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Peeping Toms on History :
Barry Hannah's *Never Die*
as Postmodern Western

by Mark S. Graybill

In his thoughtful essay "Home by Way of California: The Southerner as the Last European," Lewis P. Simpson explores what seem to him basic differences between the mind of the South and its western "other." The latter, contends Simpson, has corollaries in the artistic vision of northeasterners—Henry David Thoreau, James Fenimore Cooper, and the "father" of the popular western, Owen Wister—who create fictions in which a hero transcends history amid the pristine, naturally democratic vistas of the American landscape. In contrast, the former extends a tragic European outlook that sees the individual as a creature trapped, the hapless victim of history. Simpson's paradigm has been very influential in southern studies, and one can indeed see how the tragic ethos he identifies informs to grand effect the body of southern writing produced during the fabled Renaissance, a literature acutely concerned with the past in the present (to paraphrase Allen Tate's famous formulation) and the doomed yet heroic efforts to cope with or survive history, not escape it—reflected in Faulkner's famous proclamation in the Nobel speech that humanity will not merely "endure," but "prevail."

Yet this South-versus-West theory tells only part of the story, for the West has, since the early nineteenth century, occupied a special place in the southern imagination. Historian Richard Slotkin notes in particular how southerners have "mythologiz[ed] . . . the Frontier . . . as a new Garden of Eden"; he locates this mythos in a Jeffersonian agrarianism in which the "frontier . . . promises complete felicity, the satisfaction of all demands and the reconciliation of all contradictions" (69–70). No less a canonical

southern text than *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884)—identified by both Tate and Louis D. Rubin as the first modern southern novel—bears out this representation, as Simpson himself tacitly admits. Huck's account shows that life is "satisfying" only when marked by a pastoral plenitude beyond the artificial and hypocritical constraints of southern (read eastern) culture, a realization that ultimately impels him to "light out for the territory" of the western frontier. Twain's story may lack the gunplay of the novels that were already beginning to gain popularity in the 1880s, but in its fusion of the southern pastoral and the unadulterated frontier, it is in many ways the prototypical "western." Its influence continues as contemporary southern fictionists, including Charles Portis, Richard Ford, Ishmael Reed, and Cormac McCarthy, stake out territory west of the Mississippi. The popularity of McCarthy's *The Border Trilogy* confirms most decisively how alluring the West remains for southern writers and readers alike.

Such recent authors, however, offer a more complicated version of the western than does Twain. Whereas the modern (or "proto-modern") *Huckleberry Finn* helped establish the cultural authority of a mythologized West, its successors have done much to question that authority. In this respect, they might be called "postmodern." The western's role as a totalizing construction that organizes history into a coherent, "satisfying" set of patterns that essentialize American identity marks it as an example of what Jean-François Lyotard calls "metanarrative."¹ For Lyotard and other noted theorists, postmodern art exhibits a thoroughgoing "incredulity toward metanarratives" and usually strives to undermine these overarching "stories" from within. Linda Hutcheon has shown that postmodern novels about the West, in particular, exhibit a "contradictory attraction/repulsion to structure and patterns" that uses and abuses the western as a genre, ultimately destabilizing the historical, political, and personal fantasies it tries to fulfill (133). One of the most well-known novels by a southerner to do this is McCarthy's prelude to *The Border Trilogy*, *Blood Meridian* (1985).

This fascinating account of exploitation and violence parodies *Huckleberry Finn* and later westerns. The protagonist, minimalistically named "the kid," lights out for the territory emptied of Huck's moral sensibilities, lacking even the modifier that gives western heroes such as Billy the Kid, the Sundance Kid, and the Cisco Kid their uniqueness. If, as John Cawelti says, the western landscape traditionally "suggest[s] the epic courage and regenerative power of the hero" (40), there is no such symbiotic relationship between character and earth in *Blood Meridian*. Absent also are the civ-

ilizing forces typically found in westerns, for example, wife, schoolmarm, reverend, and sheriff. Moreover, Robert Jarrett has shown how the novel turns inside out the tendency of the “Golden Age western . . . to divide territorial antagonists into allegorical groups of ‘good’ white and ‘bad’ black hats (or white and red skin)” (70). As the novel unfolds, it alternately celebrates, condemns, and ignores the violence typical of westerns. The plot “fail[s] to constitute a pattern, to unveil a mystery or to serve any comprehensible purpose” (Shaviro 147), thus calling into question at every turn the ability of any paradigm to explain either history or the novel itself.

Representative of the entire book is the brilliant, brutal Judge Holden, a philosopher who holds forth continuously on the idea of order in the West and in the world at large, who stresses order’s singular sovereignty as well as its utter provisionality. His presence not only problematizes “the West” as we have come to know it, but reminds us continually “that there are all kinds of orders and systems in our world”—Christianity, pastoralism, capitalism, manifest destiny—“and that we create them all,” a realization that radically “condition[s] their truth value” (Hutcheon 43). Praised by commentators such as John Emil Sepich for its scrupulous attention to historical detail, *Blood Meridian* nevertheless makes it very difficult to find meaning in the past, to locate in it the essential authority of myth. Holden’s sinister dance near the novel’s close, after he has likely murdered the kid in an outhouse, might be a metaphor for the entire novel, a performance that sweeps the reader along with a perverse, carnivalistic energy: “He dances in light and in shadow and he is a great favorite. He never sleeps, the judge. He is dancing, dancing. He says that he will never die” (335). Is Holden good or evil? Is he, in his ultra-rationalism, a product of the Enlightenment, or does his desire for elemental violence make him pre-modern, a throwback to the days of ancient ritual and myth? Was the western frontier fundamentally moral (as countless versions have asked us to believe), immoral, or amoral? *Blood Meridian* proffers the “true” West insofar as it reflects how chaotic a waltz history is, and how limited yet intoxicating human attempts to render it harmoniously are. In its insistence on the raw, overwhelming power of history, the novel bears out Simpson’s notion of a southern world view; in its recognition that the coherent patterns we impose on the past are both inevitable and illusory, it strikes me as postmodern.

Barry Hannah’s *Never Die* (1991) has not, unfortunately, enjoyed the attention generated by *Blood Meridian*, with which it shares some notable features. Hannah has called *Blood Meridian* his “favorite” McCarthy novel,² and his admiration is evident in several ways in *Never Die*. The most

obvious sign, of course, is Hannah's title, almost certainly a direct reference to the repeated phrase in Judge Holden's concluding performance. *Never Die* engages in many of the same subversive pleasures as *Blood Meridian* and exhibits a similar mixture of violence and humor. History and language both take on the quality of a mad dance. As in McCarthy's novel, an important movement in *Never Die's* dance is the subversion of metanarratives such as pastoralism, Christianity, industrial capitalism, and the heroic ethos of the "large-hearted" West. Hannah offers a cast of expatriate southerners, each of whom, having gone west to shape a destiny in the wake of the Civil War, must watch his or her designs fall apart. Those of us familiar with the popular western also watch our expectations of the genre disintegrate. As in *Blood Meridian*, a sense of instability obtains as the story unfolds, and in the end we are left without most of the comforts the western typically offers. Hannah denies us even the grandiosity of high tragedy; violence never delivers a catharsis. One of the book's points is that the sequence of natural events, in all its otherness, continues apace, regardless of our attempts to slow it. But if history will "never die," neither will the human desire to contain it in narrative.

For all it has in common with *Blood Meridian*, though, *Never Die* is a much zanier novel whose parody leads more frequently to peals of laughter than to uncomfortable smiles or snickers. Whereas McCarthy draws upon certain elements of the conventional western and abandons others, Hannah offers up a parodic smorgasbord of characters and scenarios in order, as Hutcheon might say, "to challenge [them] and yet to use them, even to milk them for all they are worth" (133). All the recognizable constituents are there: the small outpost of a town, a place "even the map seem[s] barely interested in" (92); the sheriff charged to keep order; the legendary gunfighter; the schoolmarm and the good-hearted saloon whore; the "civil servants," including a doctor and judge; the villain and his entourage; and the requisite show down between "good guy" and "bad guy." Yet this is all off-center, sometimes radically so. The obligatory action usually does not yield the expected results. The characters, who go by names like Fingo, Edwin Smoot, Kyle Nitburg, and Luther Nix, have a cartoonish quality not unlike what one finds in Thomas Pynchon's fiction. There are no white hats-versus-black hats tableaux; this is another lawless country in which everyone is just as much "bad guy" as "good guy"—including the hero manqué, Fernando—and violent farce, not morality, reigns. As one reviewer approvingly puts it, with its skewed take on western conventions of characterization and plot, *Never Die* reads "like pure burlesque scored for ukulele" (Coates 3).

Not all reviewers agree on the merits of Hannah's approach. Janet Kaye complains that the requisite violence of the western "is unsettling" in this novel "but for all the wrong reasons. The perpetrators are presented as if they were the Marx Brothers doing a combination western parody and slasher film." The real problem, as Kaye sees it, is that the "characters in this novel are undeveloped, and Mr. Hannah's fine, wry insight is wasted when applied to caricatures." She concludes by asking, "when, as in *Never Die*, bad things happen to bad caricatures, who is to care?" (18). If Hannah's supporters in academe disagree with such an assessment, none have said so: to my knowledge, a substantial journal article or book chapter about the novel has yet to appear at this writing.

There has, however, been at least one thorough and compelling article published on the way western conventions are appropriated by postmodern writers generally. While Theo D'haen's "Popular Genre Conventions in Postmodern Fiction: The Case of the Western" appeared several years before *Never Die*, many of its points prove useful in understanding Hannah's postmodern western and help to correct overly reductive readings like Kaye's.³ D'haen suggests that though popular forms like the western are anti-modernist in that they challenge "'high art' . . . as the last metanarrative, the last bastion of the humanist world view" espoused by New Critics T. S. Eliot and F. R. Leavis (163), they nevertheless seek to create a kind of literary and moral "consensus" in society (164), a project that Lyotard would see as basically modernist. Citing Cawelti, D'haen explains how "formula stories," of which the western is a prime example, "serve their audience's needs of escape and relaxation" by "project[ing] 'collective fantasies shared by large groups of people.'" Hence, they "help to maintain a culture's ongoing consensus about the nature of reality and morality" (Cawelti, qtd in D'haen 164). But one important difference between formula stories and "serious" literature, argues D'haen, is that "the formula's frame of reference . . . is primarily 'generic' [rather than] 'mimetic,'" a distinction that "tallies rather well with the Postmodernist idea of the world itself as story," as a network of fictional codes. Postmodern writers including E.L. Doctorow, Richard Brautigan, and Louis Ferron (all of whom D'haen discusses in some detail) exploit popular genres by

turn[ing] the blatant codedness of these formulas upon itself in order to express their distrust/disbelief in all metanarratives: they play havoc with the formulaic conventions to upset, rather than uphold, the very idea that there could be such a thing as a tenable metanarrative, and to reveal literature's complicity in ideology building. (165–166)

While postmodernists employ the various codes upon which the western relies—D’haen mentions just a few, including the conflict between hero and villain, which ends with the former reestablishing order through violence over the admonitions of “an eastern schoolmarm or a heart-of-gold saloon lady or whore madam”—they subvert those codes “to reveal the projective character of these principles by first invoking them, and then negating the conventions evoking them” (166). This is very much Hannah’s tactic in *Never Die*.

Consider, for example, the novel’s “hero,” Fernando Muré. At first, he appears to be precisely what his Spanish-sounding name suggests: a kind of *caballero* who walks the streets in a “fedora [with] his long tan Mexican cigarettes” (5). Fernando is a “mediocre gambler” who nevertheless wins “a fortune” in money and respect when he demonstrates his prowess with a gun after a poker game gone bad. Confronted by “three angry men” with guns,

Fernando sensed what was happening [and] threw over the table, got behind it and received fire. With his left hand around his groin he ducked his head and fired through the table itself, took out the other pistol and did the same. When the smoke cleared, the table was shredded, but he had not suffered a scratch. All three of his adversaries lay dead. (4)

After this, Fernando’s legend grows. Later we learn that around town, “it was rumored that [he] could not only see behind his back but around corners” (87). All pretty standard fare for a western. But almost as soon as Hannah establishes Fernando as a mythical (and typical) desperado, he begins to subvert the role. We are told, for example, that the rival gamblers bore “shotguns loaded for doves,” a small detail that diminishes their ominousness and Fernando’s heroics. The more we learn about this legendary gunslinger, the more quirky and less imposing he seems.

For one thing, he is not a Mexican but an idle, terminally bored New Orleans native with a lisp, a university education, and a severe case of melancholia. In talking about Fernando, Hannah admits he had in mind the stereotypical faded southern aristocrat, a product of a “sad” cultural “incest you see in the delta of Mississippi where big old boys are really just kind of mama’s boys wandering around in the right clothes” with “nothing to assert” (interview). One *can* see Fernando as a parodic, middle-aged Quentin Compson, brooding and hypersensitive. The narrator assures us that he was not always so emotional and ineffectual. We are told how as a young man Fernando “could scheme, plunge through, grapple, pitch”

with the best (23). But as Hannah says, Fernando “knows that he is not a hero.” The character himself claims as much, lamenting the way he has been mythologized: “I didn’t want to be this much Fernando. You know, you start with little things, they grow, pretty soon there’s something grown beside you looks like you” (104). Even the recounted escapades during his early years, when he was a “bad guy,” evoke laughter, not fear or respect. Out one night on the range, a rattler “just came up and bit him on the mouth, and since then, the despised lisp.” On another occasion, he robs a train carrying mail and then sobs “over the letters to loved ones he had deflected” (23). The town’s women secretly wish for him to “assault them like a shovel of passion pushed in the grave of their lusts,” but his sadness is “turning [him] androgynous” (7). Fernando is an alcoholic whose greatest talent might be his ability to make his testicles—comically named Juan and Manuel—dance.

As in the westerns that D’haen discusses, in *Never Die* “the reader is made to reflect on the difference between [this character] and the typical western hero” (D’haen 168). This is especially true when Fernando faces his primary nemesis, Edwin Smoot, who himself does not conform to the conventional image of a western villain. A dwarf likely imported by Hannah from the arguably postmodern TV western *The Wild, Wild West*, the “low man” Smoot lays Fernando low early, not through cunning or physical prowess, but by bashing one of his kneecaps with a baseball bat as a drunk Fernando stumbles through town. Later, as Fernando lies passed out in the office of Doc Fingo—a homosexual who is in love with his patient and gives him a morphine addiction that will plague him throughout the novel—Smoot returns with the bat and cracks his other knee.

Fernando is, of course, outraged at being defeated by a “mere nub of a villain” (21), but he is powerless to avenge himself through most of the book. Instead of finding Smoot, he tries to burn the entire town of Nitburg. In a more conventional western, this might be an act of heroism, a purification ritual meant to cleanse the corrupt town run by Smoot’s boss, Judge Kyle Nitburg, the man who gives the order to wound Fernando. In this novel, however, it is anti-climactic and anti-cathartic, a mere accident of history. The blaze gets out of hand, and Fernando realizes that he is not a shaper of history, but a bit player. Commenting on such “climactic” scenes, Hannah wryly points out: “Nothing’s been accomplished. You’ve burnt down half of a town. It doesn’t prove anything. . . . Burning up the edifices looks good in the movies, but it doesn’t prove a damn thing, you know? You’re just knocking down shit, like teenagers” (interview). When Fernando and Smoot do eventually have a showdown, it is another parodic

scene both laconic and comic. There is none of the anticipated “gun-play”—which should not be surprising, since the judge warns earlier that there never was “much . . . play. People shot each other, from the back at close range, preferably” (48)—and Smoot actually demands that Fernando kill him. When Fernando “raise[s] the gun without much determination,” Smoot says he wants the deed done with a knife, and his adversary, who admits “I ain’t never been a knife man . . . and I ain’t got the strength,” begins to walk away. Then comes one of the funny yet disturbing exchanges at which Hannah is so adept:

- I’ll shoot you where you stand, nigger! cried Smoot.
- Fernando looked around again.
- Smoot, I’m not a nigger.
- In my world you are! You ain’t never known my world! This ain’t over! I’ll shoot you where you stand! (143)

With that, Fernando grudgingly fires on and kills Smoot, winning the “duel” without a trace of the usual drama.

Hannah’s subversion of the hero and villain figures might be enough by itself to thwart the reader’s expectations and expose the fissures in the mythology westerns rely upon for their cultural authority. But Hannah takes similar liberties with most of the other character types as well. The local preacher, McCorkindale, is plagued by lust and proliferating body hair. The powerful Judge Nitburg, who seems at first a bit like McCarthy’s Holden, turns out to be an ambivalent, lonely soul “so exquisitely friendless” that “some afternoons . . . he roll[s] over and over in a hot tub of water trying to suck himself” (30). The women characters are even less conventional. They occupy the traditional positions in this society, but do not behave in the traditional ways. Stella, the tubercular “slut” who serves as Fernando’s love interest (6), is not really convincing as the typically kind, sexless village whore, though she is passive enough. But with Tall Jane—a “tall and strong lesbian prostitute” who procures opium for Nermer, the town hermit (124)—Hannah truly savages the stereotypical western saloon madam. When Nitburg erupts into flames and gunfire, it is she, not Fernando, who steps out into the street in “her high heels” and performs the role of gunslinger, cutting down two men and then dancing on their lifeless bodies—because “they killed two of [her] domino partners” (125).

While women traditionally bring a measure of civility, even domesticity, to the western, *Never Die* never offers “a clean, god fearing, gentle and loving Eastern schoolmarm” like Molly Wood of Wister’s 1902 novel,

The Virginian (D'haen 168). Nandina Nitburg is the closest we get. Though a school teacher who occasionally memorizes a Psalm, Nandina does not play the devoted girlfriend to Fernando; she plays the *field*, flirting with and seducing men in Nitburg as she mines for financial prospects. Nandina's initial appearance in the novel confirms that while she may share Molly Wood's profession, she shares none of her domesticity and moral rectitude: we see Nandina kissing her own father down to the "teeth," attracted to him "just an elf's step beyond common practice . . . because of the judge's late rapid wealth" (13). Like Tall Jane, Nandina can take care of herself, as she demonstrates when the aptly named Randy Black solicits sexual favors from her in the desert. After Randy gets "down on his knees" expecting that Nandina will "*commit* something with [him]," she spits on him and rides away (77). She does so because Randy, of course, cannot offer her what she really wants: to own "an automobile"—that symbol of power and freedom coveted by many in the book—and ride along with "the wind in [her] hair, the cock of a gun or whatever you call it in [her] hand, the thrashing putrid smoke around [her]" (21). In the popular western, it is very rare, of course, for a woman—particularly a schoolmarm—to dream of being "a member of some riding gang" so she can "rain unprovoked violence on something, someone!" (20).

Nandina's fantasy never comes to fruition, nor do the dreams of the other characters in *Never Die*—and if the members of this motley group have one thing in common, it is that they dream. Yet, among their fantasies there is, as one character says about Fernando, not "one dream that'd square with the earth" (94). This is one of the more serious aspects of a novel filled with madcap humor: human dreams—whether in the form of a grand "design," a waking fantasy, a reverie during sleep, a vision induced by alcohol or morphine, or a novel—do not "square with the earth"; that is, with the inscrutable processes of nature, history, the *real*. If the traditional western novel fulfills our own fantasies about how the region was "won," *Never Die* disturbs those fantasies by drawing our attention to their ideological underpinnings. If the classic western provides us a window on history as we want to see it, Hannah's postmodern version makes us aware of our looking, our readerly voyeurism, and shifts our focus to the window's frame.

Nitburg, the town in which the action of the novel occurs, is itself the apparently realized dream of Judge Kyle Nitburg, a southerner and self-made man who, like Huckleberry Finn and Faulkner's Thomas Sutpen before him, lights out for the territory. He seems motivated both by a desire to escape history and a need to take advantage of and shape it. His

journey begins in the wake of the Civil War, which pitted “brother against brother,” or, in his case, “child against mother” (89): upon learning as a twelve-year-old in New Orleans that his mother is a spy for the Confederacy, Nitburg promptly turns her in to the Union, collects his one-hundred-dollar reward, and watches her “hanged on a railroad bridge” (1). “He was in the main sweep of an awesome history,” the narrator says, “and he could not help it” (89). But Nitburg tries to carve his niche in history by taking the money, heading west, and building his own modest empire. He marries, then sells his wife to a Comanche tribe “for four thousand dollars in real gold” (2). Soon after, the west Texas hamlet of Dolores Springs becomes Nitburg, a town the judge manages through violence and the distribution of drugs.

Kyle Nitburg reminds one of Faulkner’s Flem Snopes, a southerner for whom the old ways have no value and capitalism seems the only authority. “This is who settled the West,” says Hannah. “It was not done by well-meaning spirits; it was done by rather vicious capitalism” (interview). Although Hannah betrays a certain sympathy (both in the novel and in his comments about it) for the ingenuity and drive of the judge and his kind, he seems most interested in exposing the economic and social ideology that motivated settlement of the West—an ideology ignored or disguised in most westerns. Hutcheon observes that postmodernists use the western “not, as some have claimed, [as] a form of ‘Temporal Escape,’” but as “a coming to terms with the existing traditions of earlier historical and literary articulations of American-ness” (133). The point seems quite appropriate vis-à-vis *Never Die*. The novel, in a fashion similar to Doctorow’s *Welcome to Hard Times* (and one of its intertexts, Stephen Crane’s “The Blue Hotel” [1899]), “underline[s] . . . the power of money, greed, and force on the western frontier: through intertextuality, it is suggested that some noble myths have capitalistic exploitation at their core” (133–134). As Hannah interrogates narrative constructions of “American-ness,” he simultaneously questions representations of the old South by giving us a glimpse of “Snopesism” before the letter.

Capitalism, for all the power it affords Kyle Nitburg, does not, of course, secure for him a place above or outside history. As a metanarrative, it is just as provisional as those it has supplanted. The judge, grown older, senses that his town is on the brink of destruction, and tries to convince himself of its—and his—sovereignty. Reflecting on the corruption and violence that have brought him control—and perhaps on the irony that violence will presently destroy his dream—Nitburg asks Smoot, “Yet Nitburg *is*, is it not?” (99). But the West is not a script waiting for him to

write. History rolls on, according to its own unknown script, as Nitburg burns outside the bathroom window where the judge has spent afternoons masturbating. Although the town does recover from the fire, as does the judge, the glory, such as it was, dissipates. Though he “still ha[s] a great deal of money” afterward, “he [can] not think of one thing to buy” (150), sensing that capitalism has failed him.

Part of the irony in Nitburg’s fall is that it is made possible by the technological innovation ushered in by industrial capitalism: a Winton Flyer automobile, owned by Navy Remington, Nitburg’s foe, and a World War I biplane both play roles in the destruction of the town. By introducing these symptoms of modernization, Hannah again breaks the rules of the classic western, for, as Jane Tompkins notes, the genre “requires a technologically primitive environment” in which characters can prove themselves man-to-man (34). No one in the novel is comfortable with these new machines, though some of them recognize the possibilities for freedom and power they offer. Smoot, for instance, fantasizes about stealing the automobile and kidnapping, along with it, Remington’s pet monkey:

He dreamed of the picture, the things, the revulsion of the town, the rambling buckboard, the smoke of South Texas dust, himself ramming through it in the long steely automobile, beyond it all, circling it, the monkey in goggles sitting next to him. He would mount two steel barrels of gasoline in the back seat so he would never run out of fuel. He could drive to Brazil and meet that monkey’s relatives if he wanted to. (38–39)

Nandina, of course, also dreams of the car. For her it represents wealth, power, freedom, and an erotic pleasure of the kind J. G. Ballard associates with automobiles in his controversial novel, *Crash* (1973). The Winton Flyer (already described in decidedly phallic terms in Smoot’s daydream) becomes most blatantly a sex object during Nandina’s surreptitious visit to Remington’s garage, where she samples some of the oil left in the car’s parking place:

She knelt and put her fingers in the oil, right down to the clay. Then she put a finger in her mouth. This was a first for her. So this was what made the New World run. There was something awfully familiar about the taste, something from way back there in the swamps, the gas, the rotten roots, the scaly alive things heaving mud around. She put her finger in again and sucked the oil off. Actually, she thought, this tastes better than men. (46)

Tellingly, Nandina later dies in the Winton Flyer. Though she envisions the automobile as her deliverance into a brave new world, Hannah knows differently. This is nothing new, he seems to say; where there were horses and guns before, there are now cars and airplanes mounted with guns. The “New World” should not to be exalted any more than the old, the era of the “damned, woolly west,” as one character calls it (148). Throughout *Never Die*, Hannah deconstructs both the myth of the wild West and the industrial/technological metanarrative that supposedly succeeds it.

Hannah also targets two older symbolic orders which complement each other but are equally illusory: Christianity and the pastoral. True to the form of his other novels, Hannah is particularly hard on Christianity. As in Zane Grey’s *Riders of the Purple Sage* (1912), the resident schoolmarm in *Never Die* reads from that most pastoral of Psalms, the twenty-third. But whereas Grey’s Jane Withersteen subscribes to it faithfully, Nandina dismisses it as nothing more than “a tidy dream” (17). In this respect, Hannah’s western does something that Jane Tompkins argues many westerns do: it “asserts . . . that Jane Withersteen’s goodness and mercy, the 23rd Psalm [which she cites], and the whole Judeo-Christian tradition it represents won’t work when the chips are down” (34). Yet it does so in a way that inverts Grey’s text, because it is the school teacher, the “good Christian woman,” and not the gunfighter, who demonstrates the untenability of Christian pastoralism. Others in the novel mock the idea that the West could be a new Eden, a Christian paradise for southerners on the run from the nightmare of history. Ironically, the Reverend McCorkindale is one of the most vociferous. His warning to his oblivious congregation —“The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. Rotten Indian-giver, eh? There is no mercy. Things can turn on you like a stomped snake” (57) — echoes, with comic difference, John Wayne’s eulogy over the bodies of men he has murdered in *Red River* (1948). When McCorkindale does try to play the role of traditional pastor, suggesting that Fernando sing the hymn “I Walk in the Garden Alone,” Fernando quips, “That’s for them that can walk. I can hardly tumble toward the outhouse” (36).

As unviable as Christianity and the pastoral may be, visions of Eden seem to permeate other characters’ dreams of what the West should be, just as Richard Slotkin suggests it did for many southerners in the nineteenth century. The hermit, Nermer, continuously reads Psalm 23, convinced it is “the only verse a man need[s], really” (28). Sheriff Neb Lewton has strange dreams in which “he curses God,” but in which “something still calls him from a cool garden in his memory” (5). And then there is Navy Remington, the eccentric sea captain and veteran of

the Confederacy, a gentleman who remembers fighting for “the Old Cause,” whose “life ha[s] been heavy with honor and duty” (82). More than any of his fellow expatriates, he seems to believe he can transplant the dispossessed garden of the South in the open, virginal spaces of the West. Though he has purchased a piece of the industrialized world in the Winton Flyer, Remington’s style of life might be best described as agrarian. He has established a little pastoral island, a sheep ranch with a garden forty miles east of Nitburg (3). He has also taken up writing as a gentlemanly avocation, evidenced by his manuscript, *The History of My Life and Times by Capt. A. Navy Remington* (41). But, unknown to him, his pastoral design is being sabotaged by Smoot, who breaks into his house and “poison[s] his garden every solstice.” As Smoot thinks about how he has duped Remington, an image both humourous and pathetic emerges: “Navy Remington might have been a big man on the sea, but he was a fool moving his garden from place to place in a sublime watered meadow. Probably looking up at the sky toward God and asking what the deuce were these last two years, Papa? Smoot smiled, but not very much” (40). The humor and pathos of this scenario spring, oddly enough, from the same realization. Remington’s predicament parallels that of all the characters: he journeys west with a dream, a design, only to see his desires mysteriously, inexplicably thwarted.

Readers who find special pleasure in classic representations of the West—that is, representations that emphasize its mythical qualities—likely have similarly frustrated expectations as they make their journey through *Never Die*. As they see less than heroic fates befall Hannah’s collection of wierdo outcasts, they sense the dissolution of the West as they have always known and loved it, perhaps not because they identify with the characters, but, paradoxically, because they do not. The novel has the effect of making us aware of our own readerly desires, our own need to have the history of the West (intermingled, in various ways, with the history of the South and of all America) assume a particular shape and order. It achieves this effect by manipulating generic conventions, of course, but it also employs other self-reflexive strategies to focus our attention on the processes by which myths and fantasies are made.

Some of those strategies are blatant, some subtle. Fernando talks rather overtly about how “real” people and events are inevitably subsumed into narrative: “Comes to a point where you ain’t nothing but a couple of stories blowing around like a weed” (83). The stories get started by assorted chroniclers—poets, photographers, newspaper men—and then become their own essence, their own reality. Hannah consistently mocks the human

appetite for myth on which they thrive. He parodies, for instance, the inflated rhetoric of myth with L. P. Sheheen's account of the final confrontation between Fernando and Smoot. A man supposedly obsessed with "facts," Sheheen's version is rife with clichés characteristic of the dime novel, the cowboy movie, and the television western: "The sun was dark and hot. But their guns were long. . . . How it begun was not wrote out well for Fernando. . . . The last to fall was the low man Smoot. . . . We will be here at the same time tomorrow, my children" (144–147). This parodic scop's oration is devastatingly funny largely because the "children" to whom Sheheen speaks are actually hogs. But at times, Hannah abandons knee-slapping humor in favor of evocation. In the novel's opening, the narrator mentions that Kyle Nitburg had been photographed next to his mother's dangling corpse after betraying her: "An early cameraman got it perfectly in black and white. He was a student of Matthew Brady, the great Civil War photographer" (2). Though it seems an insignificant detail, it hints at the way history has been "captured" on film, framed for easy viewing. The mention of Brady—a kind of legend in his own right who purportedly "staged" some of his pictures to get the best effect—might also remind us to what degree historical representations are always illusory, inherently fictitious.

As D'haen observes, postmodern novels usually foreground the "projective character" of representations, especially when society has afforded them, for whatever reason, some special authority. Perhaps *Never Die* does this most effectively by employing a theme beloved by postmodern authors from Nabokov and Pynchon to Julio Cortázar and John Fowles: voyeurism. Of course, the story depicts for the reader sexual scenes usually absent in westerns—the judge diddling himself, Remington "ravishing" Nandina, Stella watching Fernando's testicles dance—but Hannah is interested in more than sexual appetite. He is concerned with the more intense, perhaps connected, desire to see the past made into myth, to see history "screwed" with.

Near the end of *Never Die*, the eastern newspaper man Philip Hine, introduced earlier as a "kindly verisimilitudinist" (128), expresses most clearly Hannah's conception of reader-as-voyeur and history-as-fantasy. Hine, whose occupation supposedly depends on objectivity, "freely admit[s]" to being "a voyeur . . . [a] peeping Tom." When his listeners puzzle at this statement, he tries to illustrate with an example: what if, he proposes, "an average sidewalk-walking woman . . . came in here right in your face, took off her clothes, I mean jaybird naked and just stood there with her things hanging out." His audience members all agree: "Well. Not really so good." "But see," says Hine:

a woman at night across the way through gauze curtains, lighted from behind, doing the same thing with, say, just a little grace, just a little—here we are—slowness. . . . Time and distance. Distance *from* the woman. The *time* it would take to *get* her. The whole thing becomes something else entirely. And who is to say not more real. (151)

Though Nemer and McCorkindale do not understand, Hannah undoubtedly hopes the reader does. We are all somewhat like Hine, Hannah suggests; we who read the novels and histories and watch the films and documentaries are all “peeping Toms on history” (interview).

The western genre has provided a window on the past, replete with the gossamer drapery to give it all the right effect. As the poststructuralist psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan might say, the western has satisfied its readers’ desires to see “the object as absence.” The voyeur relies on time and distance, and on a mediating structure—which, in the case of the novel, means language—to place between him and the fantasy object. But Lacan explains that voyeurism is always an act of projection, a passive externalization of desire: “What the voyeur is looking for and finds is merely a shadow, a shadow behind the curtain. There he will phantasize any magic of presence, the most graceful of girls, for example, even if on the other side there is only a hairy athlete” (182). Traditional representations of western history, which remarkably have often been taken for “truth,” facilitate this projective process; put simply, they show us what we want to see. Such will be the goal of Hines and other chroniclers of the West. He says as much on the last page of the book, speaking of how the mythical status of Fernando and the others will continue to grow: “Every day, more light from behind, more softness, more gauze. It’s time we held the dance of history. You’re all heroes, and folks will miss your kind. History won’t let you hate yourselves anymore” (152).

Never Die consistently frustrates its readers’ voyeuristic designs and desires, presenting the outlines of characters and events we expect to see in a western, only to pull aside the gauze and reveal misfits, caricatures, and parodies. It resists the temptation to reduce in a realistic narrative the irreducible “sweep of an awesome history” (89). It never takes itself too seriously, never allows readers to think for very long that this might be the “real” West; as the author himself admits, the book is “false history” whose territory is not the actual West, but “Hannah’s West” (interview). A delightful exercise in postmodern humor, *Never Die* counters Hine’s choreographed but seemingly fluid dance of history with the banal and ridiculous, the dance of Fernando’s testicles.

Hannah's only published novel of this decade also recognizes that the fantasy of the mythical West will go on unabated, even in an era when books and films are contesting in their various ways that myth⁴. Ironically, the western's "gleam," as Hannah has called it, will continue partly because works such as *Never Die* and *Blood Meridian* perpetuate it. As David Cowart writes, no matter how derisive parody is, inasmuch as it "imitates" in some measure its target or "host" text, it "revitalizes as it subverts." In this regard, "even as the truth quotient of the host diminishes, even as its pretensions to absolute insight dissipate, the host benefits from the attachment of its postmodern guest" (Cowart 39). This is a phenomenon of which Hannah, who speaks lovingly of westerns as his generation's opera, seems quite aware—so much so that he concludes his subversive western with a moment of pastiche, a sly nod to the pastoral fantasy that the West once seemed to offer: as the aging, unheroic Fernando, saddled with a "paunch" and a "face . . . slack and grotesque," sits fishing, "the river lap[s] green and merry in the cove under the willows" (152). The myth, Hannah seems to acknowledge, will never die. But at least we can laugh at it.

NOTES

1. My conflation of myth and metanarrative here might seem counter-intuitive, but, as Lyotard makes clear, they are two sides of the same epistemological coin: both "legitimate social and political institutions and practices, forms of legislation, ethics, modes of thought, and symbolics." The only difference is that metanarratives "ground this legitimacy not in an original 'founding' act," as myths do, "but in a future to be brought about, that is, in an Idea to realize" (50). As I show, *Never Die* confronts both myth and metanarrative through its "serious play."

2. From an interview with Barry Hannah conducted 27 July 1997 in Oxford, Mississippi. Subsequent quotations are noted parenthetically as "interview."

3. Hannah himself seems ambivalent about being called a postmodern writer (just as he has seemed, at times, to harbor mixed emotions about being called a southern writer). While he notes that he has never taken "anti-narrative" as a technique or "the fragmentation of existence . . . as a theme," he clearly admires McCarthy at least partly because "his novels are postmodern" (interview). Elsewhere, Hannah has expressed admiration for fictionists such as Donald Barthelme, Samuel Beckett, and Kurt Vonnegut, all of whom critics often consider postmodern.

4. *Never Die* bespeaks a familiarity with a number of these films, including Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969), which features a gang of aging "heroes" in confrontation with a world increasingly run by machines, and Robert Altman's *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971), which, as Hannah noted during the interview, treats

the often ignored role of drug abuse in the "wild West." The year following *Never Die's* publication, of course, saw the release of Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* (1992), a film that, among other things, reminds us of the role that writers like Hine have played in creating a mythologized but enduring view of the West.

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