

No Country for Old Gods

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Abstract: This essay is an interpretation of the film *No Country for Old Men*. Each of the three main characters, it argues, represents a different response to the modern world. It proceeds by examining each character and the final scene.

Keywords: *No Country for Old Men*, Coen brothers, Cormac McCarthy

William Butler Yeats's poem "Sailing to Byzantium" tells of an old man who yearns to be part of something eternal in the face of his own approaching death. A perennial theme of artists and poets, at least until the advent of post-modernism, the narrator seeks immortality through art, and asks of the sages on a mosaic wall who stand in "God's holy fire,"

Consume my heart away; sick with desire
And fastened to a dying animal
It knows not what it is; and gather me
Into the artifice of eternity.¹

He's coming from a country whose inhabitants do not contemplate eternal monuments, caught up as they are in the cycle of coming into being and passing away. This, the narrator says, "is no country for old men."²

The old man in the film *No Country for Old Men* is sheriff Ed Tom Bell, but unlike the narrator of Yeats's poem, he cannot find a way out of this world. We hear Bell's opening monologue over scenes of the desolate landscape of West Texas, as hard and beautiful a country as the United States has to offer. It is not the desolation of Texas that defeats Bell, but its harshness does offer a clue about his inability to find

a home here. The novel by Cormac McCarthy almost seems written for the Coen brothers, and its prologue echoes the first scenes of the Coens's first movie, *Blood Simple*, which also opens with images of the Texas desert and a narrator who explains that in Texas, "you're on your own."³ West Texas is large and sparsely populated, with the long Mexican border opening onto a savage wilderness from which almost anything might emerge. Even by 1980 (when the movie is set) it was a hard place to police, and Ed Tom is the embodiment of law and order in the land. A new form of disorder, in the form of vicious Mexican drug gangs, has appeared and shaken the foundations of this old order.

This new world is the country Bell finds unbearable, and the challenge of living in it is a persistent theme for McCarthy (as well as the Coen brothers), which is why so many of his books are set on a frontier. Bell's family had been in Texas for several generations and he "always liked to hear about the old timers," who seemed to live in simpler times. We find out later, though, that this nostalgia may be misplaced: the frontier had always been a wild and savage place that required enormous fortitude from its inhabitants. This country, his uncle Ellis tells him, "is hard on people." It is not Texas, but the modern world, which nothing seems to be holding together and in which "you're on your own," that breaks Ed Tom Bell.

The young man in the film, Llewellyn Moss, who finds the money, is able to adapt to this world and, despite his premature death, is not broken under its weight. Where Bell sees only uncontrollable chaos around him, Moss does what he can to take hold of his situation and shows great resourcefulness in the process. Despite his imperfections, Moss faces the challenge of the modern world head on and although he dies while Bell lives, he is the closest thing in the movie to a hero.

The villain, Anton Chigurh, conveniently dressed in black throughout the movie and undoubtedly its strangest character, believes himself to be in complete control of events and exempt from the chance that determines the fate of those around him. Early in the film, he sits on Moss's sofa after breaking into his trailer home and stares oddly at his reflection

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as if experiencing déjà vu. Shortly after, Bell arrives and sits looking at his own reflection from the same spot. Both Chigurh and Bell drink from Moss's bottle of milk. Just as each of these three men, who never share the screen, sits looking at the same TV, we are invited to compare them and how they make their way in the modern world.⁴

ANTON CHIGURH

Anton Chigurh, the antonym of Ed Tom, is bent on finding the money that Moss finds in the desert, but he is not so much interested in the money itself as he is in proving a point. Chigurh believes that he has discovered a truth about the world and human affairs that none of those around him have seen: it is chance that determines events and nothing but chance. There is no transcendent order or God watching over us. By grasping this insight, Chigurh paradoxically elevates himself above it, and he no longer sees himself as being simply the plaything of fate as are those around him. He finds his bliss in proving to others both the contingency of their lives and the freedom of his own. While they are buffeted blindly by forces they don't understand, he is in complete control.

After shooting the man who sent Carson Wells to find him and watching him die on the floor of his office, Chigurh asks the accountant who is also present why the Mexicans were given a transponder. The unfinished thought in his response, a characteristic response for an accountant, is that the more people looking for the money, the greater the chances of finding it. "That's foolish," Chigurh responds, "you pick the one right tool." The right tool, of course, is Chigurh himself who, through his superior skill, transcends the odds. That those around him cannot see this attests all the more to their inferiority. In the book we learn that he is arrested in the opening scenes of the film for killing a man outside a café. He allowed himself to be taken in handcuffed by the officer just to prove that he could extricate himself "by an act of will."⁵ Just before being strangled, the deputy who brought Chigurh in tells the sheriff over the phone that he's "got it under control," and Chigurh's goal is proving that he's mistaken. He toys with those around him simply because he can, to prove that he is not like everyone else, and that the law, for him, does not apply. He makes his own order and is willfully oblivious to the rules that constrain others.

In keeping with the impression that he comes from some unknown country with entirely different norms, Chigurh's accent and appearance are exotic, as are his weapons. The first glimpse we get of his stun gun ("stungun" in McCarthy's quasi-German formulation)⁶ comes in the film's opening monologue as Bell says the words, "I don't understand." The deputy who arrests him is similarly clueless, thinking that the gun is an oxygen tank for emphysema; something from which an old man might suffer. Later in the film, sheriff Bell tells Moss's wife Carla Jean the story of a man who was disabled after a bullet he fired at a cow ricocheted into his arm. The moral of the story is that "even in the contest between man and steer the issue is not certain." These days, he continues, they slaughter beeves with air guns. Bell is out of step with the times and the moral of his story no longer

holds: the contest between man and steer today is in fact certain for those with the right tool.

It is no coincidence that Chigurh uses a weapon that takes chance out of the equation and that was designed to slaughter animals. In his eyes, ordinary people are nothing more than animals and he is like a god among them. Like a man surrounded by sheep, he does as he pleases without much concern that those around him will even notice his presence, nor does he fear that the law will be able to catch or hold him. He relinquishes no information about himself while demanding the most private details of others—asking one man in menacing tones what time he goes to bed and how he came to own his house. The first man he kills with the stun gun stands docilely by while Chigurh, telling him to hold still, carefully places the nozzle in the middle of his forehead. The man is as oblivious to what is about to happen as any farm animal with a rifle pointed at it, and we can't help but see him as ridiculous.

The Coen brothers have a special talent for making the lives of regular people appear frighteningly boring. They were criticized for making fun of the people of North Dakota in *Fargo*, and while they denied this charge, having come from Minneapolis which is just next door and probably not much more exciting, it is hard not to see the lives of most of *Fargo*'s characters as hopelessly pointless (the significant exception is the policewoman Marge, whose satisfaction with a normal life in a fairly dreary situation is the point of the movie). In *No Country* the inhabitants of West Texas, clad in beiges and browns that fade into the landscape, are well-meaning yokels who elicit both scorn and ridicule from the audience. After an inane conversation at a gas station Chigurh forces the attendant to flip a coin for his life, and perhaps some part of the audience secretly hoped the attendant would lose; imagining ourselves as superior to most of those around us, we sympathize with Chigurh and want the attendant to suffer for his foolishness and perhaps also because he is content to live out his life in a crumbling Texaco station in the middle of nowhere.

Chigurh proves that his view of the world is true by demonstrating again and again that the lives of those around him are in his hands. They are nothing more than the dying animals of Yeats's poem, and the fact that they die confirms, in his eyes, the futility of their existence. He observes their daily routines and small projects as a scientist observes his specimens. He is disgusted with their pettiness but exalts in his own transcendence. "If the rule you followed brought you to this," he asks Wells just before killing him and clearly delighted with himself, "of what use was the rule?" Wells is more like Chigurh than the other characters, and when he is told that he has lived a charmed life, he responds that luck had little to do with it. Still, he does not have Chigurh's skill and the path he chose led him ultimately into the latter's grip; whatever rule Wells followed led to his death, and this proves, in Chigurh's mind, that this rule was useless. For him, death is defeat. Though Wells knows where the satchel of money is, Chigurh is uninterested. "I know something better," he says, "I know where it's going to be. It will be brought to me and placed at my feet." Despite the suggestion from Wells to the contrary, Chigurh says that he knows this to a

certainty and implies that nothing unforeseen will thwart his plans.

Chigurh believes himself to be above the odds while everyone around him is entirely at their mercy, and this leads to certain paradoxes. The use of a coin to determine whether someone lives or dies makes it appear as though it is just a matter of luck, but Chigurh is forcing his victims to submit to this gamble. Although it is incoherent, Chigurh thinks of himself as both responsible and not responsible for what happens; he is not subject to any coin toss because of the strength of his will, but others who have neither his will nor his insight into the nature of the world, are at the mercy of a quarter. He tells Carla Jean that the chance to escape with a coin toss is the best he can do; he is free to offer her this opportunity, which he does not offer Wells, and despite his promise to kill her, and yet her fate is thus simultaneously, in Chigurh's mind, the culmination of his plan and a matter of chance. He tells the Texaco attendant that the coin is his lucky quarter and that it had traveled twenty-two years to get there as if it had been the coin's intention, but also that it is "just a coin" like any other. The quarter both does have the ability to influence events—hence it being lucky—and it does not, since it is just any old quarter. When people, as they often do, tell Chigurh that he doesn't have to kill them, he acts as if he does not in fact have a choice. Carla Jean refuses to call heads or tails, since, "The coin don't have no say. It's just you." Rather than admit his own agency in the matter, Chigurh says only that he "got here the same way the coin did," that is, by chance. Chigurh wants to prove to her both that the events that led up to his presence in her living room were a matter of chance, and that he is in complete control since he is fulfilling his promise to Llewellyn that he would find her and kill her no matter where she was.

Although Chigurh believes he "knows to a certainty" what will happen, he is wrong. The money is never brought to him and placed at his feet, nor does he kill Moss as promised since the Mexicans find him first. And shortly after driving from Carla Jean's house a car he didn't see coming slams into him, leaving him badly injured. Chigurh's last scene—a car accident, or a bit of bad luck—proves that Chigurh is wrong about the world. He is not above chance and his will can never exempt him from death. As Wells points out, Chigurh has no sense of humor, as do most of the other characters in the movie, and if we think of humor as a way of dealing with life's uncertainties, then Chigurh's severe manner is consistent with this misunderstanding of the world. He is also unlike Moss or Bell in that he has no connection or attachment to anyone else. He is solitary, and while this allows him to act efficiently, it is also a sign of his total lack of humanity. That Chigurh can control whether those around him live or die proves to him that mortality is the most important fact about human beings, but his strict materialism and isolation indicate that he has missed the most important fact about what it means to be human.

LLEWELLYN MOSS

What is striking about the relationship between Moss and his wife Carla Jean is the apparent lack of affection between

them. They never kiss or say "I love you," even when he leaves her on a Greyhound bus headed to Odessa, and yet it is clear that the bond between them is a strong one that lasts even beyond Llewellyn's death. When Chigurh tells Carla Jean that her husband had the opportunity to save her, but that he used her to save himself, she knows it is not true. Llewellyn's love for his wife and his compassion for others turns out to be his tragic flaw; most obviously, he is pursued after bringing water to a man who lay dying in the desert, something he knows is "dumber than hell." Unlike Chigurh, who is constrained by no human attachments, Moss is torn between the freedom afforded by his resourcefulness and newfound wealth, and his humanity, which forces him to do what he can to save his wife. Moss is by no means a hero; imperfect and without Chigurh's resolve or decision, he cannot fully escape his circumstances. But his compassion and active striving to transcend fate's allotment make him the most impressive of the three main characters.

Moss is the young man of the film; a fact the Coens indicate through a hitchhiking scene that does not appear in the book. "Shouldn't be doing that," the man who picks up Moss says as they barrel down the highway, "Even a young man like you." He means Moss shouldn't be hitchhiking, but Moss has faced greater dangers than this and really isn't too young to be hitchhiking, having served two tours in Vietnam twelve years earlier. The country is hard on people, and only a young man like Moss has any chance of succeeding in it.

His first line in the film echoes that uttered by Chigurh in the immediately preceding scene; both urge their proposed victim to be still, and while Chigurh is about to kill a man he treats as a farm animal, Moss is firing at a wild antelope in the plain below him. Chigurh can't help but hit his unsuspecting target, but Moss fails to kill his. Unlike Chigurh, Moss does not use a tool that eliminates the odds, an important clue to his character. He is more down to earth and believable, and cannot control what happens to the extent that Chigurh does. More subject to chance than Chigurh believes himself to be, the fact that he finds the satchel of money really is just luck, although he does not treat it as such.

But what Moss does with this luck elevates him above the other ordinary people in the movie. Taking the money home with him and planning to keep it was a crime, and in the context of this film this places him somewhere between Chigurh, who pays no attention to the law of the land or its conventions and Bell, who hopes against any reasonable hope that the order he believes in and has been trusted to maintain will persist. And while Chigurh is not actually interested in the money for its own sake, Moss really is; with this money he plans to retire from his ordinary life and to make sure Carla Jean can retire from Walmart as well. We never discover what this proposed retirement would have been like, since Llewellyn's pursuit of it sets him on that great American path of being 'on the run'—a condition that for Moss, as with all his restless forebears, is an end in itself rather than a means to some idle finishing point. It is only Ed Tom Bell, the old man, who retires.

Moss finds the money, the means to his retirement, next to the body of the "ultimo hombre" (who, incidentally, no one else in the movie ever appears to find). The

Nietzschean overtones here are obvious, as Moss takes from the “last man,” the infamous decadent bourgeois of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (not that the slain gangster is a decadent bourgeois), the money that the dead man could not use and that leads to the transformation of Moss into, if not a superman, at least some approximation of a tragic hero. Had Moss simply taken the money and run, he would have been a typical criminal, but the fact that he returns to the scene of the crime to help a dying man, even though he’s too late, makes him a much more interesting character.

Moss is not as clear-sighted as Chigurh, and he imprudently returns to find the dying Mexican late at night after being tormented by an internal debate with his conscience. Had he been quicker to make a decision, he would have both helped the man and probably would have gotten away without detection. Instead, the Mexican gangsters discover Moss at the scene and chase him down in their truck, lights glaring and guns blazing. Moss arrives at a river, strips off his clothes and dives into the water. When he emerges from the river, the classic symbol of transformation, he manages to shoot the dog that was chasing him just before being mauled. While he missed the antelope in the film’s first scene, he now hits the mark, and from this point on he stands in a different relation to other human beings. This is not to say that he sees everyone around him the way Chigurh does, but he does move a step in that direction; he has taken his fate into his own hands and, both literally and figuratively, he cannot go back home again.

After finding the money, many who come into contact with him wind up dead (including one man Moss assures he will not hurt a split second before he’s killed), but this does not seem to worry Moss terribly. As he says to Carla Jean, “Things happen. You can’t take ‘em back.” In a similar vein, he seems unaffected by the death of the clerk at his hotel near the Mexican border. When Moss checks into the hotel, he glances at a cat sipping milk on the floor and then back to the hotel clerk. Chigurh kills the clerk a short time later and when Moss runs back through the door while trying to escape he notices that the proverbial spilt milk is all over the floor. Moss does what he can to save his wife, but he comes to share at least some of Chigurh’s disdain for ordinary people, with whom he has similarly inane conversations.

Although not as savvy as Chigurh, Moss shows tremendous resourcefulness in staying one step ahead of his pursuers. He contrives to hide the money in motel air ducts, and no one but Chigurh is able to figure this out, and his tools (the sawed-off shotgun and tent poles) have a more homemade feel to them than Chigurh’s. He has, though, bitten off more than he can chew, as the words to the mariachi group who play for him as he lies bleeding indicate: “You wanted to fly without wings / You wanted to play with fire.”

The Mexican gangsters who’d been tracking Moss eventually catch up with him in el Paso, thanks to his garrulous mother-in-law. In Llewellyn’s last scene he tells a woman at his motel that he’s “just lookin’ for what’s comin’,” and she responds, “no one ever sees that.” Chigurh didn’t see that car that hit him coming and Moss, although he could not have been surprised, did not see the Mexicans coming. Despite his best efforts to take control, he is overwhelmed by the

world he has entered. But we should not view his death as a defeat. Had he simply handed over the money to the police and lived happily ever after, we would rightly have thought little of him, and it is his attempt to break free of his world that makes him an impressive character.

ED TOM BELL

Llewellyn’s death, though, is a shock. At this point in the movie we expect Ed Tom Bell, who has been on the sidelines until now, to kick into high gear and chase down Chigurh. We know he has the know-how to do so, since he seems at least vaguely aware of what kind of weapon Chigurh is using and has some insight into his character (he knows, for example, that Chigurh returns to the scene of the crime). Like Chigurh and Moss, Bell is smarter than those around him, his partner Wendell is particularly foolish, but rather than actively pursuing the killer, he is content to bemoan the signs and wonders of the changing times. More shocking than Llewellyn’s death is Bell’s failure to avenge it and in giving up the chase, he fails in his duty to protect those who’d entrusted this responsibility to him, and allows Carla Jean to be killed as well.

Despite his short time on-screen relative to Moss and Chigurh, Bell is the main character of the film, and the real focus of the story is his inability to live in this country. He is the old man and the modern world is the country that has no place for him. He is, or at least thinks of himself as, a man from an older time, and as such he cannot adjust to way the world has changed. The crucial change that makes this country unbearable for him is the loss of anything permanent beyond this world he can hang on to. Just as the narrator of Yeats’s poem laments that the younger generation “neglect Monuments of unageing intellect” (in the form of art and poetry), Bell is inconsolable because, as he tells his uncle Ellis, God never came into his life. As the town sheriff, Bell is responsible for maintaining law and order, but without the support of God or something beyond this world, that order seems to him hollow and futile.

In the prologue to *Blood Simple*, the narrator says that, “The world is full of complainers. But the fact is, nothing comes with a guarantee. I don’t care if you’re the Pope of Rome, President of the United States, or even Man of the Year, something can always go wrong.” Bell still hopes for guarantees, and, without any, he quits. Bell tells us, as *No Country for Old Men* opens, that he always compares himself to the old timers he loves to hear about, and wonders how they would have reacted to his own time, implying that they had something more solid on which to rely and did not face the kind of disorder he does. Some of these old timers, including the “younger” Jim Scarborough never even carried a gun, and judging by Bell’s lack of interest in technology (unlike Chigurh or Moss), he seems to wish he had lived in these simpler times as well. But while Bell may well be facing something new with the wave of drug crime coming from Mexico in 1980, Bell’s uncle reminds him that many of the old-timers he admires died violently and young. This is no doubt partly why he admires them. The country has always been hard on people, and it has always been a place in which

only the young can really live. The old timers didn't think of themselves as living in olden times, and living on the frontier could grind just as heavily on previous generations as it does on Bell.

Death does not frighten Bell as much as meeting something he doesn't understand. In the last line of the opening monologue, he says, "A man would have to put his soul at hazard, he'd have to say OK, I'll be part of this world." The Coens added this last line, which clarifies what exactly is at stake for Bell. This world has, by the end of the film, become overwhelming and he can no longer bear to face the unexplained chaos that surrounds him. If Bell, who appears to believe in ghosts, had been able to find God he presumably would have had the strength to go on, but because he didn't, and because he could not find the strength inside himself, he withdraws from this world, which he finds more frightening than death.

In particular, Bell wonders how the old timers would have reacted to criminals like Chigurh, and the boy he'd recently sent to the electric chair. What shocked Bell about this boy was that his crime, killing a 14-year-old girl, had not been one of passion (which he would have understood), but something he'd been planning for some time and something he would do again if released. The conscious decision to transgress such a fundamental law with no fear of hell and for no conceivable reason other than self-gratification or, as with Chigurh, a sheer act of will, leaves Bell speechless. Confronting individuals whose autonomy has no relation to the moral order he assumed was a fundamental part of the world causes him to lose faith in every aspect of that order.

As if in search of some sort of comfort or solace after reaching his breaking point, Bell visits his uncle's squalid farm. Ellis is an ex-police officer who is disabled, having been shot in the line of duty (in the novel he's also blind in one eye).⁷ As a young man Ellis seems to have been more daring than Bell, who, as he tells his wife in his first scene in the film, never gets hurt on the job. His youthful fire has mellowed and he's retained a sense of humor; to Bell's surprise he would not have done anything to (presumably chased down and punished) the man who'd shot him if he'd been released from prison. The numerous cats in his home are somewhere between domesticated and wild, and in this regard he has achieved a more subtle understanding than either Chigurh or Moss. He has no regrets and accepts his situation; he has lived a long time, but he is not an old man.

Ellis tells Bell, "I got to say, you're lookin' older," when he enters the room, and without hesitation Bell agrees that he is indeed older. Bell, though, has always been older and we learn in the book that he is, and sees himself as, a coward. In the Second World War he had the chance to stay with the wounded members of his unit and to try to defend them against the advancing Germans. Instead, he fled at nightfall, and though he was awarded a medal for his supposed bravery, his guilt always weighed on him and he became sheriff in part to assuage it.⁸ Llewellyn, who returns at night to help a man he does not know and is nearly killed in the process, stands in sharp contrast to him. When asked why he's quitting, Bell replies that he feels overmatched and says, "I always

figured when I got older, God would sorta come into my life somehow. He didn't. And I don't blame him." This is Bell's admission of defeat. Ellis responds by telling him the story of his uncle Mac's death, which despite his eagerness to hear about the old timers, Bell has never heard. Uncle Mac was gunned down by eight men on horseback for what sounds like no good reason, and as they watched him dying he kept trying to get his shotgun. Bell wants to know when Mac died, but does not want to know the year, but what time of day, and as Ellis says that he died later that night, having been shot in the lung, we begin to suspect that Bell is more afraid of violent death than he'd initially claimed to be. Bell believes that he is facing something unprecedented, but for Ellis, the country has always been hard on people, and what Bell has is nothing new. What Ellis is really trying to tell Bell is that, "You can't stop what's coming." Moss couldn't stop it, and even Chigurh couldn't, and the fact that Bell tries to escape what's coming is, as Ellis says, vanity.

THE ENDING

Moss considers himself retired after finding the money, but he never finds any rest and dies a young man. Bell really does retire, and in the last scene we find him forlorn, idle and under his wife's feet. His dreams are of his father who, like Moss, died a young man.

Bell lost the money his father gave him in town and squandered his potential. While Moss kept the money and fought as hard as he could to keep it, Bell simply lets it go. He will never become one of the old timers who died young and about whom he likes so much to hear, and whose belongings find their way into museums as did his uncle Mac's thumb-buster revolver and badge. One of this film's harder lessons is that a long life is not always the best life, and in trading his money for a comfortable retirement Bell feels a defeat which in the novel he describes as "more bitter to him than death."⁹

In the second dream, which Ed Tom remembers more clearly, his father rides past him in the night carrying fire in a horn (the frontier contrivance of carrying the coals from one campsite to another to make it easier to start a new fire). It is cold and he is in the mountains when his father rides past without saying a word, or even lifting his head. His father carries a blanket, which, like the fire in the horn, is a source of warmth. Ed Tom is cold, but he knows that his father is "goin on ahead, and fixin to make a fire somewhere out there in all that dark and all that cold," and he knows that whenever he gets there, his father will be waiting for him. This should be a hopeful dream, but it leaves Bell shaken. The longing for a warm campfire that our father has made for us in the midst of the barren cold mountains at night is a Texan vision of heaven, and Ed Tom wants more than anything to find his father again and to be warmed by the fire. The dream is a melancholy one, though, in part because his father does not speak to, or even look at him. Instead of staying with his son and building the fire with him, he leaves Ed Tom alone in the night. And rather than arriving at the campfire, Ed Tom wakes up. And he wakes up to his life as a retired old man who could not measure up to his father. The hope for a warm place to rest in the end is only a dream. His father lived in

this world. Ed Tom won't find him again and any hope he had of bringing the fire into the world as his father had has been lost.

The image of carrying fire also appears in McCarthy's *The Road*, which takes place in a post-nuclear war America, where nothing grows and the surviving human beings have devolved to the lowest levels of barbarism. The main characters, a man and his son, often tell each other that they're "carrying the fire" and are also among the few to maintain a sense of human dignity.¹⁰ They have no one else to rely on, and at one point the father refers to his son as a god.¹¹ As in *No Country for Old Men*, it is human beings who carry the human spirit without the support of a transcendent God. For both McCarthy and the Coen brothers this world is all we have and we are in fact on our own.

In "Sailing to Byzantium" the narrator yearns for God's holy fire to bring him some form of immortality and escape from the world of coming into being and passing away. In *No Country for Old Men*, the old God is no longer able to answer these prayers. Both in life and art, there are no more hopes for unaging monuments and no sense that we can be part of something that will persist beyond our lives. This is a bleak outlook, but we are not meant to fall into despair as Ed Tom Bell does, but rather to seek for a new source of strength within ourselves. This is what it means to carry the fire. The hope it represents is hope here on earth. In the face of our solitude, maintaining compassion is the hardest challenge we face.

Moss does not appear to have any belief in a transcendent order, but he does not, on this account, abandon those around him, and though it leads to his downfall it is his true strength. Where Ed Tom loses all faith in goodness when he feels the absence of God, Moss who lives in this world and accepts it as it is, never loses his humanity.

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NOTES

1. W. B. Yeats, "Sailing to Byzantium," in *The New Penguin Book of English Verse*, ed. Paul Keegan (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 892–3.

2. Ibid.

3. Cormac McCarthy, *No Country for Old Men*, hereafter *No Country* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 3–4.

4. Mary P. Nichols, in her discussion of *No Country for Old Men* which appeared previously in *Perspectives on Political Science* sees the film as a subversion of the classic Western genre because its characters "lack the vision and energy to confront the forces that overwhelm them," and thus "undermines the requisites of liberal government and reflection on its pre-conditions and costs" (Mary P. Nichols, "Revisiting Heroism and Community in Contemporary Westerns; *No Country for Old Men* and *3:10 to Yuma*," *Perspectives on Political Science* Vol. 37, no. 4 (Fall 2008): 208). While this is a reasonable argument when the film is seen in the context of the Western and in comparison with *3:10 to Yuma*, I focus on what I take to be the film's central concern: the challenge posed by living in a world with no divine support, or one which is no place for 'old men.' While Nichols sees all of the characters in the film as old men living in a Nietzschean 'end of history,' I view each character as a complex and distinct response to the modern world. Ed Tom is clearly an old man who cannot bear the country's isolation, while Llewellyn is explicitly referred to as a 'young man' in the film and Chigurh, the strictest materialist in the film, believes himself to have mastered the world through his insight that the world is governed by chance alone. These complex and tension-ridden characters defy any simple analogy (as is the case with any true work of art), but I believe, unlike Nichols, there is a positive if harsh lesson to be drawn from them, one that is characteristic of what we could call the Coen Brothers' and McCarthy's brutal humanism.

5. *No Country*, 174–5.

6. *No Country*, 5.

7. *No Country*, 263.

8. *No Country*, 274–9.

9. Ibid., 306.

10. Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), 83, 129, 278.

11. Ibid., 172.

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