

“Who’s Rowena?” Tracking Edgar Allan Poe’s Shadowy Presence in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Counselor*

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「ロウイーナは誰」

－コーマック・マッカーシーの『悪の法則』に見られるエドガー・アラン・ポーの影－

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Abstract

This essay attempts to shed light on the pervasive presence of Edgar Allan Poe in Cormac McCarthy’s screenplay, *The Counselor*. It begins with a summary of the plot before examining three main connections—Poe’s stories, “The Fall of the House of Usher” and “Ligeia,” as well as Poe’s rhetorical style of confession—all of which can be found in McCarthy’s text.

Keywords: Cormac McCarthy, Edgar Allan Poe, horror, intertextuality, adaptation

I. Introduction: The Counselor’s Tale

In 2013, a movie entitled *The Counselor* was released to overwhelmingly negative reviews, then quickly disappeared from sight. This was the long-awaited collaboration between director Ridley Scott and author Cormac McCarthy—in fact, it was McCarthy’s first screenplay, written to be filmed—and as such the movie attracted a great deal of interest among actors, critics, and audiences alike. Unfortunately, it proved to be a failure both critically and commercially: when interviewed, cast members seemed confused as to the plot, while the director himself seemed to have misunderstood the importance of the story’s true villain, a female character named Malkina, who was portrayed by Cameron Diaz—a disastrous casting choice, as it turns out, since the entire screenplay hinges on her, much as *Blood Meridian*. McCarthy’s vicious exploration of “how the West was won,” derives its power from its villain, the sinister Judge Holden. Malkina is every bit as malicious and evil as Holden, yet Diaz is simply not up to the role; perhaps the most grating misstep is her delivery of McCarthy’s (in) famously grandiloquent dialogue, which she stumbles through in an almost Californian “Valley

Girl” accent. This was not only McCarthy’s first true screenplay, but also his first attempt to create a female villain, so the wasted opportunity of *The Counselor* seems to be compounded by this major error in judgment.

The plot itself is simple. Much like *No Country for Old Men*, it revolves around a drug deal gone horribly wrong and an irrevocable “moral decision” (in McCarthy’s words) that unleashes an unstoppable chain of destruction. The first half of the film largely consists of various characters warning the titular “hero” of the story, the unnamed counselor, against proceeding with the drug deal; the second half of the film unfolds with an almost machine-like precision and sense of inevitability. Perhaps the biggest problem with the film is this very fatalism: the counselor made his choice, yet the audience did not witness that moment of decision, so viewers are not emotionally engaged with his predicament. He begs for advice, but it is too late—the wheel of Fate has been set in motion and nothing can stop it. One character tells him, “It’s always later than you think, Counselor” (114), which means that it is too late for him to change what he has done, though at that point, the screenplay is not quite two-thirds finished; a few scenes later, another character tells the counselor that he has no choice but to accept the horrible consequences of his earlier decision—again, which was made off-screen, before the film even began—for the “choosing was done long ago” (147) and cannot be corrected or undone. Needless to say, there is no sense of agency here, and certainly no typical, Hollywood-style “happy ending” on offer.

The Counselor, therefore, seems to be yet another one of McCarthy’s morality or cautionary tales (in fact, the word “cautionary” appears frequently in the text), much like the aforementioned *No Country for Old Men*, with which it shares a great deal. Both stories bear a striking similarity to one of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, “The Pardoner’s Tale,” in which three men go off to kill Death. *The Counselor* actually stays closer to Chaucer’s original than does *No Country for Old Men*, in that in the former story we are presented with three men who make a deal (the counselor, Reiner and Westray), one (Westray) betrays the other two, and then he himself is killed. This connection to Chaucer has been noted by various scholars, so much so that we might be tempted to retitile the film, *The Counselor’s Tale*, but what is less obvious is McCarthy’s debt to Edgar Allan Poe. There are no studies that explore the connections to Poe that run throughout the screenplay or film, so in the following essay, I will attempt a preliminary sketch of how we might “track” what I am calling Poe’s “shadowy presence” in *The Counselor*.

Before doing so, I would like to point out some of the more explicit or obvious ways in which McCarthy is referring to Poe. First, the screenplay and film should be properly seen as belonging to the horror genre, less to the suspense or “thriller” genres. There really is little suspense, or thrilling action, since much of the film consists of conversations. Perhaps critics would have been more understanding if they had considered that McCarthy was working in the horror genre. Second, there is gratuitous violence and gore in the film: Scott has often relied upon what is known as “body horror” (in *Alien*, to take only the most famous example) and this film is no exception. McCarthy purposely incorporated several decapitations in the

screenplay, but Scott made the choice to graphically show them to the audience—much like Poe, who never seems to obey the limits of “good taste” when describing bodily horror. Third, there are overt references to a name (“Rowena”) and a word (“Purloined”) made famous by Poe—the first appears in the final film adaptation, an important point which I will discuss later in this essay, and the second does not. These seem to be examples of McCarthy consciously tipping his hat to the master of horror. However, there are several other discernible traces of McCarthy’s precursor in *The Counselor*, so in what follows I will focus upon three, perhaps less-obvious but nonetheless important aspects that are indebted to Edgar Poe.

II. The Haunted Palace

The opening scene, which takes place in bed, seems to owe much to Poe’s tale, “The Fall of the House of Usher.” In the story, as we see in this film, there is a doomed couple; the lovers in the film are seen from different angles, in white sheets, entwined in their lovemaking, almost at a (heavenly) remove from all earthly cares, from “the real world,” as it were. This scene introduces the lovers, the unnamed “counselor” and his beloved, the impossibly good and pure Laura (as several commentators have pointed out, perhaps named after Petrarch’s idealized love), but surrounds them or interrupts their idyll with signs of danger. In the sequence that immediately follows this opening scene, after the opening credits, the action unfolds in three different locations: a diamond dealer’s shop in Amsterdam, a sewage truck being filled (with raw sewage, as well as with a secret shipment of cocaine) in Mexico, and two cheetahs hunting jackrabbits on the desert plains, with an exotic-looking, tattooed woman watching them from a distance. Here, McCarthy is not only setting up three plotlines that will become intertwined, if not entangled—much as the lovers are entangled in the previous scene—he is also, and crucially, contrasting the world of diamonds and finance, wealth and power with the drug trade, which is represented by brown packages being hidden in a septic tank truck, then smuggled across the border in large part thanks to the overwhelming stench that makes close inspection of the truck nearly impossible. On the one hand, a world of diamonds and purity, or “pure love” (made explicit since it is the counselor who connects the previous, ethereal bedroom scene with the diamond dealer: he is, after all, in Amsterdam shopping for an engagement ring), while on the other hand, a world of filth and waste, criminality, addiction and death.

These contrastive elements would seem to owe much to Poe, particularly to the poem, “The Haunted Palace,” which is embedded within the famous tale (perhaps Poe’s most famous tale), “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839; heavily revised and republished in 1845). The poem in fact crystallizes or distills the entire tale, and plays a crucial role in foreshadowing the “fall” of “the house of Usher.” Much as the aforementioned word, “purloined,” and the name, “Rowena,” happen to appear, without explanation, at the beginning and end of the film, I would argue that it is not difficult to imagine that McCarthy had the following lines in mind while writing the screenplay, in particular the opening scene—lines that could almost function as an

encapsulation or summary of the entire plot:

In the greenest of our valleys,
 By good angels tenanted,
 Once a fair and stately palace—
 Radiant palace—reared its head [...]
 Wanderers in that happy valley
 Through two luminous windows saw
 Spirits moving musically
 To a lute's well-tuned law [...] (99)

Most scholars agree that the “house” of Usher, including the palace of the poem, refers to Roderick Usher’s own head, his mind as it were, and the “two luminous windows” are in fact his eyes. Now, if we consider the scene outlined above, which opens the screenplay and film, in which the “good angels” or “spirits” are Laura and the counselor, “moving musically” in their “happy valley,” or perhaps if we consider the counselor himself to be assuming the place of Roderick Usher, with his own descent into madness and despair providing the trajectory of this narrative, then the parallel to Poe and to the rest of the poem should become apparent. The poem continues in this manner through the third stanza, which ends with the lines:

A troop of Echoes whose sweet duty / Was but to sing,
 In voices of surpassing beauty, / The wit and wisdom of her king. (100)

As we know from the original story, Roderick Usher loses whatever “wit and wisdom” he may have possessed, and the same is true of the counselor, who is neither wise (he has not demonstrated wisdom at any point in the film) nor in the mood for joking, for levity or for witticisms (such as the macabre jokes and gallows humor of Reiner and Westray) by the story’s end. In the poem, “The Haunted Palace,” stanza five is where Usher’s madness—and, I would argue, the counselor’s doomed fate—makes its entrance. It runs as follows:

But evil things, in robes of sorrow,
 Assailed the monarch’s high estate;
 (Ah, let us mourn, for ever morrow
 Shall dawn upon him, desolate!)[...]
 And travellers now within that valley,
 Through the red-litten windows, see
 Vast forms that move fantastically
 To a discordant melody;
 While, like a rapid ghastly river,
 Through the pale door,
 A hideous throng rush out forever,

And laugh—but smile no more. (Ibid.)

Here, we encounter a kind of laughter, without the usual accompanying smile, that signifies madness. In the original poem and story, Roderick Usher has gone insane, but in McCarthy's screenplay and Scott's film adaptation, the counselor is the one who has lost his sanity, and has become "desolate," by narrative's end. The "hideous throng" can easily be imagined to be the trail of corpses that follow in the wake of the counselor's disastrous choice, his moral failing, which triggered all the destruction and carnage in the first place. This contrastive imagery—of the pure, almost virginal Laura, who floats through the film, much as she and the counselor were floating in their bed sheets at the film's start, contrasted with the unspeakably horrible death she suffers and the depths of the counselor's horror and despair by the film's end—would seem to parallel the tragic tale of Madeline and Roderick Usher, and owe much to Poe. As is well-known, Poe thought that "the death of a beautiful woman" was "the most poetical topic in the world," though we could easily argue that there is nothing "poetical" about what happens to Laura. It seems much more likely that her purity and goodness are simply placed in juxtaposition to the filth and horror of the drug world in which she becomes tragically embroiled through no fault of her own. In any event, the question as to how this reversal of fortune, concerning the two lovers, is accomplished has not yet been addressed. This brings me to the next Poe-inspired aspect of *The Counselor*.

III. The Conqueror Worm

If the beginning and end of the counselor's tale, and the doomed lovers who proceed from dream to nightmare, are indebted to "The Fall of the House of Usher," then the middle of the narrative, in which a dizzying series of betrayals and retribution propel the doomed couple to their fate, would seem to owe much to "Ligeia" (1838; revised and expanded, with the poem, "The Conqueror Worm" added in 1845), another one of Poe's stories of ill-starred love. Like "Usher," this tale features a poem-within-the-tale, one that likewise encapsulates and foreshadows the larger story that envelops it. Whereas the counselor and Laura seem to bring to mind Roderick and Madeline Usher, Reiner and Malkina would seem to conjure up images of the narrator of "Ligeia" and his two lovers, one light and one dark—and both embodied by Malkina in this film. Reiner's name perhaps refers to Rainer Maria Rilke, who wrote that "every angel is terrifying." Malkina is indeed a kind of angel, certainly a terrifying one, and she is a hunter and killer, who leaves a trail of corpses in her wake. Her appetite and lust are insatiable. At key moments in the story, when people are being killed, she says "I'm starving" (118) and "I'm famished" (184). As we shall see, Malkina assumes several aspects of the worm in the poem, devouring everyone before looking for her next victim.

In Poe's tale, Ligeia is the narrator's love, a fair-haired woman of uncommon beauty and elegance who composes a poem, entitled "The Conqueror Worm," then dies; she is replaced by a second love, a dark-haired maiden named Rowena, who falls ill—perhaps due to the narrator's

lack of affection and attention—and her corpse is somehow transformed into the body of Ligeia. As illogical or absurd as this plot may sound, Poe nevertheless considered this tale his greatest and it is hard to argue against the power of the writing. For my purposes, I would like to focus upon three elements: first, the name “Rowena” appears at a crucial point in *The Counselor*; second, the villain of the film, Malkina, has blonde hair with black roots (thereby lending some credence to her representing Rowena, returning from the dead as Ligeia); and third, the tattoo of “an Egyptian cat” that Malkina has on her neck likewise refers back to an element of Poe’s story.

In “The Conqueror Worm” we come across the lines, “And much of Madness and more of Sin / and Horror the soul of the plot” (69), which could almost serve as the tagline for *The Counselor*. But it is worth returning to the start of this poem, and then lingering over its end, to see the ways in which it runs parallel to both “The Haunted Palace” and McCarthy’s screenplay and Scott’s film adaptation. The poem begins as follows:

Lo! 't is a gala night
 Within the lonesome latter years!
 An angel throng, bewinged, bedight
 In veils, and drowned in tears,
 Sit in a theatre, to see
 A play of hopes and fears [...] (68)

Once again, we seem to be starting off from the dream world of the counselor and Laura, or perhaps from the vantage point of the audience, watching the film in the cinema. This “play of hopes and fears,” which is precisely what we find in the counselor’s tale, then ensues, with “mimes” in the poem performing on a stage. By the fourth stanza, precisely as was the case with “The Haunted Palace,” evil intrudes onto the scene and there is a sudden reversal: the final two stanzas describe, in gory detail, the tragic end of all such dream worlds. The mimes, the actors on the stage—Laura, the counselor, the jeweler in Amsterdam, the sewage truck driver, Reiner and Westray, and so on—who appear “in the form of God on high” (Poe here seems to mean humanity, created in God’s image), end up devoured by a horrible creature:

But see, amid the mimic rout,
 A crawling shape intrude!
 A blood-red thing that writhes from out
 The scenic solitude!
 It writhes!—it writhes!—with mortal pangs
 The mimes become its food,
 And the seraphs sob at vermin fangs
 In human gore imbued.

Out—out are the lights—out all!
And over each quivering form,
The curtain, a funeral pall,
Comes down with the rush of a storm,
And the angels, all pallid and wan,
Uprising, unveiling, affirm
That the play is the tragedy, 'Man,'
And its hero the Conqueror Worm. (69)

The "hero" of *The Counselor* (by which I take Poe to mean "the last one standing"), exactly as in the poem cited above, is the devourer and destroyer—in the case of the film, this is Malkina, who has a prominent tattoo on her neck of an "Egyptian cat," as mentioned earlier. The goddess associated with cats in ancient Egypt was "Baast" (or "Bast"; see Cooper 456, n. 4). Baast is the goddess of the hunt as well as of fertility, an admixture of which we find in Malkina. In Poe's tale, a goddess named "Ashtophet" (Poe's conflation of Ashtoreth, a fertility goddess, and Tophet, a version of Hell; see Poe 477, n. 2) is mentioned. In the film, Malkina is a hunter, a devourer, but we also find that she is pregnant in the final scene of the screenplay. It would seem that Poe, too, had hoped to associate these two seeming opposites, death and fertility. Malkina is famished, hungry, like the Conqueror Worm of the poem; she also detests cowardice, weakness, much like the "feeble will" that is mentioned in the epigraph to Poe's tale, apocryphally attributed to John Glanvill. This epigraph, most likely an invention of Poe's own, is then repeated after Ligeia recites "The Conqueror Worm" and just before she dies. Malkina seems, like Judge Holden in *Blood Meridian*, to be some sort of Nietzschean figure, driven purely by Will—the Will to devour, to destroy, to avenge—and she detests any kind of weakness or flaw, in either man or woman. She points this out to Reiner, to Laura, later to the escort at the end of the film.

"Who's Rowena?" is what Malkina asks when she discovers the password (Rowena) for Westray's laptop computer. She seems unaware of Poe's story, "Ligeia," but apparently Westray was not. As we know, the fair-haired Ligeia returns from the dead in the reanimated corpse of the brunette Rowena, so it would make sense that Malkina has blonde hair with dark roots—an uneasy mixture of both, much as we saw earlier with her blending fertility and death. The relationship between Malkina and Westray is also hinted at, repeatedly, in the screenplay, with Westray claiming that he and Reiner had "shared" some of their lovers, perhaps including Malkina (Westray becomes defensive when the counselor asks him about this), and with Westray saying that he "misses" his old friend, Reiner, but cannot see him anymore for some unexplained reason (perhaps because Malkina forbids it). Westray likewise says that he knows someone who can do complex mathematics "in her head," which Reiner also had mentioned concerning Malkina (in fact, we witness Malkina do just this several times in the story, calculating the "street value" of the cocaine or the number of carats and physical weight of the diamonds she will use to transport her stolen millions); and in the screenplay's

final scene (not in the film, however), we discover that she is pregnant, not by Reiner (who, it turns out, had had a vasectomy) but by someone who is now dead—again, presumably Westray. We find this out due to another parallel to Poe: the compulsion to confess, which not only Malkina indulges in, but almost all of the characters in *The Counselor* share.

IV. The Rhetoric of Confession

This is perhaps a less obvious parallel to Poe, but it is remarkably similar to Poe's style of narration. Everyone is confessing in *The Counselor*, from the jeweler in Amsterdam, to Reiner, Westray, and even Malkina. They all say "too much," say things they "should not," speak too much and display a compulsion to confess, to reveal their secrets, to go beyond accepted norms or boundaries of taste or decorum—which sounds remarkably like Poe and his garrulous narrators. "Why are you telling me this?" is a question that is repeated in this screenplay, and it is one that could very easily be asked of any number of Poe's narrators. The compulsion to confess is on display in most of Poe's major tales, from "The Black Cat" to "William Wilson" and on to "The Tell-Tale Heart," to name but three of the best-known. *The Counselor*, particularly the screenplay, is likewise punctuated by confession. It is a moral fable or cautionary tale, to be sure, but it is also deeply confessional at its heart. Much like Poe's obsessed, unreliable, oftentimes mad narrators, the characters in *The Counselor* talk far too much, which is something that critics of the film deplored.

After the opening shot of the lovers in bed, followed by the montage of scenes described above, the first sustained scene focuses upon the diamond dealer saying to the counselor, "You dont want to hear" (18). Shortly thereafter, when asked about his level of trust in Malkina, Reiner tells the counselor, "You don't want to know. I don't want to know" (34). A few scenes after this, Malkina asks Laura about the ritual of Confession in the Catholic faith ("What about confession?" 46), probing her for the very words to use so that she can actually go into a church and enter the confessional. In his "cautionary" conversation with the counselor, Westray warns him of the dangers of doing business with the drug cartels by saying, "I know you probably wont believe this, but I'll tell you anyway" (61), before proceeding to describe one of their many atrocities. While in the confessional, a few scenes after this, Malkina says to the priest, who is growing extremely uncomfortable with what she is telling him, "Look, you dont have to do the forgiveness thing. All you would have to do is listen. To the sins" (85). These are a few of the confessional moments in the text, but perhaps the strangest, certainly the most-noted, of all confessions in the film runs as follows:

Reiner: You don't want to know.

The Counselor: Sure I do.

Reiner: Not the worst things.

The Counselor: Those in particular. [...]

Reiner: I don't know. Let's talk about something else. [...]

The Counselor: What else?

Reiner: Yeah. I don't know. I shouldn't tell you this. (90)

Reiner then proceeds to tell his story, regarding Malkina and her sexual habits, to the counselor, who is dumbfounded. The point of the confession, why it is included in the screenplay and why it made it into the final edit of the film, seems to be lost on everyone—from the two characters involved in this scene to audiences and critics who found it equally confusing. However, if we bear in mind Poe's similar penchant for telling too much, having his criminals detail their crimes or give themselves away, then we may perhaps better understand why McCarthy included this awkward, uncomfortably long confession, which continues in the following manner:

The Counselor: You don't think this is an odd thing to tell me?

Reiner: I think it's an odd thing.

The Counselor: Yes, but I mean why would you tell me this? [...]

Reiner: I don't know. You're probably right. Maybe I wanted to see what you'd say. Maybe there's more to it than that. Maybe I'm scared. [...]

Just forget the whole thing.

The Counselor: It's just that I don't know what it is that you're trying to tell me.

Reiner: I know.

The Counselor: Does this have anything to do with the [drug] deal?

Reiner: I don't know. You're right. I shouldn't have told you. Just forget it.

The Counselor: Forget it.

Reiner: Yeah.

The Counselor: How do you propose that I do that?

Reiner: I don't know. Jesus, Counselor. How do I know? (94-96)

This is in fact the very moment when Reiner, along with every other character, no longer has any advice or "counsel" for the counselor. In the same way that Reiner loses control of his story—the whole point why he is telling it in the first place, his control over his emotions ("Maybe I'm scared"), how to forget it once the image is in the counselor's mind, and so on—the various characters around the counselor, who had earlier been full of advice and warnings, now have nothing to offer him. The film ends with a final scene involving Malkina and an escort (a male prostitute, in the screenplay; in the film, he appears as her banker), in which Malkina confesses several things—that she is pregnant, that she will smuggle her stolen millions by using diamonds, that she had betrayed Reiner, most likely with Westray, and so on. Her companion then says to her, "I think you have told me more than I wished to know," to which Malkina replies, "It's all right" (182). Somehow, her words fail to reassure him (and us, as readers), and McCarthy's horror story comes to its downbeat ending.

In fact, the only character who does not really confess anything is the titular counselor;

much as he is offered counsel (in the form of advice) throughout the story (by Reiner, Westray, the cartel “jefe” or boss), and declines to take it, in a strikingly similar way, the counselor never reveals his secrets, his innermost thoughts or feelings, or his motivation (why he is involved in this doomed drug-deal to begin with, why he needs money so quickly). He never confesses or reveals the awful truth to Laura, never shares his thoughts or his reasons for turning to crime with his partners, Reiner and Westray, nor does he explain what really happened—essentially that he is innocent of having robbed the shipment of cocaine—to the cartel boss, which perhaps could have saved Laura. By the story’s end, no one has any counsel left for the counselor, who had not heeded any advice prior to the drug deal going horribly wrong. His desperate questions to Reiner, Westray and the cartel boss are met with the same reply, “I don’t know what to tell you” or “I have no advice for you, Counselor.”

Most of the plot of the screenplay and film adaptation is made up of various characters giving the counselor words of warning or advice, or confessing something, talking (most often, talking too much), explaining or recounting, giving details or revealing secrets, usually against their own better judgment. Again, we can see Poe as a precursor here: many of Poe’s narrators and characters are compulsive confessors, though notoriously unreliable. One potential problem is that all this confession makes for frustrating reading—or, in the case of a movie, frustrating viewing—and this is in fact one of the main criticisms leveled at *The Counselor*: it featured far too much talking, too many cryptic monologues, too much philosophizing, charges that we also find in much criticism of Poe. Perhaps if critics had picked up on the literary references outlined above—though this would not have made up in any way for the screenplay’s (or the final film version’s) myriad weakness or flaws—they may have better appreciated what McCarthy was attempting to do in this veritable homage to Edgar Allan Poe.

V. Conclusion: In Love with Easeful Death

Apart from references to Petrarch, Machado, Rilke, Shakespeare, Marlowe, and Poe, among others, there is a conspicuous quotation from Keats with which I would like to conclude this essay. When asked about his relationship with Malkina, Reiner quotes John Keats’ “Ode to a Nightingale,” alluding to his suicidal desire: “It’s like being in love with... what? Easeful death?” (95). As Russell Hillier has pointed out, this comes from the sixth stanza of Keats’ poem, which runs, “Darkling I listen; and, for many a time / I have been half in love with easeful Death” (287, lines 51-52; quoted in Hillier n. 2, 156). If we recall the lines that follow those alluded to by Reiner, we can perhaps better sense the underlying sarcasm in Reiner’s words, which in fact run parallel to Poe’s own, in “The Raven,” where he, in effect, reverses Keats’ “Nightingale,” which runs as follows:

Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,

While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
In such an ecstasy!
Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain—
To thy high requiem become a sod. /
Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird! (287, lines 55-61)

Keats celebrates the song of the "immortal Bird," whose ecstatic song transports the poet beyond the realm of death, while Poe's raven is a demon who essentially breaks into the poet's chamber, croaks the melancholy word "Nevermore!" and offers no hope of life after death, "only emptiness, silence, and a mocking message" (Hirsch 204). This seems to me to be yet another implicit nod to Poe, which itself epitomizes the manner in which McCarthy drew upon his macabre precursor to create a richly textured, admittedly minor masterwork in *The Counselor*. Revisiting the film and the screenplay with Poe in mind will surely deepen one's appreciation of McCarthy's achievement.

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