alternatives to what Bell has cemented as truth through his personal and collective memories. Through his uncle's influence, Bell comes to realize is that he is not like his grandfather, and more importantly, that this is not a failure. Uncle Ellis also provides a different perspective on the kind of nostalgic conservative patriotism that Bell has professed. His uncle muses about the history of the country (which can refer both to the nation and to west Texas, more specifically) and of their family, telling Bell: "How come people dont feel like this country has got a lot to answer for. . . .This country will kill you in a heartbeat and still people love it" (271). Despite Bell's concern with the past, his uncle challenges him to recognize a deeper timeline as well as reminding him of the inconstancy of the land to which Bell has pledged himself. Bell loses his bearings after the events of the novel and in this conversation with his uncle he is seeking out stable ground in his struggle with his personal and collective memories. His uncle is close enough to him to provide that stability without invalidating Bell's own experiences.

After his conversation with his uncle, Bell gains balance in how he envisions the world around him, as well as the role he has played and has yet to play in it. In a reminiscence of the conversation, Bell finally ceases to idealize the past: "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 and his true purpose, which he has been dismissive of throughout the novel. After speaking to his uncle, when thinking of his father, he concedes, "As the world might look at it I suppose I was a better man" (308). Able to finally see himself as worthy of esteem and of the life he has cultivated for himself, he has a clearer vision of what his duty entails, which he announces at the beginning of the novel. Here, his viewpoint is

retrospective, acknowledging the change that has come over him. Certainly, this acknowledgement includes knowledge of evil, of the “living prophet of destruction,” Chigurh, which has prompted his change (4). But this opening narrative also expresses a clarity and self-knowledge that is unprecedented for him. He says unequivocally: “It aint just bein older. . . . I think it is more like what you are willin to become. And 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). Bell realizes that he would have to become just as bad as Chigurh to be able to catch him. In addition much like his situation in World War II, the chase could prove to be a hollow gesture, a needless self-sacrifice to satisfy the heroic ideal he has held up for himself. Until Chigurh crosses his path, that is. After the events of the novel, he finally rejects that ideal, gains perspective on his own experiences and memories, and divorces himself from the determinative and subsuming influence of his memories of the collective.

In the struggle between collective and personal memory, close relations can be so powerful that even memories of those who are dead can provide stability. In his memory of their last conversation, the father’s wife discerningly identifies their son as the key to his survival, to his coming to terms with the present. Phillip Snyder specifically points to the wife’s haunting of the novel, adding that “she ends up being wrong about her husband’s capacity for managing an ethic of survival; he is certainly ‘good’ at it, almost impossibly so, but she is absolutely right about the necessity of his son as the Other and the third who keeps his selfhood intact” (77). In the last conversation he has with her, despite the cruelty of her reasoning, she inadvertently gives the father the solution to living in a world where the past has been divorced from meaning and where the present foretells of an impending collapse. “The one thing I can tell you is that you wont survive for yourself,” she tells the father (*Road* 57). She leaves him and abandons their son,

but this memory he has of her provides him with the answer to facing the post-apocalypse and he remains faithful to this conviction. The father sees in his son “his warrant . . . the word of God,” a powerful symbol of life continuing on in an ashen present (5). The boy and the image of fire become one and the same, making him “God’s own firedrake,” stoking the fires of hope in the father’s heart; he realizes that “[n]ot all dying words are true and this blessing is no less real for being shorn of its ground” (31). The “dying words” here are his wife’s, cursing him for not ending their suffering, predicting his failure; yet, it is in those painful personal memories of her that he finds the meaning to his struggle—his son.

Although the son cannot mediate the father’s collective memories from before the apocalypse, he does act to mediate his father’s despair in the present. This is true because his father keeps hope and moral certainty alive for his son’s sake. The boy acts as an external symbol for the father, a vessel for the father’s hope, a “[g]olden chalice, good to house a god” (75), and the father’s interactions with his son contradict his private meditations on the hopelessness of their situation. In his article, Snyder similarly asserts that “[t]he boy . . . represents the ethical center of the novel, not just as the face of the Other but also as *the receptacle of his father’s previous teaching*” (75, emphasis added). Even Walsh, who asserts that “the Boy acts as Papa’s conscience and calls Papa beyond his hard-headed pragmatism to small gifts of mercy,” acknowledges that “Papa also defines ethic for the Boy” (344). The son forces the father to push back against his thoughts of guilt and failure while also keeping portions of the past alive, even if the boy looks at him like “[a] being from a planet that no longer existed” (*Road* 153). The father may be fraught with doubt within himself, in turn rejecting and clinging to memories of the past, but when it comes to his son, he cannot abide doubt. To introduce doubt

in his son's world would be to deny his son a future and to deny the goodness that the father has told his son exists, and that his son so naturally and wondrously exhibits.

The father carefully guards his son's hopefulness, in turn acting as the kind of mediation that Ricœur prescribes. This watchfulness acts as mediation because it forces a balancing act on the father. His own emotions may lead him deep into collective memories of the past or into bitterness and self-imposed amnesia, but he loves his son too much to give in or give up on the good parts of the past completely. His son needs him in all the ways a son needs a father—to reassure him of what is right and wrong, of what exists, of what does not, of what is possible, of what is beautiful—and the father needs to create stability within himself to be able to give those things to his son. Right before they find the baby's carcass, the father thinks to himself: "Do you think that your fathers are watching? That they weigh you into their ledgerbook? Against what? There is no book and your fathers are dead in the ground" (196). In comparison, after their encounter with the thief and their subsequent falling out, the father attempts to reach out again to his disconsolate son, asking, "Do you want me to tell you a story?" to which his son answers, "Those stories are not true . . . [i]n the stories we're always helping people and we dont help people" (268). In this moment, the father's display of violence has affected his son's usual optimism. Their back and forth, starting with the son's answer, is telling of their everyday interactions and of the father's teachings:

You always tell happy stories.

You don't have any happy ones?

They're more like real life. [. . .]

Real life is pretty bad?

What do you think?

Well, I think we're still here. A lot of bad things have happened but we're still here. (268-69)

This passage, especially the father's concluding optimism, illustrates the difficult balance that he must strike between his internal struggle and the external requirements of his relationship with his son: he wants to relinquish his personal memories of the past so that they do not affect his vigilance, and he wants to erase his own feelings of guilt and failure. His collective memories also seduce him with visions of disappeared beauty and goodness. Added to this struggle is his son, his reason for staying alive, whom he must try to educate on the threats of the world. But what does he teach him? To tell happy stories. "Because we're the good guys. Yes. And we're carrying the fire. And we're carrying the fire. Yes. Okay" (129). We see all this from a man who, earlier in the novel, told himself to "[c]urse god and die" (114). For the sake of his son's sense of the world and because of his love for his son, he finds meaning in his struggle with his memories.

Nostalgia

Like Ricœur's theory of close relations, nostalgia is closely associated with the different types of memory but operates on a spectrum, creating an additional mediatory force between personal and collective memory. According to Boym, "[n]ostalgia remains an intermediary between collective and individual memory" (54). This mediation is possible because of Boym's dual definition of nostalgia as two "tendencies": restorative nostalgia, which seeks to "rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps," and reflective nostalgia, which "dwells . . . in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance" (41). Boym explicitly links restorative nostalgia with the collective in that it "builds on the sense of loss in community and cohesion and offers a comforting collective script for individual longing," whereas reflective nostalgia is more

personal, “more oriented towards an individual narrative . . . ironic, inconclusive, and fragmentary” (42, 49-50). These associations complicate readings of both Bell and the father. The fact that Boym calls them “tendencies” rather than “absolute types” implies a degree of play with the possibility for overlap, of the one happening while allowing the other to also be present (41). Suddenly, both Bell and the father’s longing for the past is not just a simple manifestation of nostalgia, marking them as *only* longing for a utopian restoration of the past. Boym’s differentiation between the two tendencies of nostalgia allows us to read Bell and the father as both restorative of past sensibilities, and more importantly, reflective upon the vagaries of memory. They are able to see the gaps in and imperfections of their longing, meaning that they do possess a degree of insight and discernment.

Bell’s flights from his personal to his collective memories seem to indicate that he would only be capable of restorative nostalgia, but as with memory, his expressions vary throughout the narrative as he seeks to make meaning out of the present. There are many instances early on when Bell does get lost in moments of restorative nostalgia, like when he thinks of old timer lawmen, trying to restore a golden age of civility and clear responsibility that arguably has never really existed. While he may flee from his personal memories—at 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). He admits to cherishing his more painful memories, much like when he voices his realization of the country’s bloody history, both of his native Texas and of the nation in general, sounding much more like a reflective nostalgic. In these moments, he recognizes that his emotions about certain memories affects how he thinks of them—his love for his daughter makes her feel alive, his love for his country makes him think that it was pure once.

During his conversation with his Uncle Ellis, he also makes his remarkable confession, “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 is undoubtedly a moment of reflective nostalgia; he *wishes* for the past but he *knows* he cannot have it. He has a keen and even painful awareness of the present and of being limited to acting in the present. This is not a man who is oblivious to the demands of the present; rather, because of his dual vision, his ability to look into the past while still acknowledging his present perspective, he can seek for meaning wherever it might be found. As has been mentioned, Boym joins nostalgia to memory by associating reflective nostalgia with personal memory and restorative nostalgia with collective memory. Bell’s feelings towards the past and the present vacillate between the two categories of nostalgia as a result of his flight between personal memory and memory of the collective. Nostalgia’s potential for overlap and play can then also lead Bell to a middle ground where he continues to seek a more independent and complex way to narrate his experiences.

In *The Road*, despite the loss of the past and its intrusions in the novel, the father also manifests both tendencies of nostalgia. His constant, though warranted, fear of the present and future would make it easy to categorize him as a restorative nostalgic. To use Boym’s descriptions, the father faces “the corrupt modern world,” doggedly haunted by the loss of home and by “anxiety” for the present (44-45). Rather than flee, as Bell does, the father sometimes wishes for death to end the exhausting struggle for survival. Even when they find the bunker filled with food, his weariness and fear for what may yet come overtake him: “Even now some part of him wished they’d never found this refuge. Some part of him always wished it to be over” (154). These moments where he contemplates his own death and his son’s occur throughout the novel, but he never goes through with killing himself and his son. Rather than make him a failed

Abraham, as Manuel Broncano suggests (130), this is the play that nostalgia provides—not either/or, but both/and.

A reflective nostalgic, according to Boym, can also “[cherish] shattered fragments of memory”; yet unlike the forcibly linear narrative of a restorative nostalgic, his is “ironic, inconclusive, and fragmentary” (49-50). This cherishing of fragmentation is especially evident with the father’s constant return to memories of his wife, which are suffused with an aching sense of loss of something beautiful, mystical. Early in the novel, he confesses, “From daydreams on the road there was no waking. . . . He could remember everything of her save her scent. Seated in a theatre with her beside him leaning forward listening to the music. . . . Freeze this frame. Now call down your dark and your cold and be damned” (18-19). Does he curse his wife, who took the darkness as her final resting place? Does he curse his own dark thoughts? Does he curse God? His final curse and uncertain use of the pronoun compared to the tenderness of the preceding reminiscence exemplify the kind of play that is possible between reflective and restorative nostalgia. On the one hand, his longing seems to take him over completely and to show him all he has lost. If he could bring back or restore that world, he would. On the other hand, the intended recipient of his final curse is complicated by the father’s remembered interactions with his wife. It could be read as bravado, as him cutting out this particular moment to act as a talisman against the darkness of the present. However, when his wife leaves him to kill herself, she leaves in the dark of night and “the coldness of it was her final gift” (58). This could be her cold and her dark that he calls down on this memory to damn her, to shatter the memory for himself. Both restorative and reflective nostalgia can affect the same memory, complicating our readings of nostalgia in McCarthy’s characters.

Whether reflective or restorative, nostalgia longs for that which matters most, typically the home, thereby acting as a reminder of the importance and value of culture and human closeness. Much like Ricœur's theory of close relations, nostalgia's overlapping can mediate struggles of memory and provide common ground to stabilize the competing demands of restorative and reflective nostalgia. Boym affirms the fundamental need for the backward-looking glance as a reaffirmation of human culture, especially when memory has been hijacked by "historical cataclysms and exile" (53). She explains: "Culture is not foreign to human nature but integral to it; after all, culture provides a context where relationships do not always develop by continuity but by contiguity" (53). Culture, close relations, contiguous relationships—no matter what we term them, this is the lasting fire essential to Bell and the father. As Snyder puts it in his study of *The Road*, "the responsibility for the Other comes before history and culture and, as McCarthy shows us in *The Road*, it comes after history and culture as well. Human beings . . . are inherently structured according to hospitality, whether or not the infinite demands of hospitality are accepted or refused or even acknowledged" (85). Imminent violence and danger to the protagonists and their community cause a sense of exile from culture in both novels, though it more obviously does so in *The Road*. Times of exile and cataclysm, however, leave a void that needs to be filled. According to historian Jacques LeGoff, even in societies without writing "there are memory specialists, memory-men . . . [who] are the 'memory of society' . . . and they are at once the conservators of 'objective' history and of 'ideological history,' . . . 'aged heads of families, bards, priests'" (56). Whether people seem to be bent on erasing each other through cartel wars or through cannibalism, those who carry memory and look to it can gain great power and understanding.

The different types and tendencies of memory and nostalgia drive the visionary perspective both for Bell and the father by pushing them to recognize what is most valuable: human closeness. The strangeness and violence of the present gives them a sense of rupture and distance, which turns them to the past. “This defamiliarization and sense of distance,” Boym asserts,

drives [nostalgics] to tell their story, to narrate the relationship between past, present and future. Through such longing these nostalgics discover that the past is not merely that which doesn’t exist anymore, but, to quote Henri Bergson, the past “might act and will act by inserting itself into a present sensation from which it borrows the vitality.” (50)

Bell and the father both doggedly avoid and pursue the past—they both try to avoid parts of it but cannot escape it, including it again and again in their narratives. The past gains a new vitality, a visionary and prophetic potential in its reintegration with the present by revealing that there is safety and security possible; their families are both the means and the end of their journey, the safety that is possible, the vision they receive.

Through their obsession with the past, Bell and the father come to crucial realizations about their circumstances that essentially have the same implication for the future. Their families survive the violence, burst illusions, and conflict. Bell’s uncle, his wife, and his daughter mitigate his feelings of guilt and failure, and also help to show him that they are a constant thread in the present and future. John Cant even calls Bell a “success” because Bell “chooses life” when he refuses to face Chigurh (250). Instead, Bell “insist[s] on facing the truth of his own life, [and] accepting responsibility for that truth and resting on the life-giving support of his wife” (250). Bell admits that his heart belongs to his child—“I know that over the years I have

give her the heart I always wanted for myself and that's alright" (285). But his heart also belongs to his wife. "That's my heart yonder," he tells his horse, seeing his wife at a distance, "It always was" (300). The father's dying words to his son reflect his own faith in this ethic of human closeness, of giving up ownership of one's own heart to pass down its best qualities: "I cant hold my dead son in my arms. I thought I could but I cant. . . . You have my whole heart. You always did. You're the best guy. You always were" (279). The father's son breaks him free from the burden of his supposed duty, that is, to kill his son to protect him, and his wife shows him that despair leads to death but taking care of others leads to life. As Cant argues of *The Road*, "[a]lthough individual death must come at the end, collective continuity remains a possibility if the generations can pass on that ardenhearted vitality which is the inherent motor of life" (279). Neither man necessarily becomes a prophet in the strictest sense of the word since neither can predict the future beyond this particular vision they attain, but McCarthy brings them to the brink of wanting a prophet through the demands of the different types nostalgia and memory. Whether restorative or reflective nostalgia, personal or collective memory, their longing or looking to the past comes from anxiety in the present about the future. This anxiety drives their return to the past as well as the desire for a prophet or a vision to then lead them back to a present and future that is stable. The image of carrying the fire indeed suggests that this ancient need is at work in these novels and that even the narrative structures of *No Country* and *The Road* bespeak both the search for and the reception of revelation.

The search for stability and revelation through the different types of memory and nostalgia is enacted in the structures of these novels themselves. Because they so often look to the past in these stories, McCarthy's characters inscribe their search for the prophetic and revelation both thematically, carrying the fire being the most obvious example of this, and

structurally. The structure of Bell's first-person narratives points to this prophetic need in the novel, and that his is not simply a peripheral narrative to be taken lightly, but a substantial framing device of revelation in the novel. His italicized narratives open and close the book as well as opening each new chapter, acting both as a literal and a philosophical frame for the novel. Critics have taken notice of the importance of this frame, frequently comparing him to Old Testament prophets, but without validating this prophetic potential in his narrative search. Walsh dismisses the importance of his narrative, stating that "[w]hile the Sheriff's opening and closing soliloquies in *No Country for Old Men* enclose the adversary's actions, they are not the divinely explanatory and restorative speech of the prologue and epilogue of the book of Job" (344). Likewise, Ellis coins the phrase "the Old Man book" to describe Bell's italicized musings, and compares Bell to Jeremiah of the Old Testament, though to Ellis this is a weakness in Bell's narratives (227, 243). However, Bell's narratives do actively search the past for meaning through his collective and personal memories, navigating and weighing its value through his shifting nostalgia. Lydia Cooper juxtaposes Bell to Chigurh "like the twin faces of Janus, each envisioning a different possible world . . . [and] 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). In addition to pointing to Bell as a prophet because he is the twin of the prophet of destruction (Chigurh), Cooper also connects to this idea of the search for the prophetic that Bell is undertaking. The fact that these first-person narratives are all retrospective, all memories, should be as telling as what he remembers, since without this active, vital, and generative backwards-looking glance, he would be like Chigurh or even the cannibals in *The Road*—ahistorical, unconcerned with the future, unimpressed by any need for continuity.

Memory and nostalgia's dual yet overlapping longing propels a certain kind of narrative forward, a narrative that not only looks to the past but embeds the past in the structure. For Bell and the father, *how* they tell their story depends just as much as *what* they tell on the power and strength of ancient religious symbols of fire and divinity to dissipate the anxiety of the present. In *The Road*, one of the most obvious recurring motifs is the son's unearthly divinity in the eyes of his father, which imbues the father with a desire to search for revelation and to interpret signs—both seeking after and performing prophetic functions. The father calls his son “his warrant” and says, “[i]f he is not the word of God God never spoke” (5), clearly harkening back to the language of the New Testament that describes Jesus Christ as the word of God: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (*King James Version*, John 1.1). If the boy is the word of God, then the protector and defender of the word would inevitably be his prophet. His son is also “God's own fire-drake” and when they encounter the old man, Ely, the father asks him: “You thought [the boy] was an angel?” (*Road* 31, 172). As Ely suggests, the father seems to think of himself as travelling “on the road with the last god” and as the keeper of that god, he seeks to validate the sacredness of this experience (172). “Recite a litany,” he commands himself, “Remember” (31). Despite the father's wrestling with God, his son's presence always draws from him desperate invocations to the divine. “All of this like some ancient anointing,” he tells himself after he has washed the road rat's brains out of his son's hair, “When you've nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them” (74). The anointing, the ceremonies—these are religious symbols of faith, but more basically for the father, they symbolize a certainty that will bear the weight of the present. To perform these symbols enacts the deep history of meaning that they carry with them and ties the present to that rich lineage, granting stability where there was none before. The father travels the

road with the word of God, like a New Testament prophet, and he performs sacred rites and rituals, like an Old Testament prophet. It is no coincidence that he is also the character who voices the novel's most profound truth since he so diligently searches for those signs.

By the end of each novel, these protagonists essentially remain paradoxes, failing in some ways but also coming to profound visions because of their narrative journeys. The complexities of personal and collective memory, of restorative and reflective nostalgia, rather than acting as hindrances, cast them as LeGoff's memory priests or Boym's nostalgics. They both fear and long for the past, but they understand the past's claim on the present, which goes beyond the simple fact of temporal continuity. How we view the past and how we interact with it through our present affects how we act, how we think, and what we feel about that present. To recognize this power that the past has, that is what it means to be a memory priest or a generative nostalgic. Though Bell and the father are imperfect and afraid, they do have that power to look into the past and they know the importance of lineage, tradition, community, history, and most importantly, memory. Their varied perspectives on memory and nostalgia, the fact that collective and personal memories threaten to split their minds apart, that restorative and reflective nostalgia have them wavering with emotion, such complexities and contradictions give them multifaceted perspectives of time. They look for answers where others might only see relics or the dust of irrelevant forebears. They sift through the wreckage of their fragmented minds and the records of their communities. And what do they find? What brings them forward out of the past? The image of carrying the fire, an ancient representation of hope and of the burning light of human culture.

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