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READING CORMAC MCCARTHY'S APPALACHIAN FICTION—The Orchard Keeper, Outer Dark, and Child of God—my gaze has been drawn back from the pictur esque vista of the broader Appalachians, back from the sublimity of the panorama, to focus upon the harsh realities of the close-up: eastern Tennessee and western North Carolina as mountainous wastelands.(FN1) My vision has been drawn to what other critics of McCarthy's Appalachian fiction have given but slight attention: the ecological undertones of landscape representation.(FN2) McCarthy's descriptions of the mountain terrain have more in common with Walker Evans's black and white close-ups of poor Alabama sharecroppers in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men than with the long view of the land framed by Ansel Adams's landscape photography. As in Evans's photographs, where the quaint ruggedness of the rural people does not obscure their poverty, McCarthy's Appalachia is revealed as a place both beautiful and ruined—a land of scant patches of virgin woodlands juxtaposed with the scars of over two centuries of pioneering. McCarthy is attentive to a variety of ecological measurements: geologic records; vegetative and animal life that shaped these records—for instance, the hundreds of millions of years of sea life piled on the land when it was covered with water, and whose corpses decayed into the wealth of mineral matter underlying the present-day mountains(FN3); and riparian history.(FN4) By focusing on details of the land—the surface features and landforms, the vegetation covering it, and the human structures built upon it—one better understands McCarthy's subtle critique of the forces that have laid waste and continue to lay waste to the mountain wilderness and the inhabitants who dwell there.

A historical awareness of natural resource usage in Appalachia encourages appreciation of the ecological critique of McCarthy's fiction. In The Southern Appalachian Forests, foresters H. B. Ayres and W. W. Ashe report the findings of field surveys they undertook in the mountains in 1900 and 1901. About the northwestern slope of the Unaka Mountains (the Unakas lie in parts of each county on the eastern edge of Tennessee), the foresters reported:

> 92 percent is wooded.... In the coves ... the soil is fertile.... As a rule the earth is fairly well covered and thus protected from erosion.... In this region streams heading in unbroken forest are notably clear and show little fluctuation, while those from cleared lands are muddy and inconstant. While present erosion is limited, there is evidence that it would be very great if large areas of the earth were uncovered.... (qtd. in Camuto 251)

In the southern Appalachians in 1900, from New River Gap in Virginia to the Hiwassee River an western North Carolina and northern Georgia, existed at least 137 tree species; add to that 174 species of shrubs, "as well as uncounted varieties of herbs, forbs, grasses, plants, lichens, mosses, ferns, and fungi," for an example of a species-rich watershed (Camuto 251). Further praising the richness of botanical life in Appalachia is Wilma Dykeman in The French Broad. The mountains of eastern Tennessee and western North Carolina support woods "richer in variety of trees than the whole of Europe, for this is the area where Northern and Southern vegetation meet and mingle" (11), Dykeman says. She explains that 25,000 years ago a great ice cap formed over Labrador and crept across North America, "until at last all the northern

United States was buried under ice, and trees and plants once native to Canada made their last stand on the heights of the Southern Appalachians" (11). On these mountains exist "some of the largest stands of virgin spruce and balsam fir in the eastern United States. Here are the great hardwood forests of America" (11). These forests, Dykeman says, "were and are the most valuable natural heritage of the French Broad country. Not alone for quantity of board feet, nor for wide variety of species, but for the life they supported and their relation to the vast water resource of the region" (11). These diverse forests have, of course, been the site of vigorous cutting. Deforestation in the region dates back to the late eighteenth century, when large numbers of homesteading pioneers migrated into East Tennessee. Settlers hacked away at the wilderness to construct homes and plant crops. The waste of timber stands was large; many cut trees went unused (Dykeman 51-52). Heavy logging occurred in the region throughout the nineteenth century (Smith et al. 294). Deforestation has been extensive. Of the great forests that once covered most of the state, in 1939 "less than one-tenth of the primeval stand remain[ed]" (Tennessee 19). A study conducted by the Works Progress Administration discusses the condition of the land in that year: "Fire and wasteful lumbering have taken their toll of the timber regions. Protective grasses have been uprooted from the slopes by overgrazing and by the plow. Erosion has resulted from these careless methods, and today (1939) fourteen million acres in the State need reclamation" (Tennessee 20).

The land within the political borders of East Tennessee has yielded a wealth of natural resources, including some of the world's richest coal seams. Coal was first mined in the state in 1814 in western Roane county (Tennessee 67). In 1939, the second largest marble quarry in the United States lay near Knoxville (Tennessee 68). Also in 1939, Tennessee's extensive phosphate rock deposits placed the state second to Florida in production of phosphate for commercial fertilizer. Additionally, the Tennessee Valley Authority took advantage of East Tennessee's extensive river system and in 1933 began damming the main rivers and tributaries. By 1948, nine TVA dams had been constructed in East Tennessee (Wiersema). (In the same year, John Wesley Rattner in The Orchard Keeper heads for the western road, fleeing an encroaching modernity.) The cheap power generated by hydroelectric plants attracted other industry, notably the nuclear facility at Oak Ridge, built in 1943 to produce enriched uranium for the making of the atomic bomb (Hudson). Furthermore, ALCOA (Aluminum Company of America), utilizing hydroelectric power from the Little Tennessee River, had constructed fifteen power plants in East Tennessee and western North Carolina by 1945. The first plant was begun in 1914 in North Maryville, in Blount County, Tennessee (Parker).

These real-life economic and ecological conditions are reflected in McCarthy's fiction. McCarthy's "critique" is not altogether specific; nowhere in the fiction are mentioned the Tennessee Valley Authority, coal companies, pulpwood plants, or other prominent industries taking advantage of Appalachia's subterranean and surface resources. Nevertheless, the impact of these industries is an unspoken force behind the agricultural decline in McCarthy's Appalachia. For instance, The Orchard Keeper, set in the 1930s and 1940s, presents a landscape beset by erosion and abandoned farmland. By piecing together the few dates and spans of time offered in the text, one can ascertain the narrative present to be around 1940. Kenneth Rattner left Red Branch in 1933. He returned after a year's absence, at which time Marion Sylder killed him. Add Rattner's absence of one year plus the six years Arthur Ownby has guarded Rattner's corpse (52), for the historic time when Ownby enters the narrative. We first see Ownby scavenging for peaches in the orchard, which "went to ruin twenty years before when the fruit had come so thick and no one to pick it that at night the

overborne branches cracking sounded in the valley like distant storms raging" (51). The absence of peach pickers twenty years before (circa 1920) points to the impact World War I had on agriculture. Historian Durwood Dunn notes the decrease in farming in Cades Cove, Tennessee (a town in Blount county, southeast of McCarthy's fictional Red Branch), following the war:

> The 1920's witnessed a sudden regression as agricultural prices—high before and during the war—suddenly dropped, leaving many cove farmers in desperate financial straits. National prohibition in 1919 suddenly highlighted the advantages of the cove's geographic isolation for distilling illicit whiskey. Distilling had always occupied a small fraction of the community before, but by 1920 many mainstream, respectable citizens turned to moonshining in desperation as farm prices continued to fall.

True to the historical conditions. The Orchard Keeper reveals this agricultural decline through such details as the wrecked orchard and farms of Red Branch. Ownby, a farmer in his younger days,(FN5) no longer keeps swine for his own consumption. Traditional rural hog killings were community affairs, and the absence of neighboring farmers in Red Branch is linked to the "black hog-kettle which [Ownby] didn't use any more" (56). The fictional abandoned farms evoke the historic mass migrations of the yeomanry into towns to claim factory jobs.

In an early review of The Orchard Keeper, Walter Sullivan places the novel "in the middle of the Agrarian influence" (721). In a recent analysis of the novel, Robert L. Jarrett refutes this association with the Nashville Agrarians and claims that Sullivan "misreads as 'agrarian' the text's representation of the relation between man and nature and errs in associating the distinctive features of the tradition of the Southern renaissance with McCarthy" (8). Jarrett proposes instead that McCarthy's first novel "critiques the Agrarians' and Faulkner's assumption of an essential or meaningful continuity between Southern past and present" (11). The Orchard Keeper is about disconnection, and hence a break from the Agrarian tradition, Jarrett suggests (12-13). If one limits the term "agrarian" to the Nashville scholars and plantation farming, then McCarthy's texts are indeed a divorce from the tradition. The impoverished yeoman landholders of The Orchard Keeper, with their few barren acres, do not fit into the context of "Faulkner's Southern patriarchy," with its sharecropping system rooted in "the chattel slavery of the plantation" (Jarrett 21-22). The novel is, however, "agrarian" within the context of Wendell Berry's agricultural praxis. Berry, a farmer who lives in the foothills skirting Appalachia near the confluence of two rivers—the Kentucky and the Ohio—has written a dozen books of nonfiction, most of which emphasize the ecological importance of small-scale sustainable farming. A few of the most explicitly "agrarian" texts include A Continuous Harmony (1972), The Unsettling of America (1977), and The Gift of Good Land (1981), all bearing a variation of the subtitle "Culture and Agriculture." Berry calls himself an "agrarian" because he is an advocate of agricultural practices that sustain the ecological integrity of a place. He is a supporter of sustainable forestry and of the ability of a people to live "independently"—that is, not dependent upon out-of-region and foreign imports of fossil fuels, food, textiles, and so forth.

The Orchard Keeper is an elegy to yeoman farmers and their descendants. The novel is "agrarian" in its awareness of land abuse in modern Appalachia, an abuse snowballed by the shift of property ownership from the small-scale yeoman to "absentee" (out-of-county or state) landholders and corporations. One notices the decline of independent agricultural communities in Marion Sylder's story. At the age of sixteen, circa 1929, Sylder leaves the community with little more than "a pair of thirty-dollar boots mail-ordered out of Minnesota.... Whatever trade he followed in his

exile he wore no overalls, wielded no hammer" (12). Sylder's purchase of boots through mail order either testifies to the lack of boot sellers in Red Branch, or it sets Sylder up as a representative of the new cash economy. Since Sylder probably could have purchased a pair of boots in Knoxville, one assumes he is exercising personal choice in buying mail-order boots from far away, rather than supporting his local economy. Sylder returns to Red Branch "bearing no olive branch but hard coin and greenbacks and ushering in an era of prosperity" (29). A moonshine runner, Sylder acquires quick money with minimal labor expenditure. Additional references concerning the move in Red Branch away from subsistence farming and into a cash economy are to the Tiptons, residents who embody the "new catalog store prosperity" in their china lamps and linoleum floor and "warm morning heater" (105). Other signs appear in Knoxville, where farmers converge to higgle their produce, and where markets sell meat "white-spotted and trichinella-ridden" (82). Replacing subsistence farmers who cultivated corn, wheat, potatoes, beans, and who raised a few hens for eggs, a cow for milk, a hog for meat, are poor farm boys "with no more farm than some wizened tomato plants and a brace of ravenous hogs" (16). Sylder's job at the fertilizer plant near Knoxville, where he worked circa 1930 before running whiskey, is another sign that large monocrop agriculture dependent upon factory-made fertilizers and pesticides is expanding. "Progressive" or "scientific" agriculture had by 1910 "swept Cades Cove as it engulfed the rest of the United States" (Dunn 77). Agribusiness technology made possible the harvesting of larger quantities of agricultural produce with fewer hands, which drove down agricultural prices. Land taxes, however, remained steady; indeed, independent landowners were taxed at higher rates than corporate and absentee owners.(FN6) This economic discrepancy hurt small farmers and spurred their exodus into towns.

Industrial farming, coupled with mining and other heavy industry, shows its presence in The Orchard Keeper in the form of a scarred landscape. Near the ruined orchard stands a spray-pit once used for mixing insecticide. The orchard has not been actively "kept" in twenty years, yet weeds still do not grow under the apple trees, attesting to the potency and longevity of the chemicals. Additionally, whenever rain pours in McCarthy's Appalachia, the rivers run red with clay from the eroded land. Ownby walks to where a mysterious government tank—an intruder in his Eden—sits "like a great silver ikon, fat and bald and sinister" atop a knoll. A wooded area has been cleared to make room for the tank. It is "A barren spot, bright in the moonwash, mercurial and luminescent as a sea, the pits from which the trees had been wrenched dark on the naked bulb of the mountain as moon craters" (93). Surrounding this wasteland is a wire fence within which "The great dome stood complacent, huge ... clean and coldly gleaming and capable of infinite contempt" (93). This once-healthy forest has been injured, as evidenced by the mud-choked water, like red blood after a rain. During a storm, Ownby casts himself into a land awash in red: "The road had gone from dust shocked up in dark waterballs to geysers of erupting mud" (171). The land in the vicinity of Ownby's misused farm is "bleeding," the rain "cutting gullies on the hills till they ran red and livid as open wounds" (173). "Rafts of leaves descended the flowage of Henderson Valley Road, clear water wrinkling over the black asphalt. The mud-choked gullies ran thick with water of a violent red, roiling heavily, pounding in the gutters with great belching sounds" (174). A flooded creek churns "a chocolate-dark foam," a "thick brown liquid"—the color of topsoil. All this erosion is a reminder that "forests and water are as inseparable as the heart and its blood. If there is a water problem, there is a forest problem first" (Dykeman 11).

Erosion of land is a natural process; for millions of years before heavy industry, water transformed landscapes; the Grand Canyon, carved by the Colorado River, and

Mammoth Cave, formed by water trickling and streaming through limestone, are two examples. Nevertheless, the hand of man is recognized behind McCarthy's blood-red streams, gullied roads, and hillsides with gaping "wounds" where trees once stood. Human industry speeds up the momentum, propels the erosion. The land washed away during the big flood in The Orchard Keeper recalls earlier scenes of human violence: Ownby dynamiting the earth in preparation for new roads, the pesticide pit like an enduring ulcer on the land, and the young boys dynamiting birds, foreshadowing yet another generation who will, in the manner of Thomas Sutpen in Absalom, Absalom!, rip violently from the earth whatever is needed for the building of empire.

Around 1949, Ownby waxes nostalgic on the agrarian lifestyle, a time passed. Standing on a high ball knoll on Red Mountain, he gazes at the Great Smokies far in the distance. "If I was a younger man," he says, "I would move to them mountains. I would find me a clearwater branch and build me a log house with a fireplace. And my bees would make black mountain honey. And I wouldn't care for no man." He adds, "Then I wouldn't be unneighborly neither" (55). Ownby expresses here agrarian sentiments—a desire for personal self-sufficiency and neighborliness. It is a vision of the agrarian "hero" of pastoral literature, described by Leo Marx in The Machine in the Garden: "Instead of striving for wealth, status, and power, he [the farmer] may be said to live a good life in a rural retreat; he rests content with a few simple possessions, enjoys freedom from envying others, feels little or no anxiety about his property, and, above all, he does what he likes to do" (98). John M. Grammer notes, however, that the pastoral dream is obsolete, while adding that The Orchard Keeper offers the most positive image of pastoral order in McCarthy's oeuvre, "a kind of touchstone" against which we can examine McCarthy's "later and bleaker examinations of the pastoral impulse" (30). McCarthy's ambivalent presentation of the disappearing farmer-pioneer is demonstrated by a comparison of The Orchard Keeper with Child of God. In the final lines of The Orchard Keeper, the narrator notes the passing of these people: "They are gone now. Fled, banished in death or exile, lost, undone.... No avatar, no scion, no vestige of that people remains. On the lips of the strange race that now dwells there their names are myth, legend, dust" (246). This vanquished "race" includes failed subsistence farmers and descendants of farmers, hunters, and moonshiners—those whose ancestors were once independent of "outside" sources of sustenance and entertainment but who are now locked into the broader world of commerce connected with the outroads of Appalachia. McCarthy's characterization of these people is objective, yet one senses nostalgia, a small tribute, some authorly admiration in their stubbornness to remain aloof from the outside world. The yeoman farmer is not romanticized, however, as his scions commit acts of idiotic violence. In Child of God, for instance, a community narrator explains that Lester Ballard once broke a cow's neck by pulling her with a rope attached to a tractor (35). Another young yokel sets fire under his oxen team to get it to move (36). The violent pioneer impulse lingers in these twentieth-century farmers. They are complex characters, at once admirable, pitiable, and base.

McCarthy's prose carries an "apocalyptic" tone, as if the collapse of the earth as we know it lurks in the near future. Violent acts run throughout the novels, dealt by humans, animals, and weather. Destruction to life is overbearing. The declining fauna of McCarthy's Appalachia provide the most obvious evidence of ecological disease. Even readers unimpressed by dirt-choked, blood-red waters and the agrarian critique will recognize McCarthy's ethics of the wild. In The Orchard Keeper, Ownby recalls how he has not smelled muskrat for forty years (56). A reason why is not given, but one suspects muskrat populations have been decimated, trapped out, as have mink

(143). Ownby laments the decline of the raccoon, overhunted, one supposes, or pushed out of Red Branch with the clearing of forests for crop land and for such structures as the enigmatic government tank. The threat to Red Branch wildlife goes all the way back to the 1870s, when Ownby worked on road crews in the area. Logging roads cut off wildlife migration paths, and perhaps whatever wildlife has not been overhunted and trapped in John Wesley Rattner's and Ownby's roaming area has moved south to the Smoky Mountain wilderness, the less-developed watershed that from Red Branch looms "like a distant promise" (10).

The most memorable symbol of ecological catastrophe in The Orchard Keeper may be the hungry solitary panther. Like the venerable bear of Faulkner's novella, the panther is the last of its kind. After a flood, the cat treads the eroding landscape searching for food. She appears "bedraggled and diminutive, a haunted look about her" (174). She is "very thin and forlorn," because her food sources have been diminished by trappers, hunters, and loggers. Through the panther's search for food, the lack of vegetative and animal life in Red Branch can be seen. The land the cat inhabits in the environs of Ownby's abandoned farm appears deadened: "she came down the patch obscure with parched weeds shedding thin blooms of sifting dust where she brushed them" (216). Because forests have been hewn, there is not much natural cover to protect the soil and few spots where the earth holds moisture on a hot dry day. The panther crosses into a "dry gully, the cracked and curling clay like a paving of potsherds" (217). A "potsherd" is a fragment of broken pottery, particularly one with archaeological worth, such as the Mimbres pottery unearthed in New Mexico, etched with picture-stories from Pueblo Indian mythology.(FN7) We can similarly "read" the cracked clay and deadly drought of Red Branch, and comprehend the connection between bone-dry land and absent forests. The panther traverses the baked clay earth and then approaches one lone walnut tree standing in a field, sole survivor "against axe and plowshare" (217). All is passing: the single walnut tree is sure to fall, along with the last panther, the mink and muskrat, and the old independent pioneers like Ownby.

McCarthy never allows readers long spaces of comfort. Sublime natural settings are quickly penetrated by agents of violence. In this sense, McCarthy's fiction participates in what Marx calls "complex" pastoral literature. Marx differentiates between two kinds of American pastoralism: "naive" and "complex." "Naive" pastoral, such as Emerson's Nature, tends to romanticize the whole land as a "garden," a pastoral ideal in which peaceful wilderness provides a haven of rest for the weary. "Complex" pastoral, on the other hand, recognizes the penetration of human industry into the sylvan countryside, as when railroads encroach upon the quietude of Walden Pond or into Faulkner's Big Woods or into McCarthy's Hurricane wilderness. In one paragraph of The Orchard Keeper, we are privy to a picturesque forest, where sunlight flashes among sky-reaching tree trunks in which squirrels frolic; in the next paragraph, the "machine" breaks the calm in the form of a fire trail built by the "CCC," the Civilian Conservation Corps (200). Ownby, who makes his newest home in the wilderness, finds a rattlesnake belly-up on the fire trail. He prods the snake and discovers someone has cut away the rattles—a human hand again intruding upon a sliver of old growth wilderness. Another "complex" action—one imparting both hope and heavy loss—occurs near the end of the novel, when John Wesley returns a dead hawk and the bounty he had collected on it to the Knox County courthouse and announces, "I cain't take no dollar. I made a mistake, he wadn't for sale" (233). The gesture is futile, yet it suggests that John Wesley has cultivated an ontological appreciation for wild nature, a change from his earlier utilitarian preoccupation with trapping furbearing animals for their hides. John Wesley is a type of American Adam, cast out of Eden

and fallen. His returning of the dead hawk is an admission of complicity, a form of repentance. He knows there will be no reclamation of wildness in Appalachia—no more abundant mink and muskrat and freedom from bureaucracy—and at the novel's close he accordingly heads westward in search of a new Eden.

The apocalyptic tone is overbearing, yet elements of hope exist in the fiction that readers may miss—a hope centered not upon humanity but upon the rebounding health of the damaged nonhuman world. Consider how McCarthy presents not only examples of abused nature but also examples of land not destroyed by human invention. When he first introduces his fictional East Tennessee in The Orchard Keeper, for example, he sets up the dominating conflict of most environmental writing: the contrast between humanscarred land and healthy wilderness. It is summertime in Red Mountain. The land cleared for roads and crops has been baked by the scorching sun:

> The red dust of the orchard road is like powder from a brick kiln. You can't hold a scoop of it in your hand. Hot winds come up the slope from the valley like a rancid breath, redolent of milkweed, hoglots, rotting vegetation. The red clay banks along the road are crested with withered honeysuckle, peavines dried and sheathed in dust. By late July the corn patches stand parched and sere, stalks askew in defeat. All greens pale and dry. Clay cracks and splits in endless microcataclysm and the limestone lies about the eroded land.... (10-11)

In the subsequent paragraph, McCarthy presents a healthy forest by which we can gauge the damage done to the adjacent land:

> In the relative cool of the timber stands, possum grapes and muscadine flourish with a cynical fecundity, and the floor of the forest—littered with old mossbacked logs, peopled with toadstools strange and solemn among the ferns and creepers ... has about it a primordial quality, some steamy carboniferous swamp where ancient saurians lurk in feigned sleep. (11)

These borders—the margins where the misused land meets the healthy—lend a sense of hopefulness to the story of wasted nature. Agricultural margins, where land damaged by farming and industry abuts land that has been spared of heavy use, can reveal how much our history in a place has failed, but also show us what we must aspire to, Wendell Berry says. The land spared of use "is an indispensable example, a little border of health along the edge of bewilderment and defeat" (Unsettling 185).

Characters in McCarthy's Appalachia generally walk through wastelands but occasionally traverse these marginal conditions where a scarred, abandoned farm or eroded hillside abuts a healthy forest. To escape the law and seek peace, the old "orchard keeper" Ownby moves into the "Harrykin" (Hurricane) Wilderness, a forest showing signs of health: a moss carpet over dark earth where wildflowers grow; fallen timber allowed to decompose and fortify the forest floor; rattlesnakes lurking near each log (a detail by which we infer that the food chain is stable, as the soil supports the plants, grub worms, and insects which nourish birds and rodents upon which snakes feed). The woods here are diverse and deep, with "spiring trunks," "regiments of Indian Pipe," "green puffballs." Mountain pheasants dwell here. The plush forest floor yields to the weight of Ownby's brogans: "steps soft now in the rank humus earth, or where carapaced with lichens the texture of old green velvet, or wet and spongy earth tenoned with roots, the lecherous ganglia of things growing..." (201). Utilitarians may appraise areas like the Hurricane wilderness as cluttered "worthless" lands, or as "development potential," or as a "gold mine" of natural resources. An ecologist, on the other hand, knows these marginal areas are bursting with life.

The grim burden of apocalyptic thinking is to an extent mitigated when viewed against the collapse of human structures in light of the American literary-philosophical

tradition of "Inhumanism"—a Weltanschauung that "contains a vital critique of the prevailing humanism (i.e., chauvinistic anthropocentrism) which has contributed greatly to the [environmental] crisis" (Morris 1). "Inhumanism," as poet Robinson Jeffers defines the term, is "a shifting of emphasis and significance from man to not-man; [it is] the rejection of human solipsism and recognition of the transhuman magnificence" (xxi).(FN8) Literary scholar Christopher Manes further expresses an inhumanist point of view:

> The most that can be said is that during the last 350 million years natural selection has shown an inordinate fondness for beetles—and before that trilobites.
>
> This observation directly contrdicts the scala naturae and its use in humanist discourse. From the perspective of biological adaptation, elephants are no "higher" than earwigs; salamanders are no less "advanced" than sparrows; cabbages have as much evolutionary status as kings. Darwin invited our culture to face the fact that in the observation of nature there exists not one scrap of evidence that humans are superior to or even more interesting than, say, lichen. (22)

"Inhumanism" indicates a humble conception of the status of homo sapiens in the world—a perspective similar to the "optical democracy" of landscape representation in McCarthy's Blood Meridian. Dana Phillips explains that this "Western" novel presents an "equality of being between human and nonhuman objects" (444); the interplay of the land's "largest and smallest features," and even the shadows cast by objects, manifests "optical democracy":

> The suggested independence of light and dark reinforces the lack of precedence, or referential order, in the natural world and helps make apparent the "unguessed kinships" between objects as diverse as goat turds, the sun, men, and gods. This kinship, however, neither ennobles the turds nor debases the gods but merely makes them equal in that both are putatively factual. (445)

Both "inhumanism" and "optical democracy" question whether humans have a privileged position in the world. A primary difference between the two orientations to landscape is that inhumanism shifts "significance" to the nonhuman, while "optical democracy" presents ontological equality. Blood Meridian, Phillips says, "is not so much inhuman as nonhuman. It is thoroughly dispassionate" (450).(FN9)

To understand the inhumanist perspective is to understand in part how one can read affirmatively the pervasive decay of human structures in McCarthy's fiction. In his ecospiritual autobiography The Long-Legged House, Wendell Berry explains how the deterioration of a cabin on the Kentucky River—a place he has visited since childhood, called affectionately "The Camp"—impresses his ecological awareness:

> The Camp was rapidly aging and wearing out.... Its floors were warped and titled. The roof leaked where a fallen elm branch had punched through the tin. Some of the boards of the walls had begun to rot where the wet weeds leaned against them.... Decay revealed its kinship with the earth, and it seemed more than ever to belong to the riverbank. The more the illusion of permanence fell away from it, the easier it fit into the flux of things, as though it entered the fellowship of birds' nests and of burrows. (152-53)

It is a truthful house, not indulging the illusion of the permanence of human things. (158)

Berry views the decay of The Camp as a healthy natural process rather than as an affront to human grandeur. The decay in McCarthy's Appalachia can be read similarly. In The Orchard Keeper, John Wesley returns to Red Branch from his travels to find the old house where he and his mother lived rotting and returning to earth: "he could see the roof of the house deep-green with moss, or gaping black where patches had caved through" (244). In Outer Dark, Rinthy passes a "slattern shack" "grown with a

rich velour of moss and lichen and brooded in a palpable miasma of rot" (108-09). Wooden shacks fall back into the earth, and the body likewise returns to clay: "The dead sheathed in the earth's crust ... at peace with eclipse, asteroid, the dusty novae, their bones brindled with mold and the celled marrow going to frail stone, turning, their fingers laced with roots, at one with Tut and Agamemnon, with the seed and the unborn" (Orchard Keeper 245). And a tombstone, three years planted, is already weathered and glazed with lichen—a species forming an essential part of the food chain. The lichen, like the archeological references so prominent in McCarthy's fiction, bring to mind the building up of millions of years of life on this earth. The human body is recycled, the tombstones are recycled, nature bounces back—the revolution of life and death moves on, regardless of human striving.

Critics have noted the difficulty of attaching specific moral and philosophical significance to McCarthy's texts. Jarrett, for instance, writes: "While McCarthy's landscapes hold significance, their meanings are indeterminate" (138). Grammer calls the novels "notoriously inscrutable" and notes how McCarthy's immaculate prose—his "rendering of the physical world in all its dense, vivid specificity"—has the power "to upend whatever conceptual grids are imposed on it" (28). With the "philosophical attitude" of Inhumanism in mind, I will examine the landscape of Child of God—the human structures, the plant communities and the geologic features—for its embedded economic and ecological "meaning." Furthermore, I want to consider how a knowledge of East Tennessee topography can assist one in mapping Lester Ballard's mountain rambles.

In Child of God, as in The Orchard Keeper, human structures on the land hint at the decline of subsistence agriculture. These include the abandoned quarry Ballard traverses in his rambles. The quarry, probably limestone, is cluttered with industrial artifacts: the "ruins of an old truck lay rusting in the honeysuckle" (38); "old stoves and water heaters," "bicycle parts and corroded buckets" are scattered around. White dust blows "off the barren yard by the quarry shed" (39). Like the abandoned spray pit in The Orchard Keeper, the quarry is indicative of large-scale industrial development gone bad, perhaps made insolvent during the Depression. This ruined industry reminds readers of the businesses that shut down or moved out of the region after exhausting their resource bases, and also of the short-lived prosperity farmers experienced when pulled or tempted from their self-sufficient lifestyles to work in quarries, mines, and fertilizer plants. The cornpicker Ballard observes "snarling through the fields" (40) is another of McCarthy's subtle nods towards the corporate influences abetting the decay of human and nonhuman Appalachian communities.

Referring to the exposition of Child of God, when the county government evicts Lester Ballard from the property owned by his father, Grammer writes: "The scene in which the yeoman farmer loses his property is the one which pastoral republics dread—the moment when death enters their world" (37).(FN10) The loss of land is indeed an old story. In 1981, the Appalachian Land Ownership Task Force published Land Ownership Patterns and Their Impacts on Appalachian Communities: A Survey of 80 Counties. Among the committee's concerns was the decline of the small farm in the southern regions of Appalachia, which in 1930 "had the heaviest concentration of self-sufficient farms in the country" (125). The committee documented the decline, placing heavy emphasis on the role absentee timber and coal interests played in the transition of Appalachian population from a modest but independent yeomanry to an impoverished people who are unable to save from destruction the land from which they draw their sustenance. Beginning in the 1870s, agents from timber corporations came to Appalachia in search of lumber. These agents conducted title searches, and many farmers lost the land that supported them; Appalachian subsistence farmers usually

titled only the small portions of land they cultivated, and thus many lost to the timber companies the untitled land on which they hunted and fished. The timber industry's careless logging of the region's virgin forests resulted in severe siltation and flooding problems, making farming even more difficult for the mountain dwellers. Further displacing the mountaineer from his subsistent lifestyle, the coal industry entered the country prior to the turn of the century and purchased for a pittance the "mineral rights" to the farmers' lands. The result of this exploitation, in Harry Caudill's words, was that the Appalachian farmer came to be "little more than a trespasser upon the soil beneath his feet" (qtd. in Appalachian, Land 127-28). "Many subsistence farmers deserted their ancestral farms to take jobs in the coal camps, but the majority stayed behind to follow the same pattern of agricultural life" (127-28). What happened to those who stuck with farming is described by Dean Pierce:

> Those who remained on the land attempted to provide more food or whiskey to meet their own increased needs and the demands of the coal camps. The additional foodstuffs raised to sell to these camps led to the eventual and everlasting destruction of the soil. It was these increasing outside pressures that came to overstress the agricultural system and finally to destroy the fertility of all the soil. Moreover, the coal camps, through an unjust control of tax assessment, passed the tax burden back to the landowners, falling heavily upon the subsistence farmer, who could ill afford to pay for the area's desperately needed services. (8)

The farmer, dependent upon the coal industry's cash economy and "trespasser" upon his own stressed land, was unprepared when in the 1930s the Depression brought on a collapse of the cash economy and required households to support themselves with subsistence agriculture. Much of the land was already exhausted from overuse.(FN11) Growing enough to eat was difficult, and the burden of property taxes was for many overwhelming. Many farmers consequently sold their land to absolve their tax debts (Appalachian, Land 128).

McCarthy forecasts a similar situation in Child of God. In the opening pages, the county government is auctioning Lester Ballard's farm for his failure to pay taxes on it (7). The auction occurs on a "mute pastoral morning" (4); this is no idyllic scene, however, but "death" encroaching upon the "pastoral republic" in the form of eviction. Several details highlight the pastoral nightmare that is carried throughout the novel: the auctioneer's voice like "a ghost chorus among the ruins" (5; emphasis added), the rope Lester's father hanged himself with still dangling from the loft (4), the fact that Lester is a scion of "Saxon and Celtic bloods" (4), races that long ago deforested the Scottish Highlands—the same pioneering people whose descendants settled in Appalachia and "[w]ith all the vigor and recklessness of necessity which had been behind their forward push to this very place ... attacked the forests of primeval pine and poplar, walnut and oak, chestnut and maple. With ax and fire they laid the giants low" (Dykeman 51). Additional details of the broken pastoral include the abandoned farm Lester moves to, the outhouse overgrown with moss, the barn behind it that lies in a clearing bestrewn with "clumps of jimson and nightshade," and the two-room house overgrown with "a solid wall of weeds high as the house eaves" (13-14). Lester Ballard has not inherited agricultural wisdom. We intuit that he has not cultivated vegetables for years—perhaps never—as evidenced by his adroitness with the rifle he carries like an appendage, and by the lumpy stool he excretes, indicating a lack of fiber in his diet (13). One cannot know for sure the occupation of Lester's father, who hanged himself in his barn when Lester was about nine or ten (21). Perhaps the corpse dangling in the barn suggests the senior Ballard's failure as a farmer, or maybe it suggests the lack of a good sturdy tree from which to hang a noose. We know that the timber on the land being auctioned in the opening scene was cut about fifteen to twenty years ago (5), and that

Lester's father hanged himself about seventeen or eighteen years ago. Perhaps Ballard senior sold the timber off his property as a last desperate means of support and killed himself after exhausting that money.

Ballard's mountain neighbors and their livelihoods further indicate the absence of agriculture in the region. Fred Kirby, for instance, is a whiskey maker who apparently consumes too much of his product, as he forgets where he stashes it (11-12). Ruebel, the "dumpkeeper," lives in a shack surrounded by junked cars and car parts and assorted industrial trash (26). The youth of the region exhibit an aimlessness brought on, one supposes, by lack of work. They have an excess of energy they expel in copulation, these "old lanky country boys with long cocks and big feet" who visit the dumpkeeper's idle female spawn (27). "They were coming and going all hours in all manner of degenerate cars, a dissolute carousel of rotting sedans and niggerized convertibles" (27). These country youth recall the farm boys in The Orchard Keeper who tended "no more farm than some wizened tomato plants and a brace of ravenous hogs" (16), who dawdle about Knoxville with too much time on their hands. Indeed, the novel offers only a couple of details to support the existence of agriculture in Sevier County. First, cattle owned by a man named Waldrop muddy a creek when Ballard is about to shoot a bass (34). Second, Ballard forages field corn (40). What little agriculture exists in the Sevier County that Ballard widely roams does not seem to line the stomachs of the region's human inhabitants. Food is conspicuously absent from Child of God, reminiscent of Erskine Caldwell's Depression-era Tobacco Road and its characters fighting over turnips. The few references to foodstuffs are nutritionally inadequate: whiskey, "dopes" (soft drinks), a stew with squirrel and turnips, a potato skewered on a coat hanger and roasted over a coal oil lantern, cornbread—each individual food a meal in itself, seldom eaten in combination for a "balanced" meal. The only "balanced" meals Ballard eats are during his nine days in jail, where he has "[w]hitebeans with fatback and boiled greens and baloney sandwiches on lightbread" (53), or when he swipes dollars from a dead man and purchases cans of beans, vienna sausages, bread, "baloney," a quart of sweetmilk, cheese and crackers, and a box of cakes at the store (99). Perhaps Ballard's nutritional carelessness arises from a lack of vegetable cultivation in the worn-out mountain lands of Sevier County, where the only produce raised is feed corn for livestock.

In "Reading the Landscape," geographer John Fraser Hart says we should be able to "read" the way vegetation "tells the tale of how people have used and abused the land." For example, Hart explains that woodlands cleared for cultivation, when abandoned (no longer farmed), fail to replenish their natural fecundity. In place of the ancient hardwoods grow "broomsedge, blackberry bushes, persimmon sprouts, cedar saplings, old field pines, and other plants [that] send a clear signal that the land is no longer used for agriculture." "The observer of landscape," Hart says, "should be able to recognize the plants that invade and colonize unused agricultural land" (30). Readers of Cormac McCarthy's novels should likewise be aware of the vegetative "signals" of abused and abandoned land. In the opening scene of Child of God, the Ballard farm and the surrounding countryside are seen as having been ill-used, as evidenced by the "swales of broomstraw" (3) and other scrub growth in the area: "clumps of jimson and nightshade" (poisonous plants), "bullbriers and blackberries" (14). The absence of vegetation is important to understanding the lay of the land. The auctioneer selling the Ballard homeplace emphasizes the utilitarian value of a young timber stand not far removed from its last cutting: "It's been cut over fifteen twenty year ago and so maybe it ain't big timber yet, but looky here.... They is real future in this property.... Friends, they is no limit to the possibilities on a piece of property like this" (5). The absence of large old timber stands is an early hint of the destructive human consumption carried throughout Child of God.

Knowledge of Appalachian forestry also assists the spatial function of narrative mapping—a way for a reader to become better "placed" in the mountains, to realize some structure in Lester Ballard's wanderings. Ballard's primary habitation is Sevier County, Tennessee. References to "Sevier" are explicit and numerous, as when Ballard spends time in the Sevier County jail (52). When Ballard walks the mountain terrain, however, we cannot rely on place names, but the botanical references allow a better orientation. Lester always makes his homes at high elevations; this we know by paying attention to what vegetation exists at various altitudes. From his mountain cabin, Lester descends down a slope covered in heavy snow. "When he reached the flats at the foot of the mountain he found himself in scrub cedar and pines" (75). Writing about "Plant Communities" in East Tennessee, H. R. DeSelm points out that "Virginia (scrub) pine occur everywhere in the [Great] Valley [of East Tennessee] and on the [Cumberland] Plateau, and at lower elevations in the Mountains" (381-82). These regions encompass a broad area, and thus the textual reference to "scrub pine" hardly "pinpoints" Lester's location. The Great Valley is an area thirty to sixty miles wide, flanked by the Smoky Mountains; it begins in northeast Tennessee and slants southwest into Georgia and Alabama. Its ridges "rise 300 to 800 feet above the valley floor" (Tennessee 8). It is a region "of fat soils and prosperous farms ... drained by the Tennessee River and its tributaries" (8). Ballard's stomping grounds probably lie toward the southern edge of the valley in the higher elevations, perhaps in the Smokies, because upper Sevier County lies in the lower-elevation Valley. Southwestern Sevier County is most likely Lester's primary inhabitation. From a road near his cabin, Ballard must walk three hours to get to Sevierville (96). Accounting for a standard 15-minute mile, his cabin figures to be about 10-15 miles from town. Furthermore, Lester must live near Blount County, which borders Sevier County to the west. Ballard once crosses an unnamed mountain into Blount County, descends into a village to hawk some wristwatches, and returns to his cave in Sevier County in a single day. This unnamed mountain is possibly Chilhowee Mountain, which borders Blount County and Sevier County (DeSelm, "Geography" 219). Chilhowee is a ridge in the Unaka Mountains, part of which lie within the boundaries of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. The highest peaks and ridges of the Unakas are about 2,800-4,800 feet (219).

The purpose of this topographical niggling is to demonstrate that Child of God is moderately mappable, even without the help of place names. In this sense, the novel is unlike Outer Dark, where the features of landscape are to a lesser extent defined. One feels totally awash in Outer Dark, as if wandering a land that could be any place at any time. The mountains Ballard travels are more vividly drawn. From nearby his cave-home high in the mountains during the "dreadful cold" of winter, Ballard thinks that before winter was over "he would look like one of the bitter spruces that grew slant downwind out of the shale and lichens on the hogback" (136). The reference to "hogback" (a sharply-crested ridge with steep, sloping sides) and "spruce" identifies Ballard as a high-mountain dweller. In the Appalachians, boreal forests cover ridges exceeding 4,500 feet. "At about 4500 feet, the ridges' dominant hemlock is replaced by red spruce and yellow birch. Between about 5000 and 6000 feet, spruce and Fraser fir dominate the forest" (DeSelm, "Plant Communities" 382). High-elevation spruce are weather-stunted trees; McCarthy mentions this fact in Suttree, when Cornelius Suttree takes a solitary sojourn into the Smokies south of Gatlinburg, not far from Ballard's haunts:

> Suttree went up the narrow valley and deeper into the mountains. Over old dry riverbeds of watershapen stones that lay in the floor of the wood.... At these high altitudes the trees were stunted spruce and dark and twisted.... The spruce trees stood black and bereaved of dimension in the shadow of the high cloven draws.... (285)

Ballard, like the spruce, is shaped by this harsh environment. He is pummeled by rain, snow, wind, and fire, and thus his identification of himself with the "bitter spruces" clinging precariously to the steep slopes of the hogback is appropriate. Ballard also tries to establish roots, but he is "uprooted" time and again: first by the legal system, then by fire and water.

When Ballard crosses the mountain into Blount County, he enters an ancient landscape: "Old woods and deep. At one time in the world there were woods that no one owned and these were like them" (127). This stand of virgin timber comes as a surprise, when one has been accustomed to the lower-elevation settlements full of abandoned farms and quarries, weed-choked clearings, "levees of junk and garbage," and logging roads cutting through second and third-growth forests. An additional detail of the high-elevation primeval forest demands attention: "He passed a windfelled tulip poplar on the mountainside that held aloft in the grip of its roots two stones the size of fieldwagons, great tablets on which was writ only a tale of vanished seas with ancient shells in cameo and fishes etched in lime" (128; emphasis added). The rocks in the Great Valley of East Tennessee—the sandstones, shales, limestones, and dolomites—were formed from marine sediment (Tennessee 11), as McCarthy's nod to the "vanished seas" acknowledges. For the purpose of historical mapping, the geologic record embedded in the enormous boulders accentuates the first three periods of the Paleozoic era—Cambrian, Ordovician, and Silurian—together called the "Age of Invertebrates," "when the only life was shell-forming sea animals and buglike crustaceans," and the Devonian, or "Age of fishes" (Tennessee 11). The "Age of Invertebrates" spans a time from 600 million to 395 million years ago, give or take a few million years. The Devonian period occurred from 400 million to 350 million years ago.

By calling attention to geologic time, McCarthy's fiction again manifests the spirit of Inhumanism. Millions of years of pre-human life make a person feel humbled. Archeological records place the earliest chipped stone tools of the Paleolithic at 750,000 years ago. The Neolithic period, marked by the development of agriculture and polished stone tools, began around 10,000 B.C. A single human life span seems inconsequential by comparison. This reckoning of geologic time, coupled with the other archeological artifacts McCarthy tosses to readers—the bones of bison, elk, and jaguar ensconced deep within a cave—creates an apocalyptic tone. These great mammals no longer roam the forests of Appalachia, and neither does the hairy mammoth that once ranged Tennessee. Of this beast, only a tusk remains. The young hunters in The Orchard Keeper speak of it: "They used to be cave-men hereabouts," says Warn. "Pre-storic animals too. They's a tush over on the other side of the mountain stickin out of some rock what's long as your leg" (140). In his Natural and Aborginal History of Tennessee, John Haywood mentions several teeth, tusks, and skeletal remains of the mammoth discovered in Tennessee: teeth and a jawbone in East Tennessee, in Sullivan County; tusks between two to three feet in length in the middle Tennessee counties of Maury and Sumner; a tusk eight-feet six-inches in length in the vicinity of Reynoldsburg, a town that during Haywood's tenure in the state (1807-1826) lay somewhere on the south side of the Tennessee River (58-60). As the prehistoric beasts that once rove the land have been obliterated, so too have the grand old timber stands. All this death imagery joins with the muddy creeks of McCarthy's Appalachia—bloodred water carrying the fecundity of the mountains, the piled-up death of ages, tons of organic matter washed downstream with each heavy rain, leaving bone-dry, eroded hillsides—to project an eerie prophecy of the next great extinction.

ADDED MATERIAL

FOOTNOTES

1 McCarthy's fourth novel, Suttree, is marginally "Appalachian," set primarily in the foothills of the mountains around Knoxville, Tennessee. Additionally, in Outer Dark, the features of landscape do not function primarily as ecological critique or as a frame for mapping, but serve to mythologize the narrative—to create a sense of the unreal, a world where time and space are blurred. A reader is easily disoriented in Outer Dark, since its landscape topography is less defined than in The Orchard Keeper and Child of God. The unspecific nature of the landscape enhances the allegorical quality of the novel. Since the purpose of this essay is to investigate the ecology of particular places, Outer Dark, with its "bafflingly incongruous aspects of landscape" (Bell 33), will not be discussed in depth.

2 Literary critics focusing on landscape representation in Cormac McCarthy's novels have emphasized its symbolic significance and aesthetic value. Natalie Grant, for instance, examines how "the natural world" in McCarthy's novels "often provides what T. S. Eliot has called an 'objective correlative' for defining the most mysterious aspects of his characters' personalities.... [P]ersonalities are revealed in their relationship to a natural world that objectifies their psychological boundaries, or lack of them" (61). In Grant's reading of "nature," the nonhuman world is meaningful chiefly for the insight it offers into human character. In another analysis, Robert L. Jarrett offers an artful reading of McCarthy's prose landscapes within the context of "American luminism." Luminist paintings such as Frederic Church's Mount Ktaadn situate a human viewer "on a highland vista whose horizontal extension draws the spectator's gaze 'into' the landscape and outward to the farther heights of a distant panorama" (136). Jarrett illustrates how prose landscapes in McCarthy's fiction function similarly. In the exposition of The Orchard Keeper, for example, McCarthy's narrator, in the luminist style, "first orients us geographically, pointing us east of Knoxville to Red Mountain," and then invites us "to participate in the fiction by extending our vision from our foreground vantage point at Red Mountain southward to the Appalachian summit..." (Jarrett 136). The prose subsequently draws our gaze back from the distant watershed to the "red dust of the orchard road" under our feet. These representations of the landscape, Jarrett says, "continually remind readers of the natural world within our sight, if only we expand our vision.... McCarthy's fiction might be termed an environmental fiction, constantly reinserting human society and human reality within a largely ignored yet alien natural environment" (137).

3 On the geological and archaeological history of Tennessee, see Haywood 49-60 and Tennessee (11-26).

4 For information about East Tennessee's topography and natural/economic history, I have benefitted from several sources, including The Natural and Aboriginal History of Tennessee, by John Haywood, An Encyclopedia of East Tennessee, edited by Jim Stokely and Jeff D. Johnson, and Tennessee: A Guide to the State, by the Federal Writers' Project for Tennessee.

5 Robert L. Jarrett calls Ownby "a failure at farming," one who "through his archaic lifestyle of living off the land rather than by working in a trade or farming ... resembles more Wordsworth's leech gatherer ... than the patriarchal warriors and slave owners memorialized by Faulkner and the Agrarians" (12-13).

6 See Appalachian Land Ownership Task Force, Addendum to Land Ownership Patterns, for an extensive survey of the percentage of land owned in specific Appalachian counties by citizens, by corporations, and by absentees. The study compares percentages of acreage owned with taxes paid, and concludes that the

citizens who own small pieces of land pay an unjust proportion of property taxes compared to large landholding corporations and absentees.

7 For a collection of stories based on the "reading" of Mimbres pottery, see Sonachi: A Collection of Myth-Tales by Pat Carr.

8 From the collection The Double Axe, Jeffers's poem "Their Beauty Has More Meaning" exemplifies the "philosophical attitude" (vii) of inhumanism:

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Yesterday morning enormous the moon hung
    low on the ocean,
Round and yellow-rose in the glow of dawn;
The night-herons flapping home wore dawn on their wings.
...
I know that tomorrow or next year or in twenty years
I shall not see these things--and it does not matter, it
    does not hurt;
They will be here. And when the whole human race
Has been like me rubbed out, they will still be here: storms,
    moon and ocean,
Dawn and the birds. And I say this: their beauty has more
    meaning
Than the whole human race and the race of birds. (1-4, 9-17)
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9 Vereen Bell expresses a perspective comparable to "optical democracy" when he calls The Orchard Keeper "a meditation upon the irrelevance of the human in the impersonal scheme of things" (10). Bell's attention to details of the landscape emphasizes "the awareness of nature's elemental power to reclaim its paltry human proteges without motive or warning" (19).

10 In his investigation of the "pastoral impulse" in McCarthy's fiction, Grammer discovers a vein of "anti-pastoral," "the South's second-oldest intellectual tradition," increasingly existent in the novels (29). Grammer dwells primarily on the human face of McCarthy's fiction, gearing his analysis toward the protagonists; he looks at how characters and human communities in McCarthy's South deal with the mathematical progression of modernism.

11 The farming crisis escalating after the Civil War and WWI is investigated in other southern fiction: Ellen Glasgow's Barren Ground, Erskine Caldwell's Depression-era Tobacco Road, and James Still's River of Earth, set in Appalachian coal camps. A few lines from Barren Ground are representative of the explicit agricultural concerns of these novels. The soils of Virginia farmland have been "impoverished by the war and the tenant system which followed the war..." (4). "[A]bandoned acres were rapidly growing up in sumach, sassafras, and life-everlasting" (6). The "land poor" Oakleys "owned a thousand acres of scrub pine, scrub oak, and broomsedge, where a single cultivated corner was like a solitary island in some chaotic sea" (6).

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