Landscapes of Disaster:
Cormac McCarthy and Thomas Merton on Lost Brothers

By **Megan Riley McGilchrist**

Sweet brother, if I do not sleep
My eyes are flowers for your tomb;
And if I cannot eat my bread,
My fasts shall live like willows where you died.
If in the heat I find no water for my thirst,
My thirst shall turn to springs for you, poor traveller.

Where, in what desolate and smokey country,
Lies your poor body, lost and dead?
And in what landscape of disaster
Has your unhappy spirit lost its road?[1]

These opening lines of Thomas Merton's lament for his brother John Paul, missing in action over France in 1943, might, save for their eloquence, be spoken by Billy Parham, mourning for his brother, dead in Mexico, in Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Crossing*.[2] But Merton was a monk; his emphasis on sacrifice and redemption has a theological basis. McCarthy's Billy Parham has no such basis; his sufferings do not result in resolution or atonement, but simply exist as senseless sorrows in a dark and meaningless world briefly illuminated by doomed loves. His response to the loss of his brother is to seek self-annihilation. First he tries to enlist in the army during wartime. When that fails, though deeply rooted in his native place, he becomes a wanderer, eschewing nearly all meaningful human contact except for a brief spell which ends in death and disaster. Yet it is possible to view Billy's solitary, wandering, even ascetic life as a kind of secular monasticism, in a world in which God appears to be absent. In what follows I will consider McCarthy's treatment of Billy's grief in *The Crossing* in the context of Merton's expression of grief in his elegy for his brother. I believe this comparison reveals parallels between the reality understood by Merton, a man of God, and McCarthy's vision of a godless world which still contains human decency and great love. A religious subtext to McCarthy's works has often been posited, and Manuel Broncano's recent excursion into this field[3] suggests a clearly Biblical subtext to the Southwestern novels.

In *The Crossing*, the fraternal love between the brothers Boyd and Billy Parham is initially central to the action. The novel opens with Billy, like an

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American Adam, naming the animals for his younger brother: "He carried Boyd before him in the bow of the saddle and named to him features of the landscape and birds and animals in both spanish and english. In the new house they slept in the room off the kitchen and he would lie awake at night and listen to his brother's breathing in the dark and he would whisper half aloud to him as he slept his plans for them and the life they would have" (McCarthy, *Crossing* 3). But Billy's protective love for Boyd is negated by the wayward quality of Boyd himself, who will not be protected, and who later disappears forever from Billy's life with a nameless young Mexican woman, while the boys are on the run in Mexico. After his death – probably at the hands of George Hearst's Babícora[4] henchmen – Boyd's story, which involved some accidental lawbreaking, becomes enmeshed with that of a legendary local hero and champion of the common people, the Güerito.[5] Boyd – who is a fair-skinned *güero* – has thus taken his own way into his own disastrous history, far from the help of his brother.

Like Billy, Thomas Merton does not know in what "desolate and smokey country" (l. 7) his brother's body lies, and what "landscape of disaster" (l. 9) has taken him, but unlike Billy, his faith offers him both an avenue for action, and consolation:

Come, in my labor find a resting place
And in my sorrows lay your head,
Or rather take my life and blood
And buy yourself a better bed –
Or take my breath and take my death
And buy yourself a better rest. (ll. 11-16)

Merton's belief in the efficacy of sacrifice may seem palliative in this case, yet there are parallels in his thinking with Billy Parham's. When Boyd disappears into Mexico, Billy too, seeks to obliterate himself, attempting to enlist in the US army, with the unspoken aim of getting himself sent to the battlefields of World War II, and presumably "never unmix[ing] again" as his precursor, the Virginian, says of his desire to disperse and be part of the natural world.[6] He is refused this possibility, due to a heart murmur, which he is told won't kill him, but will keep him from joining the army and being killed. Death or dissolution: there is little to choose between the two for Billy (whose name means "resolute protector") after his failure to protect his brother. In the novel, the choice of one darkness or another is all that Billy seems to have. Billy would like to sacrifice his life when Boyd disappears, and part of his placelessness later in *The Crossing*, and indeed in the final novel of *The Border Trilogy*, is a survivor's guilt that he was not the one killed, first in place of Boyd, and later, in *Cities of the Plain*,[7] of John Grady Cole.

Vince Brewton has convincingly argued that Billy's quest for Boyd's body is both "linked with the larger narrative of class struggle and national identity in Mexico" and is also a rescue narrative, analogous to the repatriation of both living and dead Vietnam POWs during the 1980s. Brewton writes,

> The repatriation of remains of soldiers killed in action and the issue of surviving MIAs became an important political and cultural subject for nearly a decade. . . . Bringing POWs home became part of a new national narrative. . . . The narrative of the guerito and the narrative of American MIAs are similar in their role in the continuous reproduction of national identity, and both incorporate "real" events into a self-serving myth necessary for their respective communities.[8]

Thus we see in Billy's quest for Boyd's body a link with the world contemporary with the writing of the novel, in which the return of American POWs, dead or living, assumed an importance which became a national obsession, often shamelessly exploited by Hollywood.

We see Merton too, acknowledging the war-torn world of his time in a less specific manner, in the quatrain:

When all the men of war are shot
And flags have fallen into dust,
Your cross and mine shall tell men still
Christ died on each, for both of us. (ll. 17-20)

This rather simple stanza, in regular iambic tetrameter, is perhaps slightly jarring in the simplicity of its tone and the definitiveness of the final end-stopped line, in contrast with the more complex rhythms and suggestions of the rest of the poem. However, it is followed by a beautiful, long line, revealing to the reader the intimacy of the poet's deeply personal relationship with the divine: "For in the wreckage of your April Christ lies slain" (l. 21). Here Christ in the wreckage of April is John Paul in the wreckage of his airplane. And he is also present in the "ruins" of the poet's life as well: "And Christ weeps in the ruins of my spring" (l. 22). The protective relationship of Christ with the fallen John Paul continues in the final tercet of the stanza:

The money of Whose tears shall fall
Into your weak and friendless hand,
And buy you back to your own land. (ll. 23-25)

In the bell-like ringing of the money falling we hear the echo of the coins dropped in the hand of Charon, ferryman of the River Styx. So too do we hear the "passing bells" for the dead. And Billy Parham, too, has paid for the privilege of retrieving his brother's body when he entered Mexico, crossing a river and paying "a silver dollar" (McCarthy, *Crossing* 355).

I have written elsewhere of the correspondences between Billy Parham and Odysseus.[9] As Odysseus travelled to the Underworld for guidance, so too does Billy travel to the land of the dead – in this case, Mexico – to find his brother's grave, and while not in search of wisdom, he is seeking closure, which is perhaps a kind of wisdom. I hope the reader will not find it an intertextual leap too far if I suggest that the Billy Parham–Odysseus linkage may be extended to Merton via Wilfred Owen: Odysseus in the Underworld speaks of the "powerless," "weak," "feckless," or most evocatively, "shambling, shiftless dead,"[10] as Merton refers to his dead brother's "weak and friendless hand." The shambling dead are like cattle (en route to the shambles), and in fact the Greek noun *karena* suggests exactly this interpretation. This then provides a link with Wilfred Owen's "Anthem for Doomed Youth," where we are asked, "What passing bells for these who die as cattle?"[11] And in the absence of those bells, we hear the bells in Merton's poem, fully articulated in the final stanza's "bells upon your alien tomb" (l. 27) – another tomb for another soldier.

When Billy Parham locates the cemetery in the town of Buenaventura in Chiapas, where his brother's body is interred – his brother who himself had become a symbol of resistance for the local people – his connection to the divine is rather different from Merton's. He finds the church. The priest is gone, the sacristan is dead; the only person present is an old woman, praying. Billy asks her why she prays:

> She said only that she prayed. She said that she left it to God as to how the prayers should be apportioned. She prayed for all. She would pray for him.
>
> Gracias.
>
> No puedo hacerlo de otro modo.
>
> He nodded. He knew her well enough, this old woman of Mexico, her sons long dead in that blood and violence which her prayers and her prostrations seemed powerless to appease. . . . Unmoving, austere, implacable. Before just such a God. (McCarthy, *Crossing* 390)

This implacable God who will not be moved is one whose tears, presumably, do not fall on the grave of Billy's brother. Billy's God is absent and silent; so too of course is Owen's – present only in absence and "mockeries" (l. 5). But Merton's God, though silent, is utterly present: "The silence of Whose tears shall fall / Like bells upon your alien tomb" (ll. 26-27).

Both dead brothers are in "alien tomb[s]," while Owen's dead have no tombs at all. Billy's brother is in the earth of Mexico; Merton's brother's body was buried at sea by his surviving crew members somewhere off the coast of France. Merton suggests that Christ's tears are the bells which will waken the soul of John Paul, and take him home, and the poem ends with a line both poignant and powerful: "Hear them and come: they call you home" (l. 28). What home Merton's lost brother is called to in this imperative line is obscure. The poet does not give us an easy answer. The poem challenges the reader with the last words of the penultimate and final lines, resounding like the peals of the passing bells: "tomb" and "home." Is the reader to feel hopeful? mournful? perhaps both, or neither. The poem's final lines end with profound stillness: the slant rhyme of "tomb" and "home," coupled with the onomatopoeic effect of the tolling of bells, closes the poem as finally as a quiet closing of a door. We are left in the profound silence of the end of the poem. And that silence speaks to us.

Billy Parham, on the other hand, is called to actually bring his brother home, to a home where he himself will never again live; embarking upon his ceaseless wandering once the mission of reburying his brother is accomplished. He *must* bring Boyd's body back from the "alien tomb" in which it rests. There is no alternative for Billy. Feeling that he failed him in life, he will not fail him in death. However, Merton knows the body of his brother has nothing to do with who his brother is; he believes that his calling from the "alien tomb" is the calling of his true, essential self – his soul; but Billy has no such confidence. Having performed the burial rites, which in the Homeric world would have ensured the soul of the dead did not spend eternity wandering, it is Billy who then becomes the homeless, wandering soul, like the cinematic solitary horseman, ever smaller in the distance as the credits roll and the lights fade.

Billy becomes the wandering spirit he has tried to ensure that Boyd is not. In his negation of self one sees a parallel with Merton's spiritual transaction:

Come, in my labor find a resting place
And in my sorrows lay your head,
Or rather take my life and blood
And buy yourself a better bed –
Or take my breath and take my death
And buy yourself a better rest. (ll. 11-16)

In this sense, the living brothers are both Christ-like, giving up their lives for the dead, but Merton's sacrifice, grounded in belief, is far more positive than Billy's. Merton transcends his suffering; Billy endures his, but endures in a world bereft of hope. The closing of the novel, when Billy is witness to the false dawn (see McCarthy, *Crossing* 425) of the Alamogordo nuclear blast, a little less than a month before the implausibly named "Little Boy"[12] destroyed Hiroshima, sets the scene for the rest of Billy's life. The sun rises on a landscape of disaster: "He took off his hat and placed it on the tarmac before him and bowed his head and held his face in his hands and wept. He sat there for a long time and after a while the east did gray and after a while the godmade sun did rise, once again, for all and without distinction" (McCarthy, *Crossing* 426). Billy is adrift in a world in which meaning has become lost with the loss of Boyd. Nothing is explicable, and Billy has no referents. Yet he goes on, without hope, persevering in a kind of dark godless pilgrimage in an empty world.

Merton's apophatic, or negative, mysticism embraces the unknowability and unnamableness of God. Here *negative* should not be taken to mean pessimistic or depressing, but rather, something closer to the Zen idea of emptiness and clearness of mind, making possible spiritual awareness in a mind not cluttered. John F. Teahan writes,

> Merton also described darkness as the specific atmosphere in which preparation for mystical union occurs, noting that the search for God is necessarily confusing owing to inadequate intellectual illumination and to the obscurity of faith. "One has begun to know the meaning of contemplation," he wrote in one of his last books, "when he intuitively and spontaneously seeks the dark and unknown path of aridity in preference to every other way." Merton's early works often associated spiritual darkness simply with suffering, tribulation, aridity, and trial. On a visit to Gethsemani Abbey in 1941, shortly before joining the community, he connected tribulation with the discovery of the true self, adding in his journal that "the most unfortunate people in the world are those who know no tribulations."[13]

Billy Parham's tribulations certainly take him down dark and unknown paths, but whether this is by design or accident is hard to say. However, his inexplicable choices – befriending the dangerous and ultimately murderous Indian who kills his parents at the beginning of *The Crossing*; turning towards Mexico with the wolf he has rescued and eventually loses; later in the novel, pointlessly and continuously leaving those places in which he might have made a home, making himself a solitary wanderer; all these suggest that he chooses the negation of the self. While it may be questionable to assert that Billy's choices correspond with the apophatic theology embraced by Merton, it may still be possible to suggest that McCarthy is delineating a world in which sorrow and sacrifice do not have the spiritually redemptive possibilities which they do in Merton's, yet they function as that which defines what it is to be human.

Merton was aware of the essential power of love: his thirst turns to springs; his tears to bells; and he turns to his brother, giving all: "Or take my breath and take my death / And buy yourself a better rest" (ll. 15-16). Where Merton would give his life in prayer for his brother, Billy seeks to give his life in some kind of atonement, but only succeeds in losing himself. He goes back to Mexico, and through an improbable series of events, finds Boyd's grave, digs up his body, and takes it back to New Mexico where he reburies it. His actions are solemn and sacramental:

> He lifted Boyd and laid him across the wooden packframe and he rolled up the blankets from his bedroll and laid them across the horses haunches and tied everything down. Then he walked over and picked up his hat and put it on and picked up the waterbottle and hung it by its strap over the saddlehorn and mounted

> up and turned the horse. He sat there for a minute taking a last look around. Then he got down again. He walked over to the grave and pulled the wooden cross loose from the cobbles and carried it back to the packhorse and tied it down on the leftside forks of the packtree and then mounted up again and leading the packhorse rode out through the cemetery and through the gate and down the road. When he reached the highway he crossed it and struck out crosscountry toward the watershed of the Santa Maria, keeping the polestar to his right, looking back from time to time to see how rode the canvas that held his brother's remains. The little desert foxes barking. The old gods of that country tracing his progress over the darkened ground. Perhaps logging his name into their ancient daybook of vanities. (McCarthy, *Crossing* 393)

When Billy returns to New Mexico to bury his brother, the response of the sheriff who discovers him digging in the churchyard is eloquent in its simplicity:

> The sheriff shook his head. He looked out over the country. As if there was something about it that you just couldnt quite lay your hand on. He looked down at Billy.
>
> There aint much to say, is there? (McCarthy, *Crossing* 421-22)

Indeed, there is not. Billy's actions might have meaning beyond their inscription in the "ancient daybook of vanities" if he were not such a spiritual orphan in the world (see McCarthy, *Crossing* 134), as one of the wise men he meets in the course of the novel tells him, warning him that to become estranged from humanity is to become estranged from oneself. Billy's estrangement continues throughout *The Crossing*, and while he briefly reconnects with humanity in *Cities of the Plain* through his love for John Grady Cole, a character much like his lost brother, his death once again sets Billy wandering, refusing friendship when it is offered, avoiding sanctuary when it appears, his only connection in the world with the horse he rides.

Both dead brothers are lost in 1943, a year of war and chaos. Their surviving brothers seek, by their actions, to redeem their siblings and bring them home from "alien" lands. The war is the backdrop to both stories, though both of the surviving brothers are distanced from it – Merton because of his monastic life, Billy because he has a heart murmur which will not kill him, but will keep him from the death he desires. Merton's poem ends in the spiritual homecoming of one lost soldier; but neither of McCarthy's lost boys is so fortunate.

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1. Thomas Merton, "For My Brother: Reported Missing in Action, 1943" (ll. 1-10), in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 35-36; subsequent references will be cited as "*CP*" parenthetically in the text.
2. Cormac McCarthy, *The Crossing* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994); subsequent references will be cited as "McCarthy, *Crossing*" parenthetically in the text.
3. Manuel Broncano, *Religion in Cormac McCarthy's Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 2014).
4. George Hearst, the son of William Randolph Hearst, had inherited the million-acre Babícora ranch in the state of Chihuahua from his mother. It was said that he kept a small army of more than one hundred armed men there: see Ben Procter, *William Randolph Hearst: The Later Years, 1911-1951* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) 37.
5. *Güero* is a word designating fair-skinned blond in Spanish; Boyd is the Celtic word meaning "blond."
6. Owen Wister, *The Virginian* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) 321.
7. Cormac McCarthy, *Cities of the Plain* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998).
8. Vince Brewton, "The Changing Landscape of Violence in Cormac McCarthy's Early Novels and the Border Trilogy," *Southern Literary Journal* 37.1 (2004) 138.

9. Megan McGilchrist, "Odysseus in the Southwest: The Homeric concepts of Xenia and Nostos in Cormac McCarthy's *Border Trilogy*," unpublished essay presented at the Western American Literature Annual Conference, Lubbock, Texas, November 2012.
10. Homer, *The Odyssey*, XI.53. I am indebted to Prof. Michael Riley of St. Mary's College, Moraga, CA, for the following insight into Homer's lines: "The definitions of amenena karena in line 49 are: *amenena* – faint, feeble, sickly; without menos, strength, force (cf. the probable cognate 'main' – as in 'might and main'). *Karena* – head (pl.), used here as in so many 'head of cattle.' Fagles has 'shambling shiftless dead,' thinking of shambling cattle."
11. Wilfred Owen, "Anthem for Doomed Youth," l. 1, in Wilfred Owen, *Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1962) 44.
12. "Little Boy" was the name given to the atomic bomb that was dropped on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945; the bomb dropped on Nagasaki three days later was called "Fat Man." For Merton's ironic treatment of the events surrounding the development and dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima, see Thomas Merton, *Original Child Bomb* (New York: New Directions, 1962); *CP* 291-302.
13. John F. Teahan, "A Dark and Empty Way: Thomas Merton and the Apophatic Tradition," *The Journal of Religion* 58.3 (July 1978) 269-70.