

Marek Paryż, ed. *Cormac McCarthy*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2014. 233 pages.

2014 was a good year for Cormac McCarthy readers in Poland: it saw the republication of *No Country for Old Men* in a new translation by Robert Sudół, followed by a release of the first Polish companion to the writer's *oeuvre*. Given the fact that the re-edition of *No Country for Old Men* capped the decade-long endeavors of Wydawnictwo Literackie to publish all of McCarthy's prose works upon his sudden rise to popularity following the Oscar-winning adaptation of the novel, the companion appears to have arrived at the right juncture. The third volume in the series *Mistrzowie Literatury Amerykańskiej*, intended by the Section of American Literature at the Institute of English Studies, University of Warsaw as a Polish counterpart to Anglo-American companions to leading literary voices

of our time, *Cormac McCarthy* joins its predecessors in what has seemingly become a sustained effort into bringing contemporary American writers nearer to the local readership.

Edited by Marek Paryż, the collection comprises ten essays examining McCarthy as both novelist and playwright. The monograph bears in mind that the road of the writer's output to his Polish readers had been long and winding, for many among his Polish translations were published in a somewhat aleatory order dictated by the demands of the local literary market. The editor of the book thus strives to outline McCarthy's production in a chronological fashion. In a brief introduction to the volume, Paryż provides a clearly delineated overview of the main themes, influences, and formal devices which permeate McCarthy's writing, as well as a brief timeline of his literary career. This introduction precedes a string of texts in which leading Polish Americanists address McCarthy's individual works and his two theatrical plays. Apart from Paryż, who beside editing the companion also contributed two of his own essays, the list of authors includes Kacper Bartczak, Julia Fiedorczuk, Zofia Kolbuszewska, Agnieszka Kotwasińska, Adam Lipszyc, Maciej Maślowski, Piotr Paziński, Alicja Piechucka, Anna Warso, and Mikołaj Wiśniewski. Although the contributions constitute independent entities, their chronological arrangement aids the overall cohesion of the book, assisting the Polish reader in tracing the various thematic, stylistic and formal developments in McCarthy's literary works. Informative but far from dry, the essays assembled in the collection make for a great read for academics and laymen alike, as they help navigate through the ever-expanding criticism on McCarthy while often contesting that criticism with perceptive insight of their own.

The compendium opens with Alicja Piechucka's analysis of *The Orchard Keeper*. In line with its title, Piechucka's essay interprets McCarthy's debut as a travesty of Transcendentalist notions of nature and non-conformism inscribed in the context of the Great Depression. Drawing from Emerson and Thoreau, and citing numerous parallels between McCarthy's first novel and Faulkner's seminal novella "The Bear," Piechucka traces the roots of the writer's trademark naturalism to a subversive reading Transcendentalist tropes, and demonstrates the influence of the Southern Gothic on the book's elegiac revisionism, while also exploring *The Orchard Keeper* as an exposition of themes (journey, violence, liminality, disintegration of traditional communities) and devices (irony and the grotesque) which pervade McCarthy's subsequent production. Maciej Maślowski's take on *Outer Dark* inspects its topography as a "radical challenging of the mimetic paradigm" (46; trans. J. J.) resulting in the novel's rather unique departure towards oneiric yet palpable nihilism which Maślowski elucidates through the lens of Jams R. Giles's concept of the fourth space, Heideggerian expositions of Nietzschean dionysianism,

and Derrida's ruminations on the significance of blindness in the Judeo-Christian tradition, which assist him in underscoring the ambivalence embedded in the transgressive allegories McCarthy employs in his second work. Julia Fiedorczuk's essay on *Child of God* picks up on the theme of transgression, investigating the emotive aspects of communal violence, legalism and empathy in view of Lacanian psychoanalysis and Girard's concept of mimetic violence. Adding to the extensive scope of interpretations of violence as present in the novel, Fiedorczuk perceptively scrutinizes Lester Ballard as a grotesque manifestation of liminality, whose freakish qualities trigger his exclusion from the symbolic order of the community and his subsequent reification, which the scapegoat later perpetrates towards his female victims. Fiedorczuk also points out how, in contemplating transgression, McCarthy plants its seeds in the reader, commanding compassion in a string of bizarrely sympathetic accounts of Ballard's perversities. Concluding the presentation of the so-called "Tennessee Period" is Marek Paryż's engaging discussion of *Suttree* as an errand into existentialism. Paryż reflects on the uncharacteristic genealogy of the novel, tracing its origins to the realist novel of the absurd as defined by David Galloway, on the one hand, and to traditional tall-tales on the other. Identifying diversely pronounced traces of the picaro, the saint, and the tragic hero in the eponymous character, Paryż expounds on the darkly pastoral qualities of *Suttree* which, contrary to many other American novels of the absurd, effectively thwart its unequivocal classifications.

Upon outlining McCarthy's early works, the volume discusses his Western novels, beginning with *Blood Meridian*. Widely considered as the writer's most famous work, *Blood Meridian* is examined in two texts contributed by Zofia Kolbuszewska, and Adam Lipszyc, Piotr Paziński and Mikołaj Wśniewski, respectively. Kolbuszewska's deciphering of McCarthy's seminal Western as a neobaroque narrative takes as its point of departure the Deleuzian concepts of major and minor strategies as adopted by William Egginton in his analysis of the ideologies of neobaroque aesthetics, which she uses to investigate the clash between the two main protagonists in the novel, paying particular attention to its oft-neglected epilogue. Kolbuszewska shifts her focus from Judge Holden, traditionally elected by critics as the pivotal character in *Blood Meridian*, towards the Kid, whom she deliberately dubs "the Child," to better expound the fundamental differences between them. This recalibration leads Kolbuszewska to contend that the mutual interdependency of the two strategies endows McCarthy's novel with an aura of grotesque hybridity, which aids the dialogic depiction of the complex history of the Frontier as an arena for the clash between the center and the periphery. On a formal level, this dialogic interplay carries over to the second text dedicated to *Blood Meridian*, in which Lipszyc, Paziński and Wśniewski engage with Harold Bloom's canonical interpretation of Judge Holden as an impenetrable figure of

Shakespearian proportions, evaluating the shortcomings of Holden as a Gnostic demiurge, the new Ahab, Kurtz in reverse and “noir Whitman” (148; trans. J. J.). The voices of the three scholars overlap in a polyphonic and mutually complementary dialogue, furthering the points made by Kolbuszewska in the preceding essay. Eventually acknowledging Holden’s imperfectly epic status, they agree it is strictly conditioned by the Kid’s “impermeable materiality” (135; trans. J. J.). Not insignificantly, the conversation soundly demonstrates that *Blood Meridian* owes as much to the allegorical tradition as it does to McCarthy’s thorough historical research which successfully prevents the relegation of the novel to an abstract moral treatise or a catalogue of depravities. Instead, the novel forces upon the reader the role of a witness to a retelling of history, despite the overwhelming fatigue entailed in this demystification. Agnieszka Kotwasińska’s analysis of the Border Trilogy (*All the Pretty Horses*, *The Crossing*, *Cities of the Plain*) probes beyond the ostensibly conventional elements of the novels which earned McCarthy popular recognition. In keeping with the title of her essay, Kotwasińska examines the destabilization of narrative formulas in the trilogy as manifested through various methods of temporal representation, such as nonlinearity, a sense of belatedness, and cyclical repetition. Inspired by Deleuze’s concepts of machinism and deterritorialization, Kotwasińska convincingly suggests how the three novels amount to a profoundly ironic metanarrative which enables McCarthy to chart a rhizomatic map of US-Mexican borderlands that spans beyond hierarchic dichotomies traditionally embedded in the Western genre and its revisions.

The final three essays in the volume cover McCarthy’s latest two novels along with his theatrical enterprises, examining the writer’s turn towards minimalist narratives. In her lucid musings on *No Country for Old Men*, Anna Warso provides a close reading of what many critics consider as McCarthy’s most accessible and least effective novel. Objecting to reductive interpretations which cast it as an unoriginal derivative of McCarthy’s early metaphysics of violence, Warso decodes *No Country for Old Men* as a narrative devoted not so much to evil itself as to its perceptions sifted through the figure of an aging everyman thrust into a world in which things fall apart at an unprecedented pace. Adding much original insight to Jay Ellis’s reading of the novel, Warso draws parallels between its formal and narrative facets as filtered through the book’s central character, while also tracking how it readdresses some of the key themes of McCarthy’s writing and indeed pokes fun at the conservative ideologies some attribute it with. In the penultimate chapter of the collection, Kacper Bartczak ventures an ambitious study of *The Road*, tracing the evolution of its minimalist language through *Blood Meridian* and *No Country for Old Men*. Bartczak approaches McCarthy’s last novel to date as “an experiment in the field of realism” (188; trans. J. J.), an exercise in representing a rapidly vanishing materiality. Interweaving Auerbach’s monumental

study of mimesis with studies on Gnosticism and philosophies of late modernity, Bartczak ponders over the increasingly pluralist potentialities of McCarthy's literary language in its changing renditions of materiality. Bartczak's intricate approach enables him to arrive at truly poetic conclusions as he compares the austerity of the book's post-apocalyptic realism to a state of "ontological emergency" (203; trans. J. J.) which enables McCarthy's protagonists to re-entrust crumbling matter with significance and "reverses the hermeneutic cycle initiated in *Blood Meridian*" (213; trans. J. J.). Closing the volume is Marek Paryż's presentation of McCarthy's theatrical output. Reflecting on *The Stonemason* and *Sunset Limited*, Paryż considers the extent to which McCarthy manages to translate the existential problems inherent to his fiction onto stage environment. Deriving the two plays from the traditions of great American family tragedy and theatre of the absurd, respectively, Paryż interrogates the consequences of the supplantation of implicative qualities of McCarthy's prose with those of direct dialogue in his dramas, perceiving this substitution as a limitation to the critical reception of the ethical dilemmas ingrained in McCarthy's literary output. Encoded within unambiguous rhetoric, he argues, the themes of nostalgia, loss, and epistemological erosion, among others, drift towards unconcealed moralism and thus compare rather unfavorably with McCarthy's dense fiction.

All in all, the companion makes a valuable contribution to the series. Intelligent and discerning, *Cormac McCarthy* provides the Polish reader with a long-awaited introduction to one of America's seminal writers. True to its mission, the compendium clearly delineates McCarthy's revaluations of genres and traditions. A comprehensive review of McCarthy's literary production, the book offers an extensive and up-to-date survey of critical sources, while also contributing refreshing analyses of its own. Although its respective essays rely on diverse methodologies, the collection nonetheless retains substantial cohesion thanks to numerous thematic overlaps which are easily graspable thanks to the sequential order of presentation of individual novels. As such, the publication successfully mirrors what Paryż terms a "homology of style, symbols, and themes" (15; trans. J. J.) which binds the writer's works together. The ability to reflect this homology in the companion will likely enable the local readership to delve beyond Harold Bloom's famous blurb, readily reprinted on each and every cover of McCarthy's Polish translations. Speaking of which, the University of Warsaw Press deserves praise for the series' consistently minimalist layout, a pleasant rarity in the Polish publishing sector.

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