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 SECULAR SCRIPTURE AND  
 CORMAC MCCARTHY'S *THE ROAD*

SINCE World War II, American literature has repeatedly questioned the existence of social and religious meaning in a society capable of destroying itself. In Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer*, Binx Bolling, suffering from existential malaise, writes in his notebook, "Abraham saw signs of God and believed. Now the only sign is that all the signs in the world make no difference" (119). Oedipa Maas, in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, seeks the meaning of symbols she begins to think are only "some kind of compensation" for "having lost the direct, epileptic Word, the cry that might abolish the night" (118). Ruth Foster, in Marilynne Robinson's powerful novel *Housekeeping*, comes to realize "that things were held in place, are held in place, by a web of words." In *White Noise*, Don DeLillo's character Jack Gladney encounters nuns who pretend to believe in heaven. "If we did not pretend to believe these things," one of them tells Gladney, "the world would collapse" (318).

The quest for life's meaning, we may safely say, has always been a central aspect of human life and culture, but in much American literature of the last sixty years we witness dramatized the absence of social assumptions and institutions that make a belief in meaning effective. We see this perplexity in Bolling's journal entry: why is it that today signs no longer signify? When Maas asks a literature professor something about the historical origins of a playwright, she is rebuffed: "The historical Marx. The historical Jesus. . . . They're dead. . . . Pick some words," the scholar replies. "Them, we can talk about" (151). Repeatedly, we see characters living inside a world of words that yield nothing beyond themselves. At the same time, this quandary expresses itself in characters and plots that dramatize the effort to establish meaning from the inside, as it were. From Kierkegaard's point of view, as he writes in "The Absolute Paradox" chapter of *Philosophical Fragments*, the individual is always inside his thought and his reasoning, always attempting to reach by thought that which thought cannot think — this is the paradox which occasions Kierkegaard's famous "leap" from reason to faith (53, 46-67).

Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road* stages the same problem of belief from the inside, but *The Road* is unique in locating the basis for meaning in the father's love for his son, and even suggesting that this meaning transcends the father's efforts to affirm and protect his son's life. In the father's only prolonged conversation with someone other than his son, the

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stranger named Ely declares that “There is no god.” The father answers him with a one-word question: “No?” (170).

McCarthy’s tenth novel depicts the journey of a father and his son as they make their way south to a coast, hoping to find there a warmer clime, and perhaps some sign of beneficent life. The boy is born shortly after the world has been destroyed — whether by nuclear blast and subsequent nuclear winter or by the impact of a large meteorite is less important than that the world has caught fire and turned everything but a few survivors to ash.<sup>1</sup> When it rains the rain is full of ash. I place the emphasis upon the fact of fire rather than its cause because of the biblical resonance of fire at the end of time. From the time they first take up the novel, readers so inclined cannot help reading *The Road* as an allegory of spiritual survival. The road image, M. M. Bahktin writes in *The Dialogic Imagination*, is a key chronotope, for in this image “[t]ime, as it were, fuses together with space and flows in it . . . ; this is the source of the rich metaphorical expansion on the image of the road as a course” (244). Thus the very title collapses the difference between story and life. The very first words of the novel recall those of Dante’s *Inferno*, for the father wakes “in the woods” and recalls his dream, in which he and his son are “like pilgrims in a fable swallowed up and lost among the inward parts of some granitic beast” (3). We are to read *The Road* then as the story of a quest. “Romance,” Northrop Frye writes in *The Secular Scripture*, “is the core of all fiction,” for it “brings us closer than any other aspect of literature to the sense of fiction, considered as a whole, as the epic of the creature, man’s vision of his own life as a quest” (15).

*The Road* has the form of a spiritual journey, but what spiritual end may be reached — what Canterbury, Jerusalem, or Grail — in a “barren, silent, godless” world? (4). This landscape recalls the “stony rubbish” of Eliot’s “The Waste Land” and invokes the “rough beast” from Yeats’s “The Second Coming.” The father’s dreams include “a creature that raised its dripping mouth from the rimstone pool and stared into the light with eyes dead white and sightless” before turning to “lurch away” (3-4), and “Tattered gods slouching in their rags across the waste” (52). In describing the beginning of their journey on the road, McCarthy gives his narrator a Miltonic cadence in ironic echo of Adam and Eve departing Paradise: “Then they set out along the blacktop in the gunmetal light, shuffling through the ash, each the other’s world entire” (6).

These literary evocations not only help situate McCarthy’s story within a literary and religious cultural history — of losing one’s way in the middle of life, of things falling apart, of life as a wasteland, of having lost Paradise — and thus use the power of allusion to amplify, to give rhetorical resonance to his story; these allusions also help constitute

one of the great losses occasioned by the apocalypse that has occurred before the novel begins. That is to say, these allusions constitute an echo not only of literary but also of human history, within which the artist sought to explain the ways of god to men, within a temporal environment still possessed of a future. Within which, at the risk of over-simplifying, “the wasteland” was a metaphor. *The Road* depicts the fulfillment of those metaphors, a world in which metaphor has become fact, in which Eliot’s spiritual “wasteland” is reified in the refining fires of apocalypse to “wasted country” — to “cauterized terrain” (14). At any rate, this is the conceit of the novel. To be sure, these are themselves images within McCarthy’s futuristic allegory. Of this, more later.

MC CARTHY’S world in this novel is a world held in the mind, as I suppose it is for us. The world assumed, imagined in sufficient bits and pieces to compose a whole. In this story the world is disappearing not simply because the world is burned and is still burning as they travel, but because the world is losing its footing in the memory of the father, who unlike the son remembers the world before fire. At the same time, in a characteristic strategy of the novel, narrating what is forgotten gives presence on the page to memories the father is losing. He wakes with “the uncanny taste of a peach . . . fading in his mouth. He thought if he lived long enough the world at last would all be lost” (18). Later we are told of “The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors, the names of birds. . . . Finally the names of things one believed to be true. . . . The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality” (89).

This central passage in the novel links the possibility of the sacred to the existence of referents, and — to a literary history that is putatively lost at the same time — these sentences invite the question of whether there can be meaning without embodiment. It is a question at the heart of American literature, not only of its recurrent theological basis — of the Word become flesh — but also of its special insistence that “God himself,” in Thoreau’s account in *Walden*, “culminates in the present moment” and is present to us in “the drenching of the reality that surrounds us” (349-50). Emerson gave theory to a cultural habit when he insisted that natural signs are symbols of spiritual facts. This identification of the sacred within nature may be a peculiarly American habit, as Charles Feidelson argued in *Symbolism in American Literature*, but McCarthy’s novel poses the question of what access we might have to spirit once those natural signs are obliterated; or, if obliteration itself be our last remaining sign — fire, ash, cannibalized remains — what spirit does it symbolize? What spirit does it summon if not the rough beast slouching toward Bethlehem?

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McCarthy stages this question in a scene beside a polluted river where father and son have camped, what the boy calls “a good place.” Next morning, the father drops a white stone into the river, only to see it disappear beneath the surface of the water, “as suddenly as if it had been eaten” (41). This disappearance within the ash-laden water may be said to swallow the referent of depth and transparency available for symbolization throughout human time. Water can no longer function as a figure of time, as it does in Thoreau’s remark that “time is but the stream I go a-fishing in,” nor of baptismal cleansing, of water as the medium of spirit. The father remembers when he had “stood at such a river once and watched the flash of trout deep in a pool, invisible to see in the tea-colored water except as they turned on their sides to feed” (41-2).

Including the scene of the polluted water together with the father’s memory of an earlier moment when he stood beside a clear trout stream, McCarthy taps into a commonplace of American writing, of fishing in America. The association of the fish with the promise of Christian redemption requires no elaboration by me. In American literature this redemptive association plays out in the act of fishing, by which a character communicates with Nature through the natural sign of the fish. Thoreau writes in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimac* of an old man for whom “fishing was not a sport . . . but a sort of solemn sacrament” (152). Here, as later in Thoreau, Melville, and Hemingway, fishing in America is a ritual in which the act of penetrating the water’s surface — by eye or hook — connects the fisher with the medium of spirit and its embodiment in the trout.

Under the influence of Eliot, of course, this topos takes on an anthropological authority, from Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* and Jesse Weston’s study of the Grail legend, whose roots she finds in near eastern mythologies of a wasted land and a wounded fisher king. Eliot’s poem “The Waste Land” ends with the image of a man fishing “with the arid plain behind,” but for our purposes, the story of Nick Adams in “The Big Two-Hearted River” is more apposite.

In “The Big Two-Hearted River,” Nick Adams descends the train at Seney to find the town and country burned, but unlike the world-consuming holocaust of McCarthy’s novel, in this story Nick takes reassurance in knowing that “the river was still there.” When Nick looks over the bridge and sees the brown trout “tighten” in the stream, steadying himself in the current, we know that Nick will join that trout, immerse himself in the water — as fly fishers do — and secure himself against the drag and pull of wartime trauma. As in Thoreau and Hemingway, the act of fishing is an act of communion, at once expressive of a relation to Nature and the recovery of spiritual equilibrium. In pastoral literature generally, the retreat to the country — in America, the retreat to wilderness — is an act

of communing once more with the medium of spirit. Here too water is life and fish the water's body, for Hemingway describes the trout as "the color of water-over-gravel."

Like artists and storytellers throughout history, Hemingway had the natural referent available to him as an image symbolizing Nick's emotional recovery. The fish Nick has caught by the end of Part II are "alive in water" and "the live feeling" has begun its restoration within Nick. Nature, in this sense, may be used by the writer as both the metaphoric medium of resurrection, and symbol of it. In sharp contrast, McCarthy's narrator — telling his story from a temporal perspective in which all natural signs have been turned to ash — can no longer use these signs as symbols of spiritual facts. He can only evoke this scene as one no longer possible. In a striking reprise of Nick Adams standing on the bridge at Seney, Michigan, looking down at the trout in water, the father in *The Road* stands "on a stone bridge where the waters slurried into a pool and turned slowly in a gray foam. Where once he'd watched trout swaying in the current, tracking their perfect shadows on the stones beneath" (30).

I dwell upon trout fishing in America at such length in part because *The Road's* last image — its last paragraph — recalls a time when "there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them in the amber current" (286). McCarthy closes his novel with a master topos of western belief, placed here as a kind of epitaph for the world's body. In an uncanny way, then, McCarthy uses memory to bring into our consciousness the very images that are fading away within the world of the novel.

THE last image is not unlike many throughout the novel, in which McCarthy's syntax purposely holds out first the image of life and then its ashen reality. When the father dreams, they are "rich in color" but turn to "ash instantly" upon awaking (21). "The country went from pine to liveoak and pine. Magnolias." The appearance of the liveoak among the pine confirms their progress southward, but these images, so alive as living referents in the reader's imagination, are soon turned to dust: "The trees as dead as any. He picked up one of the heavy leaves and crushed it in his hand to powder" (196). Sometimes this reminder, this tantalizing image is held out and taken away in the same sentence: "A vast low swale where ferns and hydrangeas and wild orchids lived on in ashen effigies which the wind had not yet reached" (276). In these reversals may be seen a recurrent displacement of the reader as the novel relentlessly transforms the living world of the reader's present into fading and fragile memories figured in burned remains.

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Of course the novel's last image of brook trout is an admonitory epitaph of what could yet be lost, in which the narrator occupies a position outside a possible future imagined as time past. We should not forget that McCarthy's burned-over world is an imagined one, a theatrical fable in which the world's barren stage has had removed from it all the alluring props of rhododendrons in flower, the taste of peaches, or the father's feel of his wife's stocking tops "through the thin stuff of [her] summer dress" (19). In this morality play, the imminence of death at every turn forces Heideggerian authenticity upon the characters. In this respect, McCarthy's tale has much in common with Flannery O'Connor's story of going on the road, "A Good Man is Hard to Find." Indeed, one may wonder if McCarthy's motive might not be exactly the testing of whether goodness can persist in the face of violence, when an act of charity may lead to one's own disembowelment, or, even more starkly, whether goodness can persist in the absence of a world endowed with meaning, and in which the future appears so foreshortened as almost to collapse with the present moment.

This may be taken as a central problem of the novel: the status of the ethical, as well as the reason for being, in the absence of the social. In the face of apparent meaninglessness and of the violence loosed by the struggle for survival, the man's wife has chosen suicide. The man articulates the problem to himself in religious terms: "He knew only that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke" (5). At the same time he seems fully aware that all the supporting structures of belief and moral action have been destroyed: "Everything uncoupled from its shoring. Unsupported in ashen air. Sustained by a breath, trembling and brief. If only my heart were stone" (11). The father's sole remaining referent of sacred idiom is his son. In sustaining his son's breath, he sustains not only his own capacity for life but for some belief in life's continuance, in the value of life. This is really an analogue of man's place in the world, raising the question if structures may be built in air, of dream and story, of mere breath "trembling and brief," a question intensified by the apparent end of time that appears so near.

The father's foundation, from the beginning of the novel, is the son, and there is perhaps in this coupling of his own existence to that of his son's a degree of selfishness, an unnatural reliance of the father upon the son. In any case, the father's strategy is to construct meaning from the inside, as it were. After the father has freed his son from the murderous grasp of another man by shooting him dead, he washes the dead man's brains out of his son's hair. As he does so he uses analogy to transform the act into one of consecration: "All of this like some anointing," he thinks. "Evoke the forms. Where you've nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them" (74).<sup>2</sup> As so often in this novel, McCarthy

here invests the father's actions with religious significance, drawing upon the reader's memory of the account in Genesis, where man is formed from dust and God "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life" (2:7). Later in the night, after he has gathered more wood to feed the fire, he strokes the "pale and tangled hair" of his boy and thinks, "Golden chalice, good to house a god" (75). From the father's viewpoint at this stage of their journey, the sacred dimension of his son would seem to be a measure of the father's love, a self-conscious awareness of his own actions as forms of analogy that wobble between faith and irony. McCarthy seems intent upon investing his story with elements of religious allegory (or at least implication). Insofar as the father and the son have no names, these characters invite the reader to think of the son as *of* the father, the son imbued with the father's values, living on after the father dies, praying to his father. At the same time, the novel suggests that this ethico-religious dimension is merely the invention of the father — that the father's love of his son is such that he views his son as a "child of god."

What is the status, within the novel, of the father's apprehension of his son as a sacred vessel? Does the novel offer more than the rhetoric and form of meaning — is it only a prophecy of the absent god? The novel, so heavily laden with mythic reference and metaphoric implication seems to invite the question. At least one reviewer justified reading the novel "because in its lapidary transcription of the deepest despair short of total annihilation we may ever know, this book announces the triumph of language over nothingness" (Cheuse). If there is an answer to this question it would lie in the recognition of the novel as revealed truth, in the sense that all dramatic art provides an indirect form of communication, what Socrates called the *maieutic* method. In his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard identifies the maieutic form of communication as the form that must be used in communicating the inwardness of the subjective thinker. Unlike objective knowledge, the inwardness of subjective thought must have recourse to what Kierkegaard calls "double reflection." The form of communication must communicate the "reflection of inwardness" and therefore the "essential content of subjective thought is essentially secret, because it cannot be directly communicated." The doubly reflected form of this content "makes it a secret for everyone who is not in the same way doubly reflected within himself." The key point of the maieutic form of communication is that each "individual [must come] to understand it by himself" (*Concluding* 67-74). The word "maieutic," interestingly, comes from the Greek word *maieutikos*, literally "obstetric," and is used figuratively by Socrates to mean intellectual "midwifery," the Socratic process of bringing out in another that which is already latent within him or her.

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All art may be said to operate in this fashion, and this is why all great art remains mysterious, withholding its secrets; or to put it another way, this is why all great art remains inexhaustible. Much influenced by Kierkegaard, Walker Percy described the maieutic as the “indirect approach” of art. “There is no such thing,” he argues, “as a literature of alienation. In the re-presenting of alienation the category is reversed and becomes something entirely different. There is a great deal of difference between an alienated commuter riding a train and this same commuter reading a book about an alienated commuter riding a train” (*Message* 59, 83).

Even within the language of the narrator and the actions of its two main characters there are reasons to argue that *The Road* offers the reader more than the rhetoric and ceremonial forms of belief that the father struggles to perform and communicate to his son. For the father’s words, thoughts, and actions must be put into context with those of other characters and within the sequence of actions that form the plot. From the reader’s viewpoint, we notice the dramatic movement of discourse from voice to voice. For example, the novel begins in the narrator’s voice describing the father’s hand on the boy’s body, rising and falling “softly with each precious breath” (3). The word “breath” reappears in the mother’s voice when, just before committing suicide, she advises her husband “to cobble together some passable ghost. Breathe it into being and coax it along with words of love” (57). We could say that this is just what the father does. The father has the boy to serve as his ghost; and certainly the father thinks his son is holy: “If he is not the word of God God never spoke” (5). Appearing in the narrator’s voice, in the mother’s admonition, the father’s thoughts, and in the voice of the mother who takes the boy under the care of her family, the words “breath” and “breathe” acquire the status of authorial design, performing the story’s work of dramatic indirection. Not least, these words bear the etymological sense of spirit, or spiritus, meaning “breath.”

THE discourse of “fire” and “light” provides another source of the novel’s indirection working powerfully upon the reader. In Kierkegaardian terms, we may say that the father communicates the inwardness of his subjective beliefs and convictions through the protection and care of his son. As part of his caretaking, he tries to pass his values on to his son, in part through the language of “fire” he uses to justify their lives and to motivate the boy. The boy himself is drawn toward death, but the father assures him that “nothing bad is going to happen.” “Because we’re carrying the fire,” the boy says, having been told this earlier. “Yes,” the father affirms. “Because we’re carrying the fire” (83). The image of “fire” is less abstract than the word “light” and may convey the concept of spirit in a way the boy can

grasp, but in the context of the still burning holocaust of the world it represents at least the sacred fire of human spirit, in opposition to the demonic fires of apocalypse. And then too, lurking within the word's complex of meanings is the fire of God. At the same time, the reader cannot shake the suspicion that the father's repeated assertion — that they are carrying the fire — is a strategy rather than a belief, a recourse to religious language and forms in the absence of any foundation for them in the world.

Perhaps this duality helps explain a word McCarthy uses that has provided the basis for excited if misleading discussion in the blogosphere. One night the father walks into the road and stands listening to the silence, described as “The salitter drying from the earth” (261). “Salitter” is a term that seems only to have been used by the German mystic Jakob Boehme in a book titled *Die Morgenroete im Aufgang* (translated as *The Aurora*) in which Boehme describes “salitter” as the divine powers “which are moving, springing powers” that generate “all manner of trees and plants on which *grow* the fair, pleasant and lovely fruits of *life*.” Boehme distinguishes between the Salitter of heaven and that of the earth, which is but “a *type* of the heavenly pomp.” Though nature is “corrupt,” it seeks continually “to produce *heavenly* figures” (92-97).

Because the word appears nowhere else (though Hegel discusses the term in his discussion of Boehme in *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*), its appearance in *The Road* implies that McCarthy has some acquaintance with Boehme's work, though it is premature at this point to draw too many conclusions about Boehme's possible influence. Here in *The Road*, the odd term certainly signifies the drying up of the divine sap, the invigorating element of natural life that is now turning to ash and dust, blowing in the wind. Yet, it may be argued that the “salitter” drying from the earth is merely the intensification of withdrawal from the earth of that divine immanence that Thoreau wrote of as the continual “drenching of the reality that surrounds us” (349-50).

In nineteenth-century New England, Ralph Waldo Emerson linked the image of the fire within to divine spirit in his lecture on “The Poet.” There Emerson asserts that we “are not pans and barrows, nor even porters of the fire and torch-bearers, but children of the fire, made of it, and only the same divinity transmuted and at two or three removes” (223). Emerson here enunciates another version of the American religion, of the direct connection between the Divine and the Divine within each individual self. Harold Bloom elaborates: “The God of the American Religion is an experiential God, so radically *within* our own being as to become a virtual identity with what is most authentic (oldest and best) in the self. Much of early Emerson hovers near this vision of God: ‘It is God in you that responds to God without, or affirms his own words trembling on the lips of another’”

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(259). *The Road* may be said to embody this Emersonian religion, though in a more social register, for the ethical action of the novel takes place in the domestic drama of the father and the son. The “suspension of world” as Thomas Carlson has written of this novel, accentuates the persistence of value in “being-with the fragile and threatened child” (54, 55).

**I**N a further element of the novel’s dramatic design, the father’s view of his son changes over time. In the novel’s only encounter with a stranger, the man allowed to join their campfire and share food, the father admits that he doesn’t understand his son. When they and the stranger part ways, the boy insists upon giving Ely some of their food. “Why did he do it?” Ely asks. The father “looked over at the boy and he looked at the old man. You wouldn’t understand, he said. I’m not sure I do,” Ely replies:

Maybe he believes in God.  
I don’t know what he believes in.  
He’ll get over it.  
No he won’t. (173-74)

The father has come to recognize that the boy has values that transcend mere survival, and that they are fundamental to the boy’s character. Values no amount of experience will extinguish.

The status of the boy — the ethical and religious implications of his character — rises abruptly in the last twenty pages of the novel. After the father has taken all the clothes of a thief found preying on their few belongings, he leaves him in the road to die, and the boy sits sobbing over the fate of the man. The father shows some impatience, saying, “You’re not the one who has to worry about everything.” But the boy answers him “Yes I am,” he said. “I am the one” (259). The boy’s assertion may simply indicate that he has matured enough to be the one who has to think of everything, to be troubled by everything, and to grasp that he will likely survive his father. This seems more likely than the boy’s recognizing a divinity within himself. Still, the words are startling. Their two meanings — the secular and the sacred — co-exist within the text, for the words “I am the one” signify both for the reader.

From this point forward the father associates the boy with light. Even more important, the word “light” appears in the narrator’s voice as the translation of the word “fire” that the father has been using. When the father is too ill to continue, “the boy would go on and then stop and look back and he would raise his weeping eyes and see him standing there in the road looking back at him from some unimaginable future, glowing in the waste like a tabernacle” (273). Again, there is no clear distinction between

the narrator and the father's perspective, but the father's perspective gains, as it were, by its collaboration with the storyteller's voice. As a result, the reader at least entertains the implication of the analogy, i.e. that the boy is in some sense a receptacle for any number of related ideas, including the consecrated elements of the Eucharist and the body of God.

The light emanating from the boy reappears in the story a few pages later, as the father lies dying, watching his son come to him with a cup of water. Here the narrative third person voice is distinct, though focalized through the father: "There was light all about" the boy, and "when he moved the light moved with him" (277). The father never tells the boy he carries the "light" or that there is light all around him, and the boy continues to use the word "fire"; the two words are kept segregated, as it were. But McCarthy makes clear that fire is the image of the idea of light, for the narrator explains, "In that cold corridor they had reached the point of no return which was measured from the first solely by the light they carried with them" (280).

I have been tracking the status of the father's viewpoint — his inner speech — within the larger dramatic design of the novel. McCarthy stages the issue for us. The day before his father dies, the boy himself questions the meaning of his father's words, whether they be mere rhetoric without foundation or referent. Though still young, the boy is old enough to question the father. The father and boy have reached the coast only to find an "alien sea . . . shifting heavily like a slowly heaving vat of slag" (215), and the father refuses to take his son with him into death. "You don't know what might be down the road" he says. "You have to carry the fire." Here the boy raises the issue of rhetoric and its transcendence: "Is it real? The fire?" The boy's question makes explicit the father's problem of communicating the inwardness of his subjective thought. The father retains enough authority that the boy seems either to take him at his word, or not to trouble him too much about it, knowing how ill he is. The father says "Yes" the fire is real, and the boy asks "Where is it?" to which the father replies "It's inside you. It was always there. I can see it." In this dialogue the father admits to his son that he is going to leave him in the darkness, something he had promised not to do. Instead he evokes the last of the ceremonial forms by giving him instruction in prayer: "You can talk to me and I'll talk to you. You'll see." When the boy wants to know if he will hear his father's voice, his father tries to reassure him: "You will. You have to make it like talk that you imagine. And you'll hear me. You have to practice. Just don't give up" (278-79).

This dialogue between the father and son dramatizes within the novel the dialogue between the novel and the reader. Which isn't to say any reader mistakes the novel for documentary realism or sacred text, but to

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ask whether through the art of the novel *The Road* is able to communicate an ethico-religious experience that transcends the beauty of its language. These last dialogues between father and son are among the most poignant in the novel, and while we never learn if the boy fully accepts that he carries “the fire” or knows what this phrase might mean, we know that he is “lucky” as his father said he would be, and finds a family of “good guys.” In these last pages of the novel, the language of “fire” and “breath” coalesces in the boy’s conversations with the father and mother who rescue him. In asking the man if he is one of the “good guys” and whether he is “carrying the fire,” the boy perpetuates the catechism of the father, though he provokes the man to ask “You’re kind of weirded out, aren’t you?” The word “weird” is another example of McCarthy’s familiarity with the etymological meaning of words, for the man’s everyday idiom, which is common in our own usage, actually derives in the form of the verb from the Middle English, “to be destined or divinely appointed *to*.” This meaning exists, one might say, only between the reader and the novel, as it goes without recognition by any characters within the novel. As if to embody the task he has been set by his father, he admits to being “a little” weirded out but demands an answer to his question of whether they are carrying the fire, and this time the man answers “Yeah. We are” (283-84).

The last conversation in the novel brings into virtual identity the belief in God and God’s existence within each man. The mother in the family talks to him about God, but the boy has promised his father that he will talk to him every day. “He tried to talk to God but the best thing he could do was to talk to his father and he did talk to him and he didn’t forget. The woman said that was all right. She said that the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all of time” (286). Here the father’s evocation of the forms, his construction of meaning from the inside, is given affirmation not only by the mother’s belief, but also by her use of the word “breath” to connect eternity with time.

The father and his words may be the only sources of meaning for the boy, but they are only one element in the dramatic indirection the reader encounters. Several pages before the father dies he and the boy converse about stories and storytelling. This conversation makes explicit the indirect way in which the novel functions. Storytelling constitutes one of the devices available to the father for raising his child to become a man and as such concerns the passing on of values from one generation to another. The boy is an apt pupil because he betrays a spontaneous if indiscriminate empathy for any vulnerable creature they encounter along the road: a little boy, a dog, even the man they catch in the act of stealing their meager means of survival. At this point, the boy is in no mood to hear another story

from his father because he says “those stories are not true.” In the stories of “courage and justice” the father has been telling, his son complains, “we’re always helping people and we don’t help people.” The stories affront the boy’s naïve expectation that art have an objective basis in a correspondence to reality. Readers can’t help thinking that the novel they are reading, though untrue, is worth reading for its account of courage, if not justice, and its affirmation of the living spirit, even if within the terms of the novel that spirit is near extinction.

From the boy’s perspective the impact of the world’s disappearance would include the disappearance of narrative, of storytelling itself, even though, paradoxically, this disappearance is a collapse of story and “real life” that makes stories not worth telling. But to leave it at that is to forget that *The Road* is itself a story and one worth reading for more than its desolate lyricism, its “brilliant writing,” as one reviewer has justified reading the novel. The father won’t let the topic drop however. “After a while the man said: I think it’s pretty good. It’s a pretty good story. It counts for something” (269). The father speaks of their journey on the road together — their life — just as the author might speak of his novel *The Road*, as counting for something. The ethical dimension of the book, then, seems to reside in the gap between the reality within the story that constitutes the life on the road of the boy and his father, and the reality of the reader who remains on the road and for whom *The Road* is a story that ends while her own life continues.

McCarthy reinforces this gap — which Bakhtin calls the “*historical inversion*”<sup>3</sup> of romance novels — in the use of the past perfect that closes his novel: “Once there were brook trout . . . you could see” (286). Here the novel reverts from the simple past of narrative time to the time prior to “was” — to the time before. This time of the time before is the time of the reader, but made strange by its dislocation to a time long ago. As the paragraph unrolls there is an even more ancient time evoked in the description of these brook trout:

On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery. (286)

This passage has been read to mean that following the devastation of the world, the world could not be made right again, not even by all the king’s men. But the grammar of reference and antecedent actually suggests something quite different, because the thing which could not be put back is “the

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world in its becoming,” not the world accomplished and destroyed. The narrator might be said to speak from that “unimaginable future” in which the father saw his boy standing. This is the position of the storyteller above the story, for whom the history of the road is entirely spatial.

THE last paragraph of *The Road* begins with a version of the words that begin every fairy tale, “Once there were.” In this fable, however, these words remember a world not only past but without recovery and thus convey a melancholy warning, though far less angry and despairing than the father whose story we have just read. The last word of novel falls instead upon “mystery,” which may be taken to be the mystery of existence — that the world has existed at all. The father has told his son “It’s all right. This has been a long time coming” (278). In the religious sense of the word, a mystery is a truth known only by revelation and cannot be fully understood. “It is not *how* things are in the world that is mystical,” Wittgenstein wrote, “but *that* it exists” (6.44). The novel’s ethico-religious sentience reveals the reader’s life as mysterious and worthy.

In *The Secular Scripture* Northrop Frye closes his discussion of the “Themes of Descent” on the theme of memory: “The only companion who accompanies us to the end of the descent is the demonic accuser, who takes the form of the accusing memory. . . . It conveys to us the darkest knowledge at the bottom of the world, the vision of the absurd, the realization that only death is certain, and that nothing before or after death makes sense.” Frye describes here what he takes to be one of the structures of romance. In the midst of this realization of certain death, the characters of descent “are fighting a battle against death, with some dim understanding that the telling and retelling of the great stories, in the face of accusing memory, is a central part of the only battle that there is any point in fighting.” Frye gives us the examples of William Morris’s *The Earthly Paradise* and Scheherazade’s use of storytelling to prolong her life. “Once upon a time,” Frye suggests, is “the formula [that] invokes, out of a world where nothing remains, something older than history, younger than the present moment, always willing and able to descend again once more” (124-26).

## Notes

1) In “Cormac McCarthy’s Apocalypse,” David Kushner writes, “While McCarthy suggests that the ashcovered world in the novel is the result of a meteor hit, his money is on humans destroying each other before an environmental catastrophe sets in. ‘We’re going to do ourselves in first,’ he says” (7).

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2) This evocation is a far cry, in tone and consequence, from the nuns in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, who pretend to believe so that others may be at ease in their nonbelief, knowing there are those who believe (317-18).

3) "The essence of this inversion is found in the fact that mythological and artistic thinking locates such categories as purpose, ideal, justice, perfection, the harmonious condition of man and society and the like in the *past*" (147).

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