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## “Immortality Through Tale in *The Crossing*”

By **Evanne Lindley**

### ABSTRACT

This article explores the dichotomy of life and death in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Crossing* through Jacques Derrida’s deconstructive lens. The article traces the novel’s ostensible indications that death is absolute, but highlights passages from the work which suggest shared narratives can challenge and even conquer death’s sting. Ultimately, the article interprets how McCarthy’s text breaks down the dichotomy between life and death and instead suggests that death can be transcended through storytelling.

The second book in Cormac McCarthy’s Border Trilogy, *The Crossing*, tells the story of Billy Parham, a romantic young farmer’s son, and his three crossings into Mexico. His journey there serves as a coming of age initiation fraught with violence, death, and disappointment and yet occasionally redeemed by a scattering of deliverance and beauty. *The Crossing*, like the entire Border Trilogy, follows a Western narrative, though the themes within this second book in particular often seem too mystical for this well known form. While the novel is new – only just published in 1994 - the conversation surrounding it is considerable. It is widely considered the densest and most philosophical of the Border Trilogy, with its emphasis on the role of storytelling and attention to religion - the questioning of God’s benevolence. Critics quickly recognize the novel as a coming of age story or *bildungsroman* and consider it the initiation of a young man into the world through violence and loss.

Many critics have focused on the novel as road narrative. Dianne Luce, the critic who first defined *The Crossing* as a road narrative, writes that while the novel tells a linear story along a journey, classifying it as a road narrative, it also functions within “a matrix of intersecting stories” of which God is the “weaver” (196). Another critic, John Beck, observes that *The Crossing* is full of “strange, abandoned, or lost commentators” who are “perpetually troubling their own ability to testify; that is, to tell what has happened” (211). The purpose of these characters, including most notably the blind man, the priest, and the gypsy, is to comment on the “function and forms of storytelling” (Beck 211). Luce concludes that, as the priest states so

mystically in the novel, the world exists as one large story of which we are all apart that is always continuing. Mark Busby adds to this discourse with his declaration that the world presented in *The Crossing* “is mediated by the power of storytelling to bring order to the chaos of forces in the world” (231). This conclusion seems natural after a close reading of the novel, however it is possible Luce and her contemporaries ignore some of its implications. Death and violence function widely throughout the novel with a resounding finality. If all the world functions as one story in which all are included and always will be included, would not it stand to reason that while one may cease to exist, one’s story goes on? If everyone is essentially a story, can anyone cease to exist? After all, story in literature, and especially in McCarthy, is often given imminence as the only thing that cannot die. If everyone functions within the world’s story, is death then powerless? McCarthy’s prose seem to answer with the impossibility of death’s powerlessness, simply because of its resounding affect on Billy through the wolf, his parents, and Boyd, but there seems to be a contradiction here that might be unraveled. The purpose of this paper is to uncover the limitations of death by calling into question the basic assumptions of society through a deconstruction of the life/death binary code. When explored through the basic tenants of deconstruction, *The Crossing* offers an inconsistency that upsets the hierarchy between life and death and suggests that the two are anything but exclusive.

Deconstruction arose in reaction to structuralism, which seeks to “reconstruct an ‘object’ in such a way as to manifest thereby the rules of functioning of this object” by articulating the “rules of association” of that object (Barthes 489). In other words, structuralism finds meaning by drawing associations between signs. Deconstruction began with the philosopher Jacques Derrida who pointed out the main flaw in the structuralist method: words refer to words infinitely. According to Derrida, the “freeplay” between words and signs never ends, leading to the question: How can one reach a definitive meaning through the association of signs if that association never ends (495)? Derrida argues that while this excess of meaning, in which each word one uses implies far more than one wished to convey, makes language difficult and complicated, it also makes language and meaning more interesting. Removing the need for a “transcendental signifier,” or ultimate authority or center, “extends the domain and the interplay of signification *ad infinitum*” (Derrida 496). The removal of the center allows people to question their society’s norms and assumptions because those norms and assumptions are based

upon truths deconstruction seeks to transform from absolute to imperfect. Norris writes that Deconstruction “is the dismantling of conceptual oppositions, the taking apart of hierarchical systems of thought which can then be *reinscribed* within a different order of textual signification” (19). Deconstruction provides people with a method of questioning what they take for granted as “true,” such as the finality of death, by declaring that society has actually constructed “truth” for them as a means of simplifying the world.

Regardless of its opposition to structuralism, deconstruction uses much of the theory’s terminology to reach its means. Structuralists use binary pairs to reconstruct the simulacrum of the text. Post-structuralists discuss binary pairs as well, but they are skeptical of them. Rather than unquestionably accepting these codes as fundamental truths, they skeptically question them as hierarchical constructions of society. Deconstruction illegitimizes the binary code “by showing how strictly impossible it is to draw a firm line between reality and representation,” or between the two sides of any binary code (Norris 142). The binary code represents what is “taken to be the truth of the world” but which “is in fact a construct that has been imposed and which is contradicted by certain results of the enquiry it founds” (Culler 138). In Cormac McCarthy’s *The Crossing*, one primary binary code functions heavily: that between life and death. The novel is full of violence and hardship centered around the loss of life. Billy loses his parents, his brother, the she-wolf, and ultimately his innocence. Today’s society overwhelmingly accepts life and death as absolutes. The novel would appear to offer the same conclusion. However, “To deconstruct a text is to show how it undermines those very oppositions it builds” (Slivniak 441). The role and explication of story within the novel overturns the construction of life and death as exclusive.

The characters of the novel make crucial and definitive statements about the conclusive nature of death, however, as De Man says, “the text does not practice what it preaches” (569). Billy’s sorrow leads him to believe that “death [is] the condition of existence and life but an emanation thereof” (McCarthy 379). The living grieve deeply for the dead and a sense of loss and mourning for what is gone and cannot return defines the entire novel. Guillemin defines this sense of melancholy as “being insistent in its grief over a loss that can neither be remembered nor forgotten” (95). He argues that

[W]ith its tales, parables, dreams, and general melancholia of past things remembered, [The Crossing] seems to presuppose death as the semantic structuring principle par excellence. Stories are grounded in death insofar as their dynamic remembrance bases itself on the static, no longer dynamic, image of their subject as perceived in moments past. (102)

Undoubtedly, the structure of the novel points strongly towards this conclusion. Each of Billy's crossings into Mexico ends in death. He first departs to return the wolf to the Mexican mountains, but instead must mercifully shoot her to rescue her from the debasement of death in a dogfight (McCarthy 123). His second crossing begins with the death of his parents, and ends with the loss of his brother, whose grave he finds in his third crossing (McCarthy 167, 390). This repetitive pattern throughout the novel seems to establish the themes of foiled goals and the world as a place ruled ultimately by death. The novel even declares, "[T]here is no order in the world save that which death has put there" (McCarthy 45). However, "texts can be shown simultaneously to affirm and to undermine," two things *The Crossing* certainly does not fail to do concerning the finality of death over life.

Binary codes create a hierarchical relationship between the terms they refer to, in this case, life and death. The first term, life, has a positive connotation, while the second, death has a negative connotation. This relationship creates one kind of hierarchy between life and death. However, that does not imply that life is more powerful than death. Life may be preferred, but presumably, the world is "ordered" in such a way that death maintains the final word, giving it power and authority over life. Such are the assumptions of the novel and of society, a deconstruction of which overturns humanity's assumption of this philosophical edifice.

In the final section of the book, Billy and Quijada, a Yaqui Indian, discuss death and story, concluding that "Where two men meet one of two things can occur and nothing else. In one case a lie is born [the story] and in the other death... It sounds like death is the truth" (McCarthy 386). Importantly, the Yaqui situates story opposite death in this assertion, whether it lies or not. Notice the significance of the word *sounds*, showing Quijada's lack of confidence in his statement. Here, a new binary code between story/death threatens the construction of the binary

code of life/death. However, this conversation brings up another important binary pair between truth/lie. In questioning this second binary code, the question arises: can stories lie?

In his book *Illumination*, Walter Benjamin draws an imperative relationship between death and storytelling. He writes that "Death is the sanction of everything the storyteller can tell. [The storyteller] borrow[s] his authority from death" (Benjamin 7). Certainly, this is the case in *The Crossing*. Those who tell their stories do so in the face of death, in opposition to death, and in answer to death. It is because they will die and require a remembrance of them to live on that they tell their stories to begin with. Benjamin explains this concept:

A man's knowledge or wisdom, but above all his real life—and this is the stuff that stories are made of—first assumes transmissible form at the moment of his death. Just as a sequence of images is set in motion inside a man as his life comes to an end—unfolding the views of himself under which he has encountered himself without being aware of it—suddenly in his expressions and looks the unforgettable emerges and imparts to everything that concerned him that authority which even the poorest wretch in dying possesses for the living around him. This authority is at the very source of the story.  
(Benjamin 7)

Storytelling, according to Benjamin, receives its inspiration from the certainty of death as a final means of transcending the end of life through remembrance.

In the second section of the novel, an important character, the heretic, imparts his story to Billy while at the same time explaining the role and importance of story to the world. He begins, "For this world also which seems to us a thing of stone and flower and blood is not a thing at all but is a tale" (McCarthy 143). Notice the unavoidable description of the tale as *not* like flower, which dies, or blood, the loss of which brings about death. He continues, "And all in it is a tale and each tale the sum of all lesser tales and yet these also are the selfsame tale and contain as well all else within them... Of the telling there is no end" (McCarthy 143). If story connects all humanity into one tale which cannot end, which cannot die, then death becomes impossible. The function of the storyteller is to combine his experience with the rest of the worlds. Benjamin writes,

Seen in this way, the storyteller joins the ranks of the teachers and sages. For it is granted to him to reach back to a whole lifetime (a life, incidentally, that comprises not only his

own experience but no little of the experience of others; what the storyteller knows from hearsay is added to his own. (Benjamin 14).

By adding his story to the story of the world, “the experience of others,” the storyteller creates a never-ending legacy. People live on through story.

Billy’s heroic brother, Boyd, serves as a perfect example of the impossibility of death through story. After his death, Billy grieves for Boyd, searches for him, and finds him first in story before he finds him, or at least his body, in the flesh. His tale tells the story “of the solitary man who is all men” (McCarthy 386). Men toast his tale as “the memory of all just men in the world for as it was sung in the corrido theirs was a bloodfilled road and the deeds of their lives were writ in that blood which was the world’s heart’s blood” (McCarthy 375). Boyd’s tale is the same as men who came before him and men who will come after him. Blood loss and death define the stories of these men, but immortality overcomes their fatality through their legacy. These men, they are all “the selfsame tale” (McCarthy 143). Storytelling functions simply here: “all that [is] seen [is] told and all that [is] told remembered” (McCarthy 192). Through each other and through the reverence, the songs, and the stories of those they leave behind, these men live on.

Like the Yaqui Indian, the gypsy also seems to contradict the power of story over death. The gypsy begins,

The witness [cannot] survive the witnessing. In the world that [comes] to be that which prevail[s] [can] never speak for that which perished but [can] only parade its own arrogance. It pretend[s] symbol and summation of the vanished world but was neither. [...] [I]n any case the past was little more than a dream and its force in the world greatly exaggerated. For the world was made new each day and it was only men’s clinging to its vanished husks that could make of that world one husk more. (McCarthy 411)

Whose witnessing does the reader believe then, the heretic’s or the gypsy’s? The heretic says all the world is tale, and the gypsy undermines the power of story as insignificant, or seems to. The gypsy speaks of the two sides of the coin of death, for certainly our stories lie. “Memories dim with age. There is no repository for our images. The loved ones who visit us in our dream are strangers” (McCarthy 411). The gypsy dashes any hopes that death does not exist or of the perfection of memory and tale to resurrect. However,

In [the gypsy's] opinion it was imprudent to suppose that the dead have no power to act in the world, for their power is great and their influence often most weighty with just those who suspect it least. He said that what men do not understand is that what the dead have quit is itself no world but that the world cannot be quit for it is eternal in whatever form as are all things within it. (McCarthy 413)

The world, which is the story, according to the heretic, is eternal, and man, who lives within the world, or more importantly, within the story, receives immortality as an extension of the world.

If memories, dreams, and stories fade and vanish, are they lies? Do stories lie? If the world and the story exist as the same being and the entire world, all of humanity, exist foremost as story, then stories never lie even while they do not tell the truth; they simply exist. Those who sing Boyd's song do not question the accuracy of the events. The beauty of the song, the way it makes them smile and makes them cry, prevents them from questioning its truthfulness. The accuracy of the story, of the world, does not matter; the honesty of it does. As Charles Bailey wrote, "For McCarthy, the 'real' story does not matter, for it has no witness; the 'true' story matters desperately because it implies the 'really true' story, which must always lie beyond human power to know or to tell," but which can always be felt (Bailey 64). Death may still be the "truth." After all, no one can deny the bag of bones and leathery skin that Boyd becomes, but the story and the people of the world, carry his spirit. The gypsy reminds the reader of the imperfections of memory and storytelling, but cannot deny the widow who tells Billy that her daughter "live[s] within her soul" (McCarthy 367). Story serves as the heart of the earth where each person lives, even after death. Not only do people live on, but the past as a haven of nostalgia lives on as well. In this way, *The Crossing* serves as "a celebration for the great hearts of those who live alienated within 'the world [grown] cold' and who mourn or honor the passing of the wolves, the Indian, the cowboy," as many of those who remember do (Luce 164). Always, the world is in a state of vanishing, of death, but it is also constantly in a state of remembrance, of story.

This view of tale as providing immortality upsets the hierarchy of death and life. Story has the power to grant immortality so that in death, which functions purely biologically in this case, a person is greater than they were in life. However, this paper does not seek to declare either that



life has authority over death or vice versa. Norris clarifies that deconstruction's purpose lies in nullifying the notion that "meaning can always be grasped in the form of some proper, self identical concept," such as the declaration that life or death reigns supreme (19). He clarifies this purpose by writing, "Deconstruction should not be content simply to *invert* certain cardinal oppositions so as to leave the 'inferior' term henceforth firmly established on top. For this is nothing more than a notional gesture, a reversal that leaves the opposition still very much in place without beginning to shift the conceptual ground wherein its foundations are securely laid" (Norris 23-24). Death still has the power to end life, because people cease to exist. "There's no such thing as life without bloodshed," without death (McCarthy 31). However, story has the power to remember the dead, granting them the power to affect the living, the world, and the story, in their death. *The Crossing* constantly contradicts itself in regards to life and death because in reality life and death do the same. A deconstruction of the construction of life/death in *The Crossing* concludes without concluding because death and life exist simultaneously and persist constantly in a power struggle that is never resolved.

In "The Storyteller," Benjamin expresses his concern that "the art of storytelling is coming to an end." He explains: "Less and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly. More and more often there is embarrassment all around when the wish to hear a story is expressed. It is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences" (Benjamin 1). This anxiety represents a real and formidable threat to human legacy. By not sharing our experience, by not sharing in the tradition of storytelling, society puts the world itself, as it is composed of story, at danger. Human beings live within a matrix of stories, in which individual's stories cross, intersect, combine, and become one, as Boyd's story became one with those who came before him and those who will follow him. Storytelling connects us to each other, to the past, and to the future. Through storytelling, as Benjamin explains, we can be confident in our legacy. The tale provides council between the entire matrix of humanity. If story vanishes, who will carry on our legacy? Who will remember us? This deconstruction adds significant magnitude to the tradition of storytelling for it implies that if man allows the practice of storytelling to die, the power struggle between death and life will cease, and man will die alongside it.

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