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# Cormac McCarthy's *The Stonemason* and the Ethic of Craftsmanship

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- 1 As critics have noted, craftsmanship and work are pivotal themes in Cormac McCarthy's works. Jay Ellis goes as far as claiming that "manual labor is one of the very few human activities to receive a consistent respect in McCarthy's novels" (59). Not only does McCarthy show a passionate interest in describing in detail all sorts of crafts in his novels, but he also endows these representations with further meanings. On the one hand, as shown by Robert Brinkmeyer, McCarthy's representation of craftsmanship also entails a "moral dimension," since "in a world otherwise given to violence and mayhem," the "craftsman hero" (60) embodied by some of McCarthy's most positive characters represents an ethical model. On the other hand, the representations of work in McCarthy can easily be read as a means to allegorically posit philosophical questions of great import, as James Christie has suggested in his Heideggerian reading of *Blood Meridian* (1985), interpreting the philosophy of work in the novel as based on "work configured as the melancholy, transitive pursuit of a continually receding identity between human subjectivity and the nonhuman world" (57). Moreover, both these aspects are projected on a metapoetic level, as McCarthy's interest in craft is reflected onto his own much-noted "crafted" style: his passion for the craft of others, and the underlying values and philosophical insights, corresponds to his own commitment to the craft of writing.
- 2 *The Stonemason* (1995), McCarthy's first published play, is the work in which these themes are addressed in the most straightforward way.<sup>1</sup> It stages a period in the life of a household of African American stonemasons from Louisville, Kentucky, in the early 1970s. The young Ben struggles to preserve the stonemasonry skills and experience of his 101-year-old grandfather, Papaw, and he sees such preservation not only as a professional vocation, but also as a form of ethical imperative. Indeed, no other McCarthian character embodies the idea of the "craftsman hero" described by Brinkmeyer better than Papaw. At the same time, throughout the play the theme of craftsmanship is constantly connected allegorically to eminent philosophical and religious issues.

- 3 However, *The Stonemason* is not merely a paean to craft. Ben's attempt to preserve Papaw's craftsmanship and the values it represents is opposed, on the one hand, to his father Big Ben's decision to leave tradition behind and become the manager of a modern construction company, and on the other, to his nephew Soldier's slackness and drift towards criminality. Ben struggles to hold his family together but his effort eventually fails and, even though driven by the best of intentions, he is actually the unwitting cause of this failure.
- 4 *The Stonemason* is a sustained reflection on how the craft of the stonemason, as an almost archetypal symbol of true craft as opposed to mere work, can be seen as the embodiment of the most profound human values. In this sense, the text seems to revive the praise of craft of Victorian thinkers such as Thomas Carlyle or William Morris. However, McCarthy's reflection on craft is much more complicated, more modern, and less rhetorical than the one offered by these writers. In McCarthy craft is not only exalted, but also problematized. Papaw is certainly the "craftsman hero," but his nephew Ben, the protagonist of the play, is not, as his unwitting complicity in the family's falling apart suggests. Papaw, like all heroes—to use Brinkmeyer's category—represents an ideal, while Ben has to face reality and put his values to the test against it. On the one hand craft is represented as the quintessential value, on the other it is measured against the sublunar world in which values have to be constantly renegotiated in order to be useful. It is by means of the dialectic tension between the ideal of the "craftsman hero" and the attempt to live up to it in reality that one can make sense of McCarthy's ethic of craft, which is much more problematic than it might at first appear.
- 5 In this essay, I intend to analyze how the tension between the ethical ideal of craftsmanship, represented by Papaw, and its difficult conversion into reality as faced by Ben traverses *The Stonemason* through three distinct if intertwined levels. First is the individual level, at which craft is featured as Ben's personal experience of learning from Papaw how to lay stone upon stone as he struggles to hold his family together. Second is the social level: stonemasonry is but one element of the economic system, which is the battlefield for the struggle between the effort of the oppressed to improve their position and the ever-renewing ways in which the oppressors defend and exercise their power. Finally, there is the symbolic-mythical level: here stonemasonry is seen as the archetypal craft embodying a view of the world as the product of God's making and as the representation of the relation between humanity and reality. It is in the tension between the ideal and the reality of craftsmanship as it crosses these three dimensions that, I claim, one can appreciate the full scope and complexity of McCarthy's ethic of craft.

## 1. "Where are the others?" The Limits of the Ethic of Craft

- 6 Even though widely used, the concept of craftsmanship can be more slippery and difficult to define than it might at first appear. Richard Sennett in his seminal book *The Craftsman* (2008) defines craftsmanship simply as "the skill of making things well" (8), and claims that craftsmanship does not merely apply to a certain set of practical jobs, but encompasses a larger set of human activities: "Craftsmanship cuts a far wider swath than skilled manual labor; it serves the computer programmer, the doctor, and the artist;

parenthood improves when it is practiced as a skilled craft, as does citizenship" (9). Brinkmeyer moves in Sennett's wake in defining craft as "meaningful work" and craftsmen as "simply those who do the best job they can, devoted to the demands and rituals of their professions" (59). As one can see these definitions are based on two converging aspects: on the one hand craftsmanship requires skill, the actual ability of making or doing things efficiently, on the other it implies a characteristic attitude of care, passion, and commitment.

- 7 The former dimension, the skill of craftsmanship, is not a merely technical aspect but a form of practical intelligence, an excellent ability in problem finding and problem solving within a specific field of expertise, and a distinctive dexterity in handling the objects of one's work, whether physical or not. As Mike Rose shows in his book *The Mind at Work* (2004), craftsmanship blurs the boundaries between thinking and doing, the mind and the hand, as the intellectual competence of the craftsman is expressed in the factual performance, and the practical activity is in itself a form of thinking as problem solving skills are constantly required. As the main character in *The Stonemason* claims in reference to his craft, "the calculations necessary to the right placement of stone are not performed in the mind but in the blood. They are like those vestibular reckonings performed in the inner ear for standing upright" (66).
- 8 The latter aspect has to do with the attitude with which these actions are performed. In Sennett's words, the craft of the craftsman expresses "an enduring, basic human impulse, the desire to do a job well for its own sake" (9). The craftsman's care for his work stems from his or her belief that there is some sort of higher value contained in a job well done, regardless of the reward one can get from it. In other words, craftsmen are committed to their work *qua* work, they see it as an end rather than as a means, as a value in itself; they are "devoted to the demands and rituals of their professions" (Brinkmeyer 59) as they see them as ethical principles rather than just checklists and protocols. From the craftsmen's devotion for their work comes their focus on and their love for the object of their work, the immersion in their activity described by W. H. Auden in his poem "Sext" from *Horae Canonicae* (1949-1955): they "wear the same rapt expression, / Forgetting themselves in a function. / How beautiful it is, / That eye-on-the-object look" (631).
- 9 In *The Stonemason* Papaw plays the role of the quintessential craftsman. He is a skilled worker who, by means of dedication and passionate commitment, has reached a rare excellence in his field. Even decades after he has built it, his nephew Ben can still identify the work of his hands as he travels through the region (8). However, it is not merely technical perfection he embodies, but also a worldview, a set of values, and an attitude towards life. By means of his work he has reached a superior wisdom which could not otherwise be attained. As Ben's wife Maven tells him, he is convinced that Papaw's "opinions are valuable because he's worked all his life. Isn't that a pretty romantic notion?" 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" (58). As Sennett and Rose prove, thinking and making go hand in hand in craftsmanship, which is a form of practical wisdom which can be applied to life in general and not just to the field in question.
- 10 This also entails that the knowledge embedded in the craft can only be reached through the craft itself and not by any intellectual, formalized knowledge that can be printed in books. Accordingly, Papaw claims that "the work is everything, and whatever is learned is learned in the doing" (65) and that "you couldn't learn [the craft] 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 craftsman is a link in a chain of traditional wisdom, which is handed down from generation to generation. Having realized this, Ben decides to model his own life after his grandfather's in order to bridge the gap created by his father's different choice and not lose his Papaw's wisdom: he drops out of college to learn the trade by working alongside his grandfather and trying to soak in all his experience before it is irredeemably lost. In this context one can understand Ben's and Papaw's criticisms of Freemasons, who aspire to obtain the mason's wisdom through symbolic gestures and learned studies rather than by meddling with stone and mortar: "if it is true that laying stone can teach you reverence of God and tolerance of your neighbor and love for your family is it also true that this knowledge is instilled in you through the work and not through any contemplation of the work" (65).

- 11 Opposed to Ben's veneration for Papaw's craftsmanship is his father Big Ben's decision to leave stonemasonry and move on to concrete. His job stands opposed to Papaw's as mere work does to craft. Instead of being an end in itself, Big Ben's mechanized work is rather a means to earn enough money to be able to sport his expensive jewels and his Cadillac: "he worked for it," Ben warns Soldier, but Big Ben does not show any genuine interest or passion for the job. Moreover, as a break from the family generations-old tradition of stonemasonry, it signals a break from the groundedness in the history of the family and of its place (Brinkmeyer 63). It does not require any form of problem solving skill, it is mere "mindless work," Ben says (*Stonemason* 20). Most importantly, while the description of the stonemason's craft extends across much of the play the only two mentions to this other kind of work define it merely in quantitative rather than qualitative terms: Ben lays the impressive number of "seven hundred and eighty two" blocks for his father and "gives" him "forty hours" per week (43). Moreover, Big Ben's bossy, rough, moody character starkly contrasts Papaw's and Ben's self-control and optimistic view, thus further highlighting the opposition between craft, which brings "truth and justice and peace of mind," and mere work.
- 12 Soldier, in turn, is opposed to both craft and work, refusing the "ethic of craft" embodied by his great-grandfather as well as the lure of modern industrial work and opts for becoming a criminal. One could argue that being a drug dealer is also a form of work, but what counts here is the symbolic dimension: Soldier does what he does not because of any interest in the products of his effort, nor for any sort of social advantage it can give him, but simply to get the money he needs to continue slacking, so that he is glad to "earn" it from Ben by simply keeping away from his mother.
- 13 However, as said above, McCarthy's ethic of craft is much more complicated than these simple oppositions might suggest. The reader of *The Stonemason* should not forget that one can only see Papaw, even though he is supposed to be on the stage, through Ben's eyes, as part of his recollections of a "completed past." Accordingly, Papaw is not just a character among others, but also a figure embodying the ideal virtues of craft after which Ben wants to model his own life. However, in his struggle to follow in his footsteps, does he actually manage to translate Papaw's ethic of craft into reality? The answer can only be in the negative: Ben represents rather a misunderstanding of such an ethic which leads him to make the wrong decisions, thus becoming the unwitting cause of the tragedy of the family, as his own sense of guilt testifies. Even though he knows that he could not have saved his father's company, he regrets not having attempted to do so. More importantly, Ben's decision to offer money to Soldier to keep him away from his sister so

that she can start a new life is morally questionable and ends in disaster. The symbolic connection between Ben's doubtful moral decision and the issue of craftsmanship is made explicit in a passage in which Ben talks about a dream he had.

In my dream I had died or the world had ended and I stood waiting before the door of some ultimate justice which I knew would open to me. I stood with my job-book beneath my arm in which were logged the hours and the days and the years and wherein was ledgered down each sack of mortar and each perch of stone and I stood alone in that whitened forecourt beyond which waited the God of all being and I stood in the full folly of my own righteousness and I took the book from under my arm and I thumbed it through a final time as if to reassure myself and when I did I saw the pages were yellowed and crumbling and the ink faded and the accounts no longer clear and I thought to myself fool fool fool do you not see what will be asked of you?... Where are the others? Where are the others. Oh I've had time in abundance to reflect upon that terrible question. Because we cannot save ourselves unless we save all ourselves. (112-3)

- 14 Ben's high view of his work and of the moral lesson it is supposed to contain have made him too proud. Pride is the hidden risk of the craftsman hero as embodied not by Papaw, but by Ben. Ben had claimed that "You cant separate wisdom from the common experience and the common experience is just what the worker has in great plenty," but this wisdom is not enough (58). "Common experience" needs to be integrated with "experience in common," with sympathy towards the rest of humanity, craftsmen and non-craftsmen alike. Ben himself has to admit this after Maven—whose role as loving critic of Ben is pivotal in the play, and should be highlighted—has asked him why, if work brings wisdom, "arent more workers wise?"; to which Ben replies: "I guess for the same reason that more college professors arent wise. Thinking's rare among all classes. But a laborer who thinks, well, his thought seems more likely to be tempered with humanity. He's more inclined to tolerance. He knows that what is valuable in life is life" (58). Ben is so convinced of being right that he forgets what he himself had advocated, tolerance and the awareness that all life, including Soldier's, is valuable *per se*, as he could have realized had he been more sympathetic towards his sister. Tolerance entails the awareness that others might not be as skilled and as passionate as one is, but that gives no right to decide for them, as well as the fact that hiding a problem is not enough to overcome it. The highest moral insight of the craftsman is to realize that not everybody can be a craftsman, and that even the wisest craftsman can at times be wrong or, more often, simply impotent when faced with the events of life. Ben is repeatedly warned against the conceit of believing he knows and is in control of everything by Maven, by Soldier ("I see you ain't changed. Still know everthing"), by Jeffrey ("You don't know shit, man"), and most significantly by his sister Carlotta, Soldier's mother. After his flight Ben tries to comfort her: "Nothing's happened. I promise," to which she replies "You cant promise. You think you can fix everything. You cant" (60). Ben is later forced to admit that "Carlotta was right. I think I can fix everything" (85). Not being willing to accept one's limits and pretending to be able to always fix things might result in making things worse, as Ben will experience on his own skin.

## 2. *The Stonemason's* "labor theory of value"

- 15 As is often the case with McCarthy's works, *The Stonemason* is set in and represents a period of historic transition and crisis in American history.<sup>2</sup> The story takes place shortly after the Civil Rights Act was passed, one of the most momentous events in recent

national history. The relevance of this aspect is highlighted by another significant year referred to in the play. As can be easily inferred, Papaw was born in 1870, the first of his family to have been born formally free and protected by the Reconstruction Amendments. The decision to have the age of this character stretch precisely over this span of time is a clear invitation to read the story *also* as a meditation on the history of African American submission and marginalization after the end of slavery (see Brewer). The Telfair family dynamics are modeled to depict the social dynamics of the time: Papaw represents the older generation coming from a full experience of segregation; Big Ben represents the attempt to break free from the past after the Civil Rights Movement victories (and the subsequent frustration in realizing that oppression was not over yet); Ben and Maven represent the younger generation profiting from the access to what had been up to then a white-dominated higher education while at the same time reconstructing a valuable link with the past which had been often too starkly severed; and Soldier represents the drug-related crime wave afflicting black communities during the late 1960s and early 1970s and the tensions it created within them.<sup>3</sup>

- 16 By setting the story against the backdrop of this larger dramatic change, McCarthy reproduces the tension between the idealization of the ethic of craft and its problematic actualization, projecting it from the individual level onto the social level. Papaw's—and as a consequence Ben's—belief in the positive value of work is so radical that in a way it even compensates for, or at least helps withstand, the injustice of oppression and marginalization. The theme is introduced by an episode Papaw relates about how he refused to join his colleagues who had decided to demolish a house they themselves had built as a retaliation for not having been paid for their work. Papaw refuses to do so not only because it would be useless (“It didn’t benefit nobody” [28]), but also because it would drain their work of its meaning:

The 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 to 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. (30)

- 17 In a parodic variation of John Locke’s—or, as Nicholas Monk has it, Adam Smith’s (71)—thesis that derives ownership from labor, Papaw elaborates on the theory of craft by taking it to its extreme consequences. If craftsmanship essentially means giving value to work in itself, then this value is independent from who actually benefits from the results of the work. Ben further elaborates on his grandfather’s “labor theory of value” observing that “to whatever extent the look and the shape of the world is the work of the mason then that work exists outside of the claims of workers and landholders alike” (31). The value and dignity of the time of the craftsman’s work is independent from the social condition in which it is conducted. Accordingly, the practical wisdom attained through work can in a way compensate for oppression and marginalization. “We knew it was a thing that if we had it they could not take from us”—says Papaw about the stonemason’s craft—“and it would stand by us and not fail us. Not ever fail us” (33).
- 18 Ben radicalizes Papaw’s view by referring to Hegel: “Reading Marx in my last year of school only sent me to Hegel and there I found 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). In the long run, Ben believes that thanks to the empowering effects of craftsmanship, the marginalized workers manage to elevate their conditions and overturn the relation of power with their employers.

Oppression is destined to wane, claims Ben quoting a famous motto attributed to Theodor Parker and repeatedly used by Martin Luther King in his speeches: “the arc of the moral universe is indeed long but it does bend towards justice” (32).

- 19 However, Ben's ideals—inspired by Papaw—once again do not translate this easily into reality. Rather than a gradual process towards greater justice the story of the Telfair family seems to testify to the tendency of the system of oppression to resist change by reproducing itself in indirect ways. Papaw is the first of the family to have been born free from slavery, but he lives his whole century-long life oppressed by racial marginalization. Big Ben can formally enjoy the protection of the Civil Rights Act, but his company has to face an unfairly biased market which forces “black contractors [to] underbid the jobs” (81). Soldier could follow Ben's path but is faced with a problematic family situation and exposed to the temptations of drugs and bad company. In short, the world might be proceeding towards justice and melioration, but each step has its risks of fallbacks. “Law can only work in a just society,” says Ben quoting Papaw, but since a completely just society never seems to be attained, the law in itself is not enough to guarantee equality.
- 20 Just as in the previous paragraph, where stonemasonry was opposed to the cement construction promoted by Big Ben, here it is opposed to hewn stonemasonry. Papaw refuses to accept the invitation of laying the cornerstone of a bank in spite of the pressing invitation of the Vice President himself, because “I aint never laid a block of hewn stone in my life and I never will. You go against the scripture you on your own” (63). The reference is, as Ben points out, to Exodus 20:25, “if you make me an altar of stone thou shalt not build it of hewn stone, for if thou lift up thy tool upon it thou hast polluted it,” but the reason why cut stone is polluted has very much to do with American history.

All trades have their origin in the domestic and their corruption in the state. Freestone masonry is the work of the free men while sawing stone is the work of slaves and of course it is just those works of antiquity most admired in the history books that require nothing but time and slavery for their completion. It is a priestridden stonecraft, whether in Egypt or Peru. Or Louisville Kentucky.... The Semitic God was a god of the common man and that is why he'll have no hewn stones to his altar. He'll have no hewing of stone because he'll have no slavery. (*Stonemason* 65)

- 21 In the large scale of hewn stone buildings such as pyramids or ziggurats, the individuality of the stonemason is crushed. It is only in the small scale of domestic buildings that the craftsman can be a real craftsman and not a mere instrument in the hands of a controlling power. Even when slavery is abolished, as Papaw's refusal suggests, control can take shape indirectly by means of economic oppression and social marginalization. The bank which Papaw refuses to lay the first stone of, for example, might be the same that later takes the Telfair's family house when Big Ben does not manage pay back his debt. Each step is tentative, and each progress, after having been conquered, has to be defended. The tension between the belief in social progress and the awareness of the risks of constant fallbacks corresponds, on this second level, to the faith in the values of craftsmanship and the awareness that these have to be measured against an ever changing reality.

### 3. From the Great Architect to the Gnostic Demiurge

- 22 On top of being set in the pivotal historical moment following the passing of the Civil Rights Act, *The Stonemason* is set against the backdrop of a much larger, more momentous

transformation, in which traditional stonemasonry fades in favor of the use of concrete. As McCarthy said in the famous Woodward interview, "Stacking up stones is the oldest trade there is. Not even prostitution can come close to its antiquity. It's older than anything. Older than fire. And in the last 50 years, with hydraulic cement, it's vanishing. I find that rather interesting."<sup>4</sup> The setting of the play in correspondence to the epochal change in construction technology from stone to concrete thus projects the tension highlighted between the ideal value of craft and its difficult transformation into reality on a larger scale. In this case the tension is embodied by the opposition between two complementary cosmological views, both based on the image of God as craftsman.

23 The first of these views is the Freemason-like idea of God as the Great Architect who has "built" the world and who benevolently presides over it. Stonemasonry, as an imitation of the creative power of God, reproduces divine activity on a lower scale, as Papaw, and Ben in his wake, claim early on in the play: "according to the gospel of the true mason God has laid [the stones] 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" (10). God's activity in the macrocosm is thus ideally reproduced in man's activity in the microcosm. The stonemason therefore brings to completion the divine plan that God has written for humanity and which is supposed to lead to the evolution and growth of man as the subject of history, since "the structure of the world is such as to favor the prosperity of men" (10).

24 In *The Stonemason*, God's ordering presence in the world is physically represented by gravity, which is what holds the world together, and what allows any stonework construction to stand, keeping each stone in place: "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" (10). This is why the plumb bob, together with the square and the hammer, is one of the main elements of Freemasonic symbolism. In one of the most lyrical passages of the play Ben expresses this idea in describing how Papaw breaks his wooden level after having realized by means of a plumb bob that it was not perfectly straight, "not in anger, but only to safeguard the true" (66):

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)

25 Gravity indicates the point of contact between matter and God, the foundation of the edifice of the world which is also the foundation of human life. However, apart from the criticism of the freemasons' tendency to refuse to get their hands dirty with actual craftwork in favor of symbolism, also in this case it seems that McCarthy evokes this system based on such a beautiful symmetry only to later make it problematic. Indeed, the tragedy of the Telfair family, as well as the history of oppression they represent, is proof that the structure of the world is not exactly "such as to favor the prosperity of man." On the contrary, towards the end of the play Ben is forced to admit that he was mistaken since he had thought "by [his] labors to stand outside that true bend of gravity which is the world's pain" (111). The shift between the idea of gravity as the loving hand of God holding the world together and that of gravity as a force bent towards "the world's pain" symbolizes a momentous shift in Ben's metaphysical view. The implicit reference in this

passage—apart from the Einsteinian space-time bend—is to the gnostic worldview that has proved so influential on McCarthy.

- 26 Like the Freemasons, gnostic thought assumes the world is the product of a divine craftsman figure, the Demiurge. The name, taken from Platonic philosophy, means precisely “craftsman,” and it expresses the idea of a form-giving power creating the world out of brute matter. However, while the Great Architect of the Universe of Freemasonic thought is a positive and benign entity, the Gnostic Demiurge is a malevolent god keeping human souls in slave-like bond with the material world by means of what is called the *Heimarmene*, or “Universal Fate.” According to Hans Jonas’s seminal book on the Gnostic worldview—which, as shown by Dianne Luce, has probably had a profound influence on McCarthy (*Reading the World* 70)—this central doctrine of Gnosticism derives from ancient Stoic thought the idea that the world is tightly ordered and structured in a deterministic way: that there is, as it were, a structure of the world based on a strict correspondence between the macrocosm (the movements of the spheres) and the microcosm (human sublunar life). However, while for the Stoics this correspondence was positive, expressing the harmony holding the universe together, gnostic thought turned it upside-down and placed it in a negative light: “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.
- 27 On the one hand there is an idea of the world as built and ruled by a benevolent craftsman, the Great Architect. On the other, there is God as an evil craftsman, the Demiurge, who enjoys the perpetual falling apart of his own creation and the suffering of his creatures. In the former case gravity is seen as the “warp of the world” keeping the “stuff of creation together” and holding up the stone wall. In the latter, gravity is seen as the bent force which eventually makes any wall fall down, symbolizing the one law which is all-comprehensive, inescapable, and that governs everything: the law of ultimate destruction. “Things exist and then exist no more” says Ben at one point. “Trees. Dogs. People. *Will* that namelessness into which we vanish then taste of us?” (*Stonemason* 104)

#### 4. Building and *rebuilding*: Stonemasonry as the Art of Dealing with Ruins

- 28 The opposition between, on the one hand, the naive and optimistic belief that the world is a cosmos heading towards melioration, and on the other the pessimistic conviction that it is trapped in a circle of destruction and decay, reproduces on a metaphysical level the dialectical tension already described on the ethical and social levels. The hope that one can lead a morally flawless life and that a just society can eventually be attained is thus confronted with the disillusion of realizing it is not so.
- 29 However, the awareness that nothing is eternal and perfect, that no wall will stand forever, does not lead to the negation of any value to be found in the attempt to build something lasting. McCarthy does not create a whole philosophy of craft just to later destroy it, letting it thereby sink into meaninglessness. Rather it is in trying to find a

balance between the two poles of the tension between the optimistic and the pessimistic view of what craftsmanship represents on these three levels that McCarthy's effort lies.

- 30 Papaw's embodiment of the role of the craftsman hero makes of him, in Ben's eyes, an ideal model which should not be considered as eternal and absolute. On the contrary, all values have to be constantly renegotiated for the present time. Ben's mistake comes from misunderstanding his grandfather's lesson, making of a certain ideal an absolute value that never needs to be questioned, while in fact it should always remain relative and tentative. This is clearly represented in Ben's closing monologue, as he sees the ghost of Papaw emerging naked from 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. (133)

- 31 This passage can be seen as the dialectical solution of the tension described on all the three analyzed levels. McCarthy shows that in spite of the fact that the universe is bent towards destruction, one can still create moments of resistance, beauty, and justice, even though these are tentative and striving for their own precarious affirmation. In order to do so one cannot appeal to transcendental truths, but must work piecemeal, day by day. "The wisdom of the journeyman is to work one day at a time," says Ben, recalling how "journeyman" comes from the word for "day," "and [Papaw] always said that any job even if it took years was made up of a day's work. Nothing more. Nothing less." Ben admits that this was hard for him to learn since he "always wanted to be finished," but by the end of the play he is forced to learn that nothing is ever finished, nothing is ever perfect (96).
- 32 Papaw knows that, in spite of all his efforts, he is working to build something that is only temporary, and that some things simply cannot be put in order: not only will they remain wrong and unjust forever, but also every attempt at fixing them would end up in more misery. This is the lesson of what in Josyph's view is probably the best part of the play (124). Although Papaw narrates the episode of Uncle Selman, who was killed for futile reasons by a white man who then got away with the murder, he refuses to say the man's name, in order to avoid raising even the slightest temptation of retaliation against that man's family.

BEN What was the man's name?...

PAPAW Well, that's been a long time ago, Benny. Been a long time ago.

BEN But you remember his name....

PAPAW Oh yes. He has children living in this town. Children and grandchildren. Great grandchildren.

BEN What was his name?

PAPAW Well. I guess I'd rather not say it. (52)

- 33 Some things simply cannot be fixed. Most things cannot be fixed. Making the world "in the maelstrom of its undoing" means that ultimately one can only try to arrange what can be arranged in order to make the world less of a "hostile place," a place where even when there is "failure on every side" one still tries to accomplish what one can (119). Stonemasonry is the perfect symbol of this: not because it is the most ancient trade there is, nor because it is the quintessential craft, but because stonemasonry is in its essence the art of dealing with ruins. A stone wall is essentially a composition of pieces collected from the earth or from previous works which have turned into ruins. Even though

assembled into unity, all of its components are always already predisposed to being reassembled in a different way.

- 34 This idea calls to mind a passage of Martin Heidegger's *Bremen Lectures* (1949) in which a somewhat similar view of craftsmanship is presented. Heidegger distinguishes the "production" performed by craftsman from the "positioning" (*das Stellen*) performed by technological mass manufacture.<sup>5</sup> The craftsman produces something which is complete in itself, and whose meaning lies in the relationship between the craftsman, the community he belongs to, and the place he inhabits. On the contrary, serial production deletes this relationship and produces "objects" (as opposed to "things") which are always in a sense mere spares, that is, parts that can be used indifferently to make the larger economic machine maintain its self-sustaining movement:<sup>6</sup>

What the machines put out piece-by-piece they put into the standing reserve of the orderable. That which is put out is a piece of the standing reserve [*Bestand-Stück*].... The piece [*das Stück*] is something other than the part [*der Teil*]. The part shares itself with parts in a whole. It takes part in the whole, belongs to it. The piece on the contrary is separated and indeed, as the piece, is even isolated from the other pieces. It never shares itself with these in a whole.... Even that which we name a machine part is, strictly thought, never a part. Indeed it fits into the gearing, but as an exchangeable piece. My hand, on the contrary, is not a piece of me. I myself am entirely in each gesture of the hand, every single time. (34-35)

- 35 The concrete building is a *Stück*, a product which has no life in itself and is merely in the service of a specific function external to it. Once it no longer serves that function, it has to be disposed of and substituted with a new one. The stonemason craftwork, instead, is made of stones as *Teilen*, parts of a whole which has a life of its own, testifying an experience of the world. The stone wall as a "thing," that is, as the product of craftsmanship seen in its true light (as Heidegger's "jug [which] is a thing insofar as it things" [15]) is not a piece, but rather a whole which brings together, in Heidegger's words, "the united four, earth and sky, divinities and mortals" (16). Translating from Heideggerian jargon, handicrafts express a form of groundedness to a specific place ("earth"); testify a certain experience of nature as a circle of growth and decay corresponding to the movement of the spheres ("sky"); hint at a transcendental dimension which is radically other than all things but which is somehow alluded to in them ("divinities"); and, finally, for being the unique products of unique human beings ("mortals") they remind one of mortality and death as the "shrine of the nothing" (17), the ultimate horizon of sense of everyone's life.
- 36 In Heidegger's view, the value of craftsmanship as opposed to inauthentic "positionality" then includes both the rootedness in the world and the awareness that no world remains unchanged, both the reference to transcendence and the experience of finitude. The balance between these aspects corresponds to the balance in the dialectical tension in McCarthy's representation of stonemasonry as the craft not merely of building, but of rebuilding from ruins. In contrast to a concrete wall, a fallen stone wall can be used as material for a new one, being made of parts (*Teilen*) of a whole which can thus become a new whole. This is what McCarthy did when he built a fireplace for the dairy barn where he was living with Anne DeLisle using "stones salvaged from fellow Knoxville native James Agee's house" (Greenwood 7), an adequate allegory of the "ugly fact" he stated in his famous 1992 interview that "books are made out of books." This is also what Papaw and Ben do to restore the old farmhouse in which Papaw was born to a family of slaves, and where the "Telfairs black and white" (31) are buried. They "pull down old walls that

are about to be bulldozed" (26), and get stones from the ruins scattered around the Kentucky landscape in order to build new walls and a restored house that serves as a symbol of a more just—but never ultimately just—world.

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## NOTES

1. For a detailed reconstruction of the history of the play see Arnold (2000).
2. For example: the end of cowboy culture in *The Border Trilogy*; the aftermath of the Mexican war in *Blood Meridian*; the Prohibition in *The Orchard Keeper*; or the post-apocalyptic world in *The Road*. See Luce (2001).
3. The historical debate about this issue has been lively in recent scholarship. See, for example, MacLean (2006), Muhammad (2010), Alexander (2012), Fortner (2015).
4. The idea also recurs in the play itself: "His craft is the oldest there is. Among man's gifts it is older than fire and in the end he is the final steward, the final custodian" (32).
5. The latter sees the whole of reality as a set of objects to be ordered and manipulated in order to continually increase its own strength. By contrast, the former is the way in which human beings produce unique things that are imbued with meaning and life. Heidegger offers the example of a "carpenter in the village" building a coffin for one of his neighbors as opposed to the "motorized burial industry of the city": "The carpenter produces a table, but also a coffin. What is produced, set here, is not tantamount to the merely finished. What is set here stands in the purview of what concernfully approaches us. It is set here in a nearness. The carpenter in the village does not complete a box for a corpse. The coffin is from the outset placed in a privileged spot of the farmhouse where the dead peasant still lingers. There, a coffin is still called a 'death-tree' [*Totenbaum*]. The death of the deceased flourishes in it. This flourishing determines the house and farmstead, the ones who dwell there, their kin, and the neighborhood. Everything is otherwise in the motorized burial industry of the big city. Here no death-trees are produced" (Heidegger 25).
6. One should not forget that for Heidegger this distinction is not just a matter of historical succession, in which serial production takes the place of craftsmanship. On the contrary, he claims that "long before the end of the eighteenth century, when the first machines were invented and set running in England, positionality, the essence of technology, was already afoot in a concealed manner. This says: the essence of technology already reigned beforehand, so much so that it first of all lit up the region within which the invention of something like power-producing machines could at all be sought out and attempted" (33). Positionality and production are two always-already possible ways—the former authentic, the latter inauthentic—of being-in-the-world, whose relation is of mutual interdependence rather than simple opposition.

Correspondingly, McCarthy's interest in craftsmanship is not just nostalgia for a gone world, but a passionate inquiry about possible modes of authenticity in a constantly changing world.

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## ABSTRACTS

*The Stonemason* (1995), Cormac McCarthy's first published play, is a sustained meditation on the values of the ethic of craft as opposed to mere work, as well as on the difficult application of such values to reality. On the one hand, craft is represented as the quintessential value; on the other, it is measured against the real world in which values have to be constantly renegotiated in order to be useful. In this essay, I analyze how the tension between the ideal of the "craftsman hero," represented by Papaw, and Ben's attempt to live up to it traverses *The Stonemason* through three distinct if intertwined levels. First is the individual level, at which craft is intended as Ben's personal experience of learning from Papaw how to lay stone upon stone as he struggles to hold his family together. Second is the social level: stonemasonry is one element of the economic system which is the battlefield for the struggle between the effort of the oppressed to improve their position and the ever-renewing ways in which the oppressors defend and exercise their power. Finally, there is the symbolic-mythical level: here stonemasonry is seen as the archetypal craft embodying a view of the world as the product of either a benevolent or an evil God. It is in the tension between the ideal and the reality of craftsmanship as it crosses these three dimensions that one can appreciate the full scope and complexity of McCarthy's ethic of craft.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** Cormac McCarthy, *The Stonemason*, craftsmanship, work ethic, labor

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