

Naturalism, Edith Wharton Review, The Ellen Glasgow Journal of Southern Women Writers, The Oxford Handbook of American Literary Naturalism, and elsewhere.

Counternarrative Possibilities: Virgin Land, Homeland, and Cormac McCarthy's Westerns, by James Dorson. Campus Verlag: Frankfurt/New York, 2016. 360 pp. Paper, \$48.00.

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We live within narratives, whether those narratives are the books we read, the national myths we respond to, or the story oriented constructs by which we create meaning and organize our lives. But authors such as Cormac McCarthy unsettle those dominant narrative forms by presenting alternative structures that open new and liberating ways of perceiving individual events in history and the grand myths that have defined the American imaginary. This is the central claim of James Dorson's rich and compelling *Counternarrative Possibilities: Virgin Land, Homeland, and Cormac McCarthy's Westerns*.

The volume is divided into two main parts with a series of chapters within each, the first dealing with narrative theory and the second the application of that theory to the Western novels of Cormac McCarthy, particularly *Blood Meridian; or, The Evening Redness in the West* (1985), and the Border Trilogy, which includes *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), *The Crossing* (1994), and *Cities of the Plain* (1998). Part I of Dorson's study, "Narratives and Counternarratives," integrates a disparate body of modern and contemporary narrative thought, including but not limited to ideas developed by Hayden White, Jean Francois Lyotard, Theodor Adorno, and Frederick Jameson. In Chapter I, "The Power of Narrative," the assumption is that for the human mind narrative is key to perception and functions as a manner by which we order and mitigate the "shifting phantasmagoria" (20) of sense experience, rendering it comprehensible and even meaningful. Dorson elucidates notions of enclosure and emplotment, the primary structure by which narrative takes shape and provides strength and legitimacy to the act of reading the world and interpreting its significance. But the inevitable and unavoidable force of narrative "does violence to the material world" and in doing so hides its own power in the process (28). Chapter 2, "Counternarrative Possibilities," suggests that narrativity is inherent in the human response to the reality we experience and the process of narrative construction is tremendously complex. Spaces remain for authors such as

McCarthy to provide "counternarratives" that function as natural systems of checks and balances that resist the oppression and misperception common to dominant myths, particularly national and cultural ones. But because of the universality and force of narrative power, these counternarratives must be themselves inherent to the structure of the dominant form, providing alternative ways of perceiving that remain within the confines of story, plot, and the closure that gives it meaning.

After elucidating these ideas and integrating them into an interpretive model, Dorson then goes on to apply them to scholarly texts from the earliest stages of the American Studies project. He pays particular attention, as the book title suggests, to Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (1950). This landmark study proved to be tremendously influential in the development of American Studies as a discrete discipline, and together with other works such as Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (1964) contributed to the development of a grand narrative of American historical conception. Of course, given the history of the West, the colonization by the Spanish and French, as well as the numerous Native American peoples that occupied the region, the land was by no means "Virgin" Land, neither innocent nor pristine. But historical reality does little to counteract the story that served to organize the nation's conception of the past. Particularly important here is the manner in which this narrative serves to unify mythic concepts of "nation" and the very real structures of the "state," particularly through the use of emplotment and closure so central to what came to become the national ideal. But Dorson argues convincingly that our awareness of the relative falsity of these myths does little to counteract them. The act of replacement must be cultivated at the deepest cultural level, since it operates on "different cultural, affective, and political registers" (107). But this transformation is necessary for a new and more ethically tenable social imaginary to emerge.

For Dorson, part of this process of narrative revitalization emerges from the contingencies of history itself, and he points to the manner in which a new narrative emerged in the wake of the 9/11 catastrophe. That alternative myth is that of the "Homeland." This concept is not new in America, as both the metaphor of the Virgin Land and the Homeland are myths that have structured American cultural perception since the end of the Cold War. One signifies innocence, the other a "deep past" (109), but there is an underlying integration of these two story constructs that functions both within the culture at large and in the literature that has served to express and define it. The national narrative centers around movement and an

adherence to place. The American is simultaneously defined through the road stories that have become the subject of countless books and films, and through the commitment to sustaining the home, which manifests itself together with the desire for movement the road narrative implies. Thus the development of national myths in America have been complex and multidimensional, involving a process of tension and integration. These relations have found their ground of play in the American imaginary at large through the various stories that have been produced to give it shape and contour.

Part II, "Cormac McCarthy's Westerns," applies these concepts to both *Blood Meridian* and the three novels of the Border Trilogy. Dorson articulates this application with many layers of argument, blending them effectively. Put simply, McCarthy's challenge to the national myth functions not only (as many critics have noted) at an ideological level, but through the structuring of narrative itself. Though *Blood Meridian* may echo elements of the bildungsroman and the American historical romance, it resists the emplotment and closure so central to achieving the unifying and organizing effect of narrative. In this largely plotless novel, "it is rather the random violence that imposes a repetitive structure on its plot and relentlessly drives it forward" (151). Closure is effectively denied as violence itself drives a series of events that are situational and discrete rather than causal and organized. *Blood Meridian* frustrates any desire for a hermetic national myth, distancing itself even from a revisionist historical myth as it asserts a "revisionist epistemology" (176) through a stylized and even cinematic violence that resists any recognizable concept of the real.

Dorson deals with the Border Trilogy first by acknowledging what has been observed by many scholars and reviewers, that is, a softening of tone and a move away from the violent extremes of *Blood Meridian*. Further, the Border Trilogy largely embraces literary genres such as the Romance and the Western, both of which in their most popular forms have been the primary means by which the national mythology constitutes and reconstitutes itself. The question then becomes this: Has McCarthy essentially sold out to a popular audience and embraced the Cold War American exceptionalism he so thoroughly resisted before? In Dorson's view, the answer is largely no. Instead, the counternarrative possibilities in the Border Trilogy function more subtly and perhaps with more complexity, especially in relation to audience. The processes of ideological displacement and resistance are numerous and complex even in the face of what might appear as an apparent complicity in the master narratives. But perhaps the most noticeable contrast between *Blood Meridian* and *The Border Trilogy* is

the manner in which the Border Trilogy invites identification, sympathy, and pathos that in many ways makes the reader a participant in stories that in the end resist the kind of closure offered by the national narrative.

Counternarrative Possibilities: Virgin Land, Homeland, and Cormac McCarthy's Westerns thus offers a detailed and highly nuanced analysis of what amounts to the political implications of McCarthy's Western novels. While many analyses debate the tension between revisionist and conservative leanings, Dorson demonstrates how a complex revisionism is accomplished through narrative and even aesthetic means. Implicit here is the intricate manner in which theme and form are intimately co-implicated. In this sense, in writing novels about the mythic West, a measured and even structured ambiguity preserves the ideas of complexity and mystery so central to McCarthy's vision. Dorson provides a highly original and distinctive look into the process by which McCarthy engages American history and cultural perception.

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Edith Wharton and Cosmopolitanism, edited by Meredith L. Goldsmith and Emily J. Orlando. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2016. xvii + 280 pp. Cloth, \$79.95.

SHEILA LIMING

Edith Wharton lived to travel. This much is clear from the number of times that she is reported to have crossed the Atlantic Ocean during her lifetime. Editors Meredith L. Goldsmith and Emily J. Orlando, in their new volume *Edith Wharton and Cosmopolitanism*, total Wharton's Atlantic crossings at sixty-six (4), while other Wharton scholars, like Sarah Bird Wright, have previously argued that it was even higher. What all this tallying of Wharton's voyages collectively points to, though, are themes of ambiguous attachment: as an early twentieth-century cosmopolitan figure, Wharton was, as Goldsmith and Orlando explain, "capable of reaching out across difference to those in whom she sensed commonality," but she was also capable of exhibiting levels of "dismay" where otherness and difference might