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## To Make the World in the Maelstrom of its Undoing: Cormac McCarthy's *The Stonemason*<sup>1</sup>

“The play will not play”: *The Stonemason* as “a notable failure”

Among McCarthy scholars, *The Stonemason* causes a certain embarrassment, which is equaled only by the screenplay for *The Counselor*. The primary reason for such embarrassment, as discussed by Edwin T. Arnold in a brilliant essay, is that the play was born under great auspices but finally failed to live up to its expectations. Written in the late 1980s, McCarthy's play received one of the seven grants awarded in 1991 by the American Express / John F. Kennedy Center Fund for New American Plays, which gave \$10,000 to the author, and \$50,000 to the Arena Stage in Washington, DC, for the work's production (Arnold 141). *The Stonemason* was supposed to be staged in 1992, but once the company understood the limitations of the script, and McCarthy proved unwilling to change it, they chose to return the grant and give up the project. The remarkable decision was also fostered by the fact that some of the actors felt that the work used racial stereotypes, and that “McCarthy, as a white writer, was unable to understand or dramatize the complexities of black family life” (Arnold 148). This reasoning is somewhat ironic considering that the play was first selected by the Arena Stage precisely because they assumed that McCarthy was a “young black playwright.” Arnold recounts how the company “had recently committed itself to an awareness of cultural diversity in its presentations; *The Stonemason* offered them the opportunity to do a complex drama with all-black characters” (144). Later on, in 1997, a new attempt to produce the play was made at the McCarter Theater in Princeton,

New Jersey, but it too was abandoned two years later, supposedly because the play “needed to be developed further and McCarthy could not find time in his busy schedule to do the necessary work” (Simonson, qtd. in Peebles 82). One production did indeed eventually see the light of day in October 2001 at the Arts Alliance Center in Clear Lake, Texas, for a fundraising event. However, this was a one-actor show, in which only selected passages of the play were performed with the accompaniment of live music and the projection of photographs, thus making it a “multimedia experience of voice, music and image” (Peebles 82) that could probably be more easily considered a rewriting of McCarthy’s play rather than an actual performance.

The play as such has thus only been presented to the public in book form – being published by Ecco Press in 1994. Still, as an overview of the play’s critical reception shows, its problematic status remains. Lurking behind Erik Hage’s comment that *The Stonemason* “bears witness to the fact that the writer’s mastery of the novel did not so easily translate to theater” (Hage 152) lies an apologetic euphemism. John Cant recognizes that “there is something amiss with *The Stonemason*,” and even though he eventually claims that the practical difficulties of the play could be “remediated most readily by an imaginative production in another medium” (Cant 122, 134), such as television or cinema, the realization of such a remedy still remains to be seen. Stacey Peebles, from whom I borrow the acute definition of the play as “a notable failure,” perceptively observes that the play was indeed originally conceived as a screenplay, and had it remained so this would “lessen [...] or entirely eliminate [...] these production problems” (Peebles 71, 73). William Quirk admits that “as far as ‘dramatic form’ goes, this is certainly not McCarthy’s preferred literary type,” and if he finds the plot and form of *The Sunset Limited*, the only other McCarthian play thus far, “somewhat lacking” (Quirk 34), it is likely that he does not think any better of *The Stonemason*. Peter Josyph claims that the fact that McCarthy’s play is a failure “places him even more securely in the tradition of great novelists” who could not “resist the lure of the stage” (Josyph 119) and made a mess of it.<sup>2</sup>

Despite her initial enthusiasm, Emily Mann, the artistic director of the McCarter Lab that led the second attempted production of the play, was painfully aware of its weaknesses and attempted to persuade McCarthy to redress them. Manuscripts and correspondence held at the Wittliff

Collections at Texas State University in San Marcos testify to Mann's failed attempts to reach a compromise with the author while simultaneously offering a unique insight into McCarthy's creative process. One aspect of the play that proved to be more complicated and which was repeatedly discussed by Mann and McCarthy is the fact that the main character of the play, Ben, was supposed to be played by two distinct actors on stage: one of them a silent character among the others, "only a figure designed to complete the scene," while the other was to stand on a podium and serve as a narrator of the events in a kind of voice-over. This technique, from McCarthy's perspective, was to have a double function: first, it would allow for placing the events in a "completed past" which, as the author repeatedly remarks in his long, first stage direction, has no communication at all with the "separate space" (McCarthy, *The Stonemason* 5-6) from which Ben talks; and secondly, it would allow for those typical McCarthian monologues in which narrated events are intertwined with arcane symbols and endowed with allegorical meaning to be included into the theatrical medium.<sup>3</sup> However, the adoption of this technique also entails several major problems: primary among them is the fact that if Ben the narrator as opposed to Ben the character knows what is going to happen, then one wonders why he does not seem to foresee what his family is doomed to. This aspect particularly worried Emily Mann, who ponders in a letter to the author dated 1 July 1997:

Since the story-teller knows his story (the narrator, not the character) should he not foreshadow the coming disasters, as a good storyteller would, just a little more? Should he not mark the turning points just a little clearer and simpler, should he not have us invest in the key characters just a little more so we feel the hero's dilemma just that much more fully? (McCarthy, *The Cormac McCarthy Papers*, Box 66, Folder 2)

Another problem with the play has to do with Ben's long monologues which, while extremely fascinating on the written page, must be something of a nightmare for any actor or theater director. Cuts were repeatedly suggested, but McCarthy insisted at this point that no change be made, and that success depended exclusively on the ability of the actors. In one of the letters to Mann he claimed self-confidently: "My general comment

about the monologues is that if the character who plays Ben is not capable of holding the audience the play will not play, and nothing in the way of trimming more drama out of the dramatic sections will help” (ibid.).

The author’s perceptible frustration at what he apparently saw as an unwillingness to understand or accept an essential part of his work already surfaced in the long stage direction that opens the published play, in which the author discusses the complicated relationship between Ben’s podium monologues and the staged play. After some rather tortuous reasoning McCarthy ends with a liberating and yet quite contradictory tone, considering the effort invested in explaining the issue: “And now we can begin. As the mathematician Gauss said to his contemporaries: Go forward and faith will come to you” (McCarthy, *The Stonemason* 6). It is interesting to note that the quote McCarthy attributes to Carl Friedrich Gauss (1777-1855) is actually usually attributed to one of his predecessors, the encyclopedist Jean Baptist le Rond d’Alembert (1717-1783), who, while introducing hesitant students to infinitesimal calculus, suggested: “Allez en avant, et la foi vous viendra.” Could the misattribution be due to a mistake on behalf of the author, who was probably misled by the fact that he might have found d’Alembert and Gauss’s names mentioned together in reference to the so-called “fundamental theorem of algebra”? More interesting than this slip, though, might be the fact that the quote appears verbatim, as a simple Google search proves, in the English translation of Oswald Spengler’s *The Decline of the West*. This book – which, as Michael Lynn Crews has insightfully discussed, “has been a rich source of inspiration for McCarthy” (Crews 106) – might very well be his actual source. Spengler uses d’Alembert’s quote as an example of how the eighteenth century was an age of “refined scepticism [which] witnessed the emergence of one impossible truth after another”, becoming thereby “a very carnival of abstract and immaterial thinking” (Spengler 58).<sup>4</sup> The fact that d’Alembert’s quote was located in the context of describing the Enlightenment’s divorce from materiality made it possibly even more interesting and memorable to McCarthy: he might have compared it to the overcoming of the materiality of brick and mortar masonry by the more “abstract” forms of modern construction technology.

Returning to our main topic, McCarthy’s choice not to yield to some of the requested changes, even at the cost of not ever seeing the play’s production,

demands some attention. Clearly, the elimination of such elements would have meant corrupting the work's structural and stylistic bases as well as its intent. Thus, although the theater piece can indeed be defined as "a notable failure," it is precisely taking into account its limitations that a full understanding of this work's importance in McCarthy's career can be achieved. One might even be tempted, at this point, to wonder whether the misattribution of the quotation could have been made on purpose; might this have been a subtle way of inviting readers – and critics – not to linger too much on the superficial imperfections of the work and "Go forward" to grasp its essential core?

"A simple classical story about a hero and his mentor..."

As McCarthy allegedly said in a telephone conversation with Emily Mann which she refers to in the letter previously mentioned, *The Stonemason* can be summed up as "a simple, classical story about a hero and his mentor, how the hero loses his way, and how he recovers it" (McCarthy, *The Cormac McCarthy Papers*, Box 66, Folder 2). The play is set in Louisville, Kentucky, in 1971 and the hero of the play is Ben – an African American who venerates his 101-year-old grandfather Papaw, his mentor. Papaw represents one of the last vestiges of the stonemasonry practice and of the life-form embodying it – one that is as old as human life but is now quickly disappearing, being overcome by the use of hydraulic cement. Stonemasonry, within the tightly-knit allegorical texture of the play, does not merely represent a construction activity, but rather an entire worldview and a set of values based on what I have elsewhere called the "ethic of craftsmanship." Big Ben, Ben's father, represents the middle generation that has betrayed family traditions and welcomed cement and modernity. His choice, however, apparently does not pay off, considering his company is going bankrupt. Ben's teenage nephew, Soldier, who represents the fourth generation living under the same roof, embodies the disruptive side-effects of the friction between old and new: he is a troublesome youth who meddles with drugs and ultimately becomes a criminal.

All actions pivot around Ben, who is narrator and interpreter of many events. He struggles to hold his family together, and is driven by the best of intentions, informed by the values he learned working alongside his grandfather Papaw, his “mentor.” These values, as already mentioned, are embodied by the stonemason’s craftsmanship, which comes to symbolize whatever is good and right and beautiful on three different yet interconnected levels. First on the individual level, in which craftsmanship is seen as the only way to lead an authentic life; secondly on the social level, in which craftsmanship redeems the oppressed; and thirdly, on the symbolic-mythical level, with stonemasonry serving as the representation of a more genuine relation between humanity in general and the world. In the first part of the play, craftsmanship is represented as an infallible panacea against all evils on each of the three levels. This is based on Papaw and Ben’s belief that there is an unbreakable symmetry between the craft of the stonemason and the action of God:

For true masonry is not held together by cement but by gravity. That is to say, by the warp of the world. By the stuff of creation itself. The keystone that locks the arch is pressed in place by the thumb of God. [...] according to the gospel of the true mason God has laid them in their bedding planes to show the mason how his own work must go. A wall is made the same way the world is made. [...] The structure of the world is such as to favor the prosperity of men. (McCarthy, *The Stonemason* 10)

The veneration of work is so vast as to be almost reminiscent of Thomas Carlyle’s “Gospel of Work.” As the Victorian thinker famously claimed in *Past and Present*, “Labour is Life: from the inmost heart of the Worker rises his god-given Force, the sacred celestial Life-essence breathed into him by Almighty God” (Carlyle 113). Similarly, in Ben’s speech craftsmanship is seen as mirroring divine action in the human world. The belief that masonry is the repository of all values rests on the metaphysical assumption that there is an objective order in the world, which corresponds to God’s plan for it, and that this order is supposed to lead to a constant amelioration of human life. The stonemason’s craft is steeped in this knowledge, which is handed down from one generation to the next but can only be fully attained by means of personal, individual experience with craftsmanship.

Ben's wife Maven warns him about the risks of such idolatrous veneration. She asks him whether it is not a "pretty romantic notion" to believe that Papaw's "opinions are valuable [only] because he's worked all his life"; to which he replies: "Yes. It's also true. You can't separate wisdom from the common experience and the common experience is just what the worker has in great plenty" (McCarthy, *The Stonemason* 58). Ben elaborates on Papaw's rectitude and fidelity to truth as he recalls how Papaw broke his wooden level realizing, by means of a plumb bob, that it was not perfectly straight:

I see him standing there over his plumb bob which never lies and never lies and the plumb bob is pointing motionless to the unimaginable center of the earth four thousand miles beneath his feet. Pointing to a blackness unknown and unknowable both in truth and in principle where God and matter are locked in collaboration that is silent nowhere in the universe and it is this that guides him as he places his stone one over two and two over one as did his father before him and his sons to follow and let the rain carve them if it can. (67)

Working is a way to submit to God's plans for the world, but it is also, in a Hegelian way (as shall be seen, Hegel is an important reference in the play) the medium with which one can intellectually penetrate such plans. In this context, Ben criticizes Freemasons because they aspire to understand the mysteries contained in masonry using symbolic gestures and bookish studies, instead of by actually building: "The work is everything, and whatever is learned is learned in the doing. [...] knowledge is instilled in you through the work and not through any contemplation of the work" (65). Knowledge is reached through experience rather than through conceptual abstraction, so that the truth contained in the stonemason craft can only be attained by means of imitation and direct action: "you couldn't learn it out of a book if there were any and there are not. Not one. We were taught. Generation by generation. For ten thousand years" (26). The same skepticism towards intellectual knowledge is reflected in Ben's decision, referred to in passing in the play, to drop his studies at college and learn his grandfather's trade. McCarthy's manuscripts show that, in spite of his character's scorn of books as a source of knowledge, the author did rather

extensive bibliographical research while working on this play. In *Books Are Made Out of Books*, Michael Lynn Crews refers to “three areas of research [...] architecture, freemasonry, and African American life in the South” (Crews 219). McCarthy perused books such as Joseph Rykwert’s *The First Moderns: The Architects of the Eighteenth Century*, Robert Gould’s *History of Freemasonry*, and Paul Frankl’s *Gothic Architecture*, and took notes about Batty Langley’s *Ancient Masonry* and Cicero’s *Dream of Scipio*.

Although the author’s research surfaces at several points in the play, more often than not the intertextual references, as is often the case with McCarthy, are woven into the text itself so as to remain hidden. An interesting case for the way in which different intertextual layers coalesce is the passage on Papaw’s “labor theory of value,” during which he claims – in a singular and somewhat ironic variation on John Locke’s thesis, which derives private property from labor – that “[t]he man’s labor that did the work is in the work. You caint make it go away. Even if it’s paid for it’s still there. If ownership lies in the benefit of a man then the mason owns all the work he does in this world and you caint put that claim aside nor quit it and it dont make no difference whose name is on the paper” (McCarthy, *The Stonemason* 30). Accordingly, Papaw recounts how he refused to join his colleagues who had decided to demolish a house they themselves had built as retaliation for not having been paid for their work. Doing it would not only be useless, but offensive towards their own work and the values incarnated therein. Ben expresses the “further agenda” of Papaw’s “labor theory of value” by referring to Hegel and “his paradigm of servant and master in which the master comes to suffer the inner impoverishment of the idle while the servant by his labors grows daily in skill and wisdom” (31). Papaw, born in 1870, is the first of his family to have been born formally free and protected by the Reconstruction Amendments, yet it is evident that neither the 101 years of his life nor the Civil Rights Act have been enough for the intention of those amendments to come to fruition. However, Ben suggests that the positive value of work is so strong that, in a way, it even compensates for the injustice of slavery and submission, since “work exists outside of the claims of the worker and landholders alike” (31). “We knew it was a thing that if we had it they could not take from us” – says Papaw about what he calls the trade – “and it would stand by us and not fail us. Not ever fail us” (33).



Aside from Locke and Hegel, a further dimension of this intertextual play can only be assessed after having read an extremely interesting paragraph in one of the manuscript's versions of this passage.

BEN. I think that what [Papaw] means is that the work exists outside of the claims of worker *or* contractor. Mason or Landowner. When Lamkin was refused payment by lord Weary for building his castle he killed lord Weary's firstborn child. Lord Weary is also another name for the devil. And there is an old superstition that masons tempered their mortar with the blood of infants. Out of the cradle the red blood did run. But the man whose life is rooted in holy labor – and it makes me smile too, yet it is holy – and the man who exploits that labor and who is esteemed for occupying a structure the craft of which is beyond the capacity not only of his mind but his soul... both men are outside the work actually. And yet the spirit of the mason resides in the stone and the stone is he while the Lord in his manse is kept from the weathers by a thing altogether other than himself – even if his own honest labor has paid. On this I remain a manual aristocrat. (McCarthy, *The Cormac McCarthy Papers*, Box 66, Folder 4)

McCarthy is here referring to a folk ballad of Scottish or Irish origin telling the story of a nobleman, Lord Weary, who refuses to pay the workers who have built his castle. As a reaction against this injustice, one of the unpaid builders, Lamkin, sometimes also referred to as Lambkin or other variants of the name, murders Lord Weary's wife and child. The ballad inspired the title of Robert Lowell's 1946 poetry collection *Lord Weary's Castle*, in which "the castle of the title may [...] refer to the world created by God but turned into all sorts of commercial, military, religious, or familiar establishments which are constructed at the expense of the owner's debt to God and to other men. [Lamkin] may also be seen as representing the exploited lower class, the true creators of value, who will take their ultimate revenge on selfish owners" (Fein 35).

A fascinating fact about the sheet of paper on which this passage is written is that it shows the clear marks of the author's fit of rage. McCarthy had written on the side of the passage, with his characteristically tidy and clear handwriting, "Lamkin." Later on, he must have had some difficulty in finding the passage marked by this reference, so that when he did find it he

used a black marker to highlight it with arrows and to write on the top and bottom of the page the name of the character in capital letters two inches tall. The emotional state he must have been in when doing this is clearly perceivable in the note he added at the bottom of the page in bold strokes and all capital letters: “30 minutes looking for this fucking sheet of paper” (McCarthy, *The Cormac McCarthy Papers*, Box 66, Folder 4). Apart from the funny anecdote, this seems to testify to the importance this reference had – at least during one stage of the play’s writing: it was an intertextual reference that McCarthy had studiously decided to insert at a strategic point in the work and, even though it was later dropped, it still might be considered as an important sub-text worth analyzing, also in reference to Lowell’s work.

Returning to Ben’s philosophy of work, embodied in his mentor Papaw, it appears that it not only aligns work with truth and justice, but also with the principle of beauty, thereby seeming to reflect the Medieval notion of how Truth, God and Beauty coincide. The beauty of the stonework is seen as an aspect of the work’s perfection itself: “The beauty of those structures would appear to be just a sort of by-product, something fortuitous, but of course it is not” (McCarthy, *The Stonemason* 91). The work’s design arises out of a “necessity” and corresponds to the “structure of the world” which is supposed to be made for the “prosperity of man” (10), including the enjoyment of beauty. Beauty is not something added to the products of work, but it is the essence of work itself, as it “is simply a reflection of the purity of the mason’s intention” (91).

“...how the hero loses his way...”

The stonemason’s trade comes to symbolize the essential values on all three levels mentioned above, thus fulfilling the role of Papaw as mentor, as McCarthy defined him in his phone conversation with Mann. On the individual level, the hard work that Papaw fosters contributes to the expression of personal excellence; on the societal level, it is a means of preserving one’s dignity even under oppression, as well as the way to eventually overcome such oppression; and on the cosmic level the

stonemason's action reflects the creative will of a benevolent God. However, as was anticipated, Ben eventually "loses his way." That is, he does not manage to rise to the values that he had chosen for himself.

Thus, not only does Ben not manage to save his family from falling apart, but he even unwillingly contributes to the tragedy: his father commits suicide after his company goes bankrupt, and Ben feels guilty because he did not give his father the money he had asked for. Soldier flees, becomes a criminal, and Ben offers him money to persuade him not to interfere with the family anymore and allow his mother, Ben's sister, to start a new life. However, when Soldier is found dead from a drug overdose the truth surfaces, and Ben and his sister separate in regret and resentment.

In spite of the implied glorification of craft, here, like in all of McCarthy's writings, effort does not lead to success, goodwill does not prove to be a reliable guide for judgment, and more often than not hope is frustrated. Ben, as he narrates, had come "to the life of the laborer as the anchorite to his cell and pallet," convinced as he was that "if enough of the world's weight only pass through [someone's] hands he must become inaugurated into the reality of that world in a way to withstand all scrutiny" (111). However, towards the end of the play he is forced to admit that he has "lost his way" and that his excessive veneration for his grandfather had actually led him astray. In a passage from the manuscript, which was later shortened in the published form, Ben states this clearly as he meditates on what he should have done with his father:

If I'd ransomed all I own and given him the money would it have saved him?

No.

Was I obligated to do so anyway?

Yes.

Why didnt you?

Because I didnt think it was right.

Because you didnt love him. / Because I didnt love him [added in handwriting]

Why didnt you love him?

Because I didnt know him.

Why didnt you know him?

Because I didnt love him. My affections were fixed upon a[n] exotic cultural artefact that I called my grandfather and I used my love for him (That bond, him, ?) to get even with my father. An artefact. An historical freak. Not even an anachronism. There was never a time he'd have sorted into without tearing something. At best he was an idea. Your father drowned before your eyes and you stood smiling with your arm around a phantom. (McCarthy, *The Cormac McCarthy Papers*, Box 66, Folder 8, page marked as "D")

Ben is forced to realize that he had never really understood Papaw's teaching. Just like Freemasons intellectualized and thus spoiled real work, Ben too has idealized his grandfather and misunderstood his lesson. The failure of his attempt to hold his family together is not just a question of bad luck: it is the empirical proof that the metaphysical principles on which Ben's ethics of work rests are mistaken. While at the beginning Ben had declared that gravity was the "warp of the world," which holds the "stuff of creation" together, and was the physical representation of how "the structure of the world is such as to favor the prosperity of men" (McCarthy, *The Stonemason* 10), he is now forced to rethink this. As logic has it, this proposition can be negated in two ways. The first and most radical is by saying that there is no such thing as a structure of the world. Jeffrey, Soldier's sixteen-year-old friend and partner in crime, represents this view in his short dialogue with Ben, who has been looking for information about his runaway nephew:

JEFFREY. [...] All I know is you living in the past. I'm living in the past. History done swallowed you up cept you dont know it.

BEN. If history swallows everybody up who do you think is running the world?

JEFFREY. It look to you like somebody *runnin* it? (74)

Jeffrey here is clearly not speaking the way an average teenager would: McCarthy is using the character to give voice to a philosophical standpoint against which to define that of the main character. Jeffrey stands for the nihilist belief that there is no such thing as a "structure of the world," that the world is just a constant catastrophe in which everything happens by chance and nothing leads anywhere.

By contrast, although Ben does not negate that there is such structure, he is eventually forced to admit that it is not “such as to favor the prosperity of man”. Towards the end of the play Ben says: “I lost my way. I’d thought by my labors to stand outside that true bend of gravity which is the world’s pain” (111). The implicit reference in this passage – apart from the Einsteinian space-time bend – is to the gnostic worldview that has proved so influential to McCarthy. According to Hans Jonas one of the central tenets of Gnosticism is the doctrine of *Heimarmene*, or “Universal Fate,” which overturns the Stoic concept of order and the alignment of the macro and the microcosm: “Order and law is the cosmos here too, but rigid and inimical order, tyrannical and evil law, devoid of meaning and goodness, alien to the purposes of man and to his inner essence” (Jonas 250). Everything is structured, ordered, and deterministic, but the *telos* – that is, the goal of this order – is not harmony and balance but, by contrast, the continuous destruction of whatever comes to be. The world is not ruled by a benevolent power, but by an evil God, the Demiurge, who enjoys the perpetual falling apart of his own creation and the suffering of his creatures. Gravity, the “warp of the world” holding the “stuff of creation together,” is not the force “pointing motionless to the unimaginable center of the earth [...] where God and matter are locked in collaboration that is silent nowhere,” and which holds up the wall; rather it is the bent force which finally makes any wall fall down. There is only one law which is all-comprehensive, inescapable, and that governs all. It is the law of ultimate destruction: “things exist and then exist no more. Trees. Dogs. People. *Will* that namelessness into which we vanish then taste of us?” (McCarthy, *The Stonemason* 104).

This change entails a subversion of Ben’s philosophy of work on all three of the levels previously described. On the individual level, the effort to build habitable places (in both a literal and a metaphorical sense) in the end only leads to adding ruins to ruins. On the societal level, every change seems merely to be the substitution of one system of exploitation for a new one, such as in the series of slavery, legal marginalization, and then economic marginalization for black American communities. A passage from an early manuscript version that was later abandoned clearly shows McCarthy’s intention to address the issue of the repeated cycles of oppression in American history. In this fascinating and disturbing passage,

Ben recounts how Papaw would sometimes talk in his sleep to friends long dead while, in the opposite part of the house, Soldier would shout in his nightmares, thus symbolically bringing the ghosts of the past and the ghosts of the future together in the same house:

And some nights Soldier would be having his nightmares and Papaw would be calling out his instructions or greeting people dead and in their graves the better part of a century and in his tower on the third floor Soldier would be howling in his sleep strangling with fear and rage and locked in combat with whatever demons he was condemned to deal with night after night and in his howling above and this calling out below the house seemed to be filling with spirits unknown to one another that had best been left so but were nonetheless wrenched out of the dark of their separate destinies and slammed rudely together in some common noumenal space, black slaves born two hundred years ago set elbow to elbow with teenage dopefiends in dayglo jumpsuits and welfare mothers in jeans with black mummies in bandanas. (McCarthy, *The Cormac McCarthy Papers*, Box 66, Folder 8)

Finally, on the cosmic level, the Freemasons' idea of the Great Architect as the nurturing power controlling the world yields to the Gnostic idea of God as Demiurge, the evil force which perversely enjoys the destruction of what he himself created.

“...and of how he finds it”. To make the world again and again and again

As discussed above, the subversion of the early optimistic view according to which the structure of the world is such as “to favor the prosperity of men” does not lead to Jeffrey's nihilism. The awareness that nothing is eternal and perfect, that no wall will stand forever, does not lead to the negation of any value in attempting to build something lasting. McCarthy's ethics of work corresponds to a genuine and profound interest in the human being's relation to the world, and to a belief that this relation can be constructive rather than destructive. However, the point is that such constructiveness cannot be considered as eternal or absolute. Ben misunderstands the lesson of his grandfather by taking a certain view of stonemasonry as an absolute value that never needs to be questioned, while in fact it is always both

relative and tentative. This is represented in Ben's closing monologue, as he sees the ghost of Papaw appearing naked in the darkness:

He was just a man, naked and alone in the universe, and he was not afraid and I stood there with my tears pouring down my face and he smiled at me and he held out both his hands. Hands from which all those blessings had flowed. Hands I never tired to look at. Shaped in the image of God. To make the world. To make it again and again and again. To make it in the very maelstrom of its undoing. (McCarthy, *The Stonemason* 133)

If the truth, value, and beauty that can be found in work are not universal, this does not mean that they are empty. On the contrary, they can only exist insofar as they are always tentative, striving for their own precarious affirmation without becoming absolute. "The wisdom of the journeyman is to work one day at a time," says Ben while meditating on the etymology of "journeyman" and remembering how Papaw "always said that any job even if it took years was made up of a day's work. Nothing more. Nothing less. [...] In the concept of a day's work is rhythm and pace and wholeness. And truth and justice and peace of mind" (96).

Even though the universe is bent towards destruction, one can still try to create moments of resistance, beauty, and justice. However, in order to do so one cannot appeal to transcendental truths, but must work piecemeal, day by day. This idea is central to many of McCarthy's works, especially from the Border Trilogy onward, and it has found its most poignant representation in *The Road*. The protagonists of McCarthy's latest novel, a father and his child, struggle to survive as they proceed one day at a time across the post-apocalyptic wasteland, managing to create in the mayhem and destruction surrounding them an occasional oasis of solidarity, humanity, and tenderness.

"The work that you do": The ethics of authorial work

In his 2007 Oprah Winfrey interview, McCarthy claims that he decided to write because he knew that he would not want to work. This is indeed a very interesting statement, coming from a writer for whom, as we have

seen, work is seen as the space in which the complex chiasmus between the human being and the world takes place. However, once work in general is distinguished from craft as truly meaningful work, endowed with an ethical awareness and a disciplined commitment (see Brinkmeyer), then McCarthy's remark is more easily understood.

In *The Stonemason*, Big Ben is as much a worker as Ben and Papaw, but his decision to drop stonemasonry in favor of concrete alienates him from those values that are inherent to the traditional craft and that lead to "rhythm and peace and wholeness" instead of overwhelming pressure and forgetfulness. By means of true craftwork, represented here by stonemasonry, the human being makes of the world *his* world, even if just for the time of his existence: "The world was before man and it will be again when he is gone. But it was not this world nor will it be, for where man lives is in this world only" (McCarthy, *The Stonemason* 104).

McCarthy's ethics of work now comes full circle, and allows us to finally gauge the import of this failed play within his *oeuvre*. In the same aforementioned Oprah Winfrey interview, in which McCarthy ironically places his profession in opposition to work, he also says that a writer has to take his craft seriously: "You have to treat it as the work that you do" (McCarthy, "Interview" n. pag.). McCarthy's appreciation in the face of the world's brittleness corresponds to his disciplined weaving together of the products of a fertile, mythopoetic imagination in an extraordinary prose in order to get as close as possible to an unreachable perfection. This idea – which recalls Samuel Beckett's invitation in *Worstward Ho* to "try again. Fail again. Fail better" (Beckett 471) – can ultimately lead to a meta-poetic interpretation of *The Stonemason* as a failed play but at the same time as the most authentic expression of McCarthy's ethics and poetics of work. Just as Papaw refuses to destroy the house he built because the value of the work invested in it remains, so did McCarthy, in refusing to compromise with the requests of the theater company, accept the failure of his creative project in order to not betray his vision. What is left to the readers then is the tangible proof of McCarthy's dedication, together with an imperfect but powerful work of genius.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank all the staff at the Wittliff Collections for their extraordinary helpfulness as well as Mr. William J. Hill for having generously supported my research visit. Thanks also to Kevin, Barbara, Jerry, and Hannah for showing me the warmth of a Texas welcome. Several passages of this paper have already appeared, albeit in different form, in my article “Cormac McCarthy’s *The Stonemason* and the Ethic of Craftsmanship.”

<sup>2</sup> Notwithstanding the acuity of Josyph’s observations about McCarthy’s disregard for the rules of theater, along with his vivisection of the work (by which he effectively exposes all of its weaknesses) he still finds the play a useful excuse for discussing at length his days in Paris. However, there have also been positive – and even enthusiastic – criticisms. Kenneth Lincoln seems to be a great fan of the work, which he bafflingly defines as “theater Grottesco [sic],” while going so far as to claim, in his peculiarly boisterous and self-referential tone, that “McCarthy’s artistry with stage speech pulls taut the rein on language and form apprenticing the trade from Greek tragedy through Shakespeare, to Mamet and Pinter” (Lincoln 91). In her idiosyncratic and multifaceted reading of McCarthy’s play Mary Brewer appreciatively remarks that “*The Stonemason*’s representation of black masculinity and faith, as personified by Ben and Papaw, defies the degraded images that historically have typified dominant discourse about blackness and black religious practice” (Brewer 45).

<sup>3</sup> It would be rather hard to imagine such monologues as part of the dramatic action itself. An analogous technique is adopted in *The Counselor*, in which the final “McCarthian monologue” takes place on the phone, thus distancing the speaker from the listener.

<sup>4</sup> More interestingly, probably, the motto could be read in light of the relation between “works” and faith in Protestant theology, which is here and elsewhere one of the most inspiring references in McCarthy’s approach to the themes of free will, destiny, and the relation between the subject and the outside world. See, for example, the following passage from Nietzsche’s *Dawn of Day* in which the philosopher gives precedence, as McCarthy seems to suggest, to action over faith: “*Works and Faith*. – Protestant teachers are still spreading the fundamental error that faith only is of consequence, and that works must follow naturally upon faith. This doctrine is certainly not true, but it is so seductive in appearance that it has succeeded in fascinating quite other intellects than that of Luther (e.g. the minds of Socrates and Plato): though the plain evidence and experience of our daily life prove the contrary. The most assured knowledge and faith cannot give us either the strength or the dexterity required for action, or the practice in that subtle and complicated mechanism which is a prerequisite for anything to be changed from an idea into action. Then, I say, let us first and foremost have works! and this means practice! practice! practice! The necessary faith will come later – be certain of that!” (Nietzsche 29).

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