

2004

# The Late Modernism of Cormac McCarthy (review)

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## Recommended Citation

Lurie, Peter, and Mark A. Eaton. "The Late Modernism of Cormac McCarthy (review)." *Modern Fiction Studies* 50, no. 3 (2004): 755-57. doi:10.1353/mfs.2004.0061.

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**David Holloway. *The Late Modernism of Cormac McCarthy*.  
Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002. xxiv + 198 pp.**

David Holloway's titular phrasing "late modernism" has an effective ring. It captures the theoretical underpinnings of his recent book, *The Late Modernism of Cormac McCarthy*, evoking Fredric Jameson's work, on which Holloway heavily relies, while also situating McCarthy precisely where he wants him to be, historically and culturally. According to Holloway, McCarthy's fiction constitutes an important rebuttal against the diminishing of modernism's once-valorous stance by forging a productive opposition to what he sees as a final stage in capitalist expansion. At the heart of Holloway's project is his concern to restore an oppositional vitality to literary production, or what he terms a "perspective of estrangement" (2). Following certain poststructuralist accounts of language's inherent instability and the related impossibilities of narrative, Holloway sees McCarthy as a writer whose singular prose at once foregrounds and incorporates the deathliness of language in his stories of an evacuated yet thoroughly commercialized American West—a *topos* and a space defined, Holloway suggests, by the ravages of globalization.

McCarthy's late modernism is distinguished by a capacity to recognize the (postmodern) limitations on language and narrative, while nevertheless using the academic ideologies of his late-twentieth-century period in order to recover a productive modernist opposition. Holloway refers in particular to the way McCarthy's language performs on the level of aesthetics what his characters fail to accomplish on the level of plot. The exemplary text here is *Blood Meridian*, which succeeds in remaking the world through its extraordinary in-

ventiveness and through its archaic diction, invoking a sense of the immutable facticity of language as "thing." Similarly, in the Border Trilogy, "where the very possibility of individual or collective secession from the structures of the world . . . is relentlessly problematized" (19), McCarthy's self-reflexive style effects a change in the realm of aesthetics that his tragic characters cannot achieve in their own endeavors: for instance, John Grady Cole's futile attempt to free the prostitute Magdalene from her status as a commodity, or Billy Parham's effort to restore the wolf to its atavistic home in Mexico.

In one of the book's most interesting moves, Holloway shows how *Cities of the Plain*, in its sudden introduction of commodification to Mexico, reveals that what has become for our own historical moment the irrefutable truth of capitalist exchange has not always been an inescapable, totalizing norm. *Cities of the Plain* thus strikes a discordant note in the trilogy by insisting on the fully commodified and commercial nature of a space that had earlier been figured very differently by McCarthy. "What is . . . most striking about *Cities of the Plain*," writes Holloway, "is the way in which Mexico, previously conceived by the protagonists as a place of sanctuary, an atavistic or primal space beyond the logic of exchange value, suddenly fills up . . . with a superabundance of commodities and acts of exchange value of all different kinds" (107).

Holloway demonstrates an admirably consistent and rigorous Marxian theorizing. His sharply defined theoretical perspective is one of the strongest aspects of the book. At the same time, however, this is one of the book's limitations. Often, he chooses a set passage or cluster of references and offers them as illustrations of elaborate theoretical principles. One example is the description of the Tennessee River in *Suttree's* prologue. Holloway describes it as "a place where the detritus of the commodity form comes alive . . . and becomes 'malevolent' in the extent to which the human energy it embodies becomes alienated." This reading of the river as "a model for a new unconscious of nature" is striking (115), yet here, as elsewhere, Holloway works from a theoretical premise back into the text. At times his methodology thus seems overdetermined.

We expect, moreover, that some readers may find his approach too abstract. Richard Godden's *Fictions of Labor: William Faulkner and the South's Long Revolution* (1997) offers a similarly Marxian reading of a "stylistics of difficulty" in Faulkner that Holloway finds in McCarthy, yet Godden goes much further in grounding his analysis in an actual history (the South's painful transition to a wage economy). "History" for Holloway is more often than not history as it has been defined theoretically and textually—by figures such as Jameson or by characters like Billy Parham—and rarely as it has been experienced by actual historical subjects.

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Holloway's book nonetheless possesses a remarkable depth of understanding of both McCarthy's oeuvre and of his own theoretical sources. Nowhere yet have we seen a study that seeks to incorporate the full McCarthy corpus, including the early southern novels, unpublished materials like his screenplay "Whales and Men," and the full Border Trilogy, as well as the rich and extensive body of McCarthy criticism. Holloway systematically and persuasively builds an account of what are, in fact, the most important aspects of McCarthy's later writing: his critical engagement with American history and the ideology of Manifest Destiny; his depiction of profoundly alienated characters like Billy Parham and John Grady Cole; and his use of an intensely charged, always dazzling and self-consciously stylized language. If some readers are less sympathetic to Holloway's overarching, avowedly Marxian claims, the failing lies neither in their relevance to McCarthy nor in Holloway's thorough articulation of them.

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