INGL 3300-066--**"Post-Apocalyptic Literature and Film" ---Ingl3300-066**
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The Question of Hope and Redemption

Cormac McCarthy has gained a reputation for being media-shy. But during promotion of his Pulitzer-prize winning novel *The Road*, and release of the film adaptation in 2009, McCarthy did participate in high-profile "conversations," in which he commented on the role of his young son John in the novel's composition.

To Oprah Winfrey in 2007, the author acknowledged that writing *The Road*, with the poignant father-son relationship at its heart, would have been impossible if he had not had a son in his senior years.

Then in an informal "conversation" published by the *Wall Street Journal* in November 2009, when McCarthy was 76, he was more explicit about the role of his son John (born 1998). Many of the lines in the book "are verbatim conversations my son John and I had," he confessed. And: "I mean just that when I say that he's the co-author of the book." [1]

I want to argue that this "late fatherhood" perspective is crucial to opening a revisionist middle ground in debates about the importance or irrelevance of religious symbolism in McCarthy's work.

A common theme in *The Road*'s reception is that the book is:

"a tale of nothingness" (Edwards, 59),

or a "testament to nihilism."

John Cant framed *The Road* as a capstone of McCarthy's long-standing "sense of man's insignificance in a godless universe" (185).[2]

At the other end of the spectrum, Marcel DeCoste (2012) asserts "that *The Road* offers not just a less than nihilistic study of virtue, but an explicitly Christian understanding of this term" (68).

I am not convinced of the accuracy of DeCoste's claim that "relatively few critics have approached the novel by way of Christian thought" (68), unless that means "approaches by true believers." The range of authors who have studied Christian or more broadly religious symbolism in *The Road* is broad (Broncano 2013; Carlson 2007; Millan Alba 2014; Rambo 2008; Sanchez 2015; Skrimshire 2011; Swartz 2009, and Weilenberg 2010). Attention to *The Road* in the Christian press (Hamilton 2012; McCracken 2009) indicates that the novel's reception in that domain is going to be ongoing.

One way to map this apparent split (godless, or god-centered) is to follow Dana Phillips' lead on "two camps of interpretation." Those who read McCarthy as a *southern* writer interpret him through a matrix of authors such William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor, for whom redemption (in language/images) is central.

Others read McCarthy as a *western* writer: Nietzschean characters predominate, along with nihilistic images and themes (Phillips 2002). In the western McCarthy, violence forecloses the possibility of redemption.

Rambo points out that one can see a shift in McCarthy's work from the "early southern setting of Tennessee to the southwestern states (from *Orchard Keeper* to *The Crossing*)" (Rambo, 100).

Seen through this lens, the transition from the redemptive south to nihilistic Southwest is recapitulated within the course of *The Road*.

Closer to my view, and an indication that the time is ripe for a less binary revisionist

reading, is Pudney's reappraisal published in 2015. "Both Christian and atheistic readings are…actively put forward by the text," Pudney argues. Yet "the novel presents a powerful challenge to both Christian and atheistic views of the world, without ever actually rejecting either" (Pudney, 293).

McCarthy presents a challenge to what seems to be a particularly American myopia—a binary tendency to want to divide the world between good guys and bad guys, between religious and secular visions, between the "blues states and the red states."

By biographical circumstance as well as artistic sensibility, McCarthy troubles such easy binaries. He grew up as an Irish-Catholic in Tennessee. "We went to church on Sunday," he admits matter-of-factly: "not a big deal," but still a part of his matrix (Jurgensen 2009). As an adult, he prefers to commune with scientists at the Santa Fe Institute—a liberal enclave in the high desert Southwest.

At the risk of stating the obvious, McCarthy's South-by-Southwest trajectory leaves plentiful traces in his texts.

IDEAL READER

His ideal reader would have an empathetic understanding both of the religious or quasi-religious imagination of the South, and the supposedly post-ethical borderlands of works like *No Country for Old Men*. It seems to me that Shelly Rambo has captured the gist of why *The Road* cannot be understood within red-blue or religious-godless binaries:

> McCarthy catches the reader in a schizophrenic, and distinctively American, postapocalyptic crisis of meaning: between the craving for a happy ending (for resolution, for redemption) and the recognition of its impossibility (there is, in Christian terms, no resurrection ahead). (Rambo, 101)

Rambo responds to readers who fault McCarthy for "going soft" by offering a form of redemption at the end. That accusation infers a binary myopia: Americans have the tendency to "narrate their lives redemptively,"[5] and so may be predisposed to wish for a redemptive ending of a harrowing tale like *The Road*.

But others may feel that they have "outgrown" naivité, often equated with the religious imagination--and so may wish that McCarthy had gone against the expectations of the genre, and killed off all his characters at the end. I have heard this view from my own students.

To go "beyond redemption" is to attempt to see "beyond the binary," then. Rambo suggests that "we are pressed to think theologically *beyond* the redemption narrative, to envision the moments after the collapse of redemption" (107).

Redemption requires a forward movement in narrative time in which there is some sort of restoration, or deliverance. But McCarthy's last lines in fact give no textual reason for such a hope of restoration: humans have achieved god-like powers of destruction, and in this text the destruction "could not be put back. Not be made right again" (287).

Looking into this void, one pictures the boy carrying fragments of the worldview of "godspoke men" who "have taken with them the world" (32). But one must imagine pieces of this "**equipment for living**" transposed into the boy, going south, but without any visible sign that sustenance may be found.

In this post-redemptive scenario, Rambo asks:

"What does theology look like without this promise, when there is no rescue, no deliverance, and no future ahead?" (108)

Such a post-theology could only be imagined by moving beyond the father's words, and beginning to piece together what the son has made of them, after the apocalypse, after the father is gone.

That is a "powerful challenge," indeed, one arguably requiring a post-Christian perspective. The preface "post" infers a pre-structuring which cannot entirely be effaced.

One who suffers from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) has not gotten "over" trauma; post-structuralists did not jettison social structures, etc.

Asked by Oprah if he had "worked the God thing out," McCarthy responded: "It would depend on what day you ask me." He still retains some embodied forms of the faith: "you can be quite doubtful about the whole business" and not "have a great idea of who or what God is" but still pray.

On some level *The Road* is a "post-Christian prayer." As another post-Christian (I freely profess) who is also raising a young child in senior years, and whose life has also transitioned from a religious south to a much more secular (if not nihilistic) West and Southwest, I want to suggest that the "answered prayers," such as they exist, could only be heard in the words of the son, and imagined in the boy's consciousness, whose form is far from visible to us, at journey's end.

Knowing their biographical roots, and then transposing the father-son reasonings of *The Road* into a post-apocalyptic setting, lends them an entirely different tenor. But although these "final things" may revisit, and revise, the Catholic themes of the author's Tennessee youth, readers should indeed resist the temptation to frame the outcome as re-inscribing or rejecting that heritage, as either promising redemption, or foreclosing the possibilities future generations may have to re-imagine these final things from different perspectives. As the boy

says to his father after they have bid adieu to the old prophet of the post-god world: "**I wont remember it the way you do**" (174).

The question of McCarthy's projection of faith or non-faith, God or godlessness into this text, cannot be answered. It would be fair to say that the author provides us with an agnostic view—the existence of the deity, no matter how faithful or dubious one may be, simply cannot be proven or disproven. But the mental architecture, the "equipment for living," remains, into whose forms the father often feels compelled to breathe life. The agnosticism of the novel is embodied, then, above all, in the father-son dialogues.

Ambiguity:

But this "breath of God," as a woman calls him at the end (286), finds that he cannot actually talk to God, only to his dead father. And when the father, shortly before his death, discovers his son in a prayer-like posture, and asks if he is praying to someone "like God," the boy's response is far from definitive: "Yeah. Maybe somebody like that" (246).

The father "feeds his son a story," Chabon wrote (2007): we are the good guys, and we are carrying the light. What the son "remembers differently" and assimilates into a "post-Christian ethics"—as a post-text outcome "beyond redemption"—can only be inferred through the changing tenor of the father-son dialogues. These dialogues, responding a world "large populated by men who would eat your children in front of your eyes" (181), transcends the limits of either religious faith, or atheism--or for that matter his father's full-hearted, but merely dyadic, form of compassion. The boy ends up teaching the father, and I should hope, readers.