

Transformation in the Wasteland: Remembrance, Naming and Charitable Action in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*.

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I. Introduction

Among America's most influential living writers, Cormac McCarthy is a novelist whose works are being adapted for film. After *No Country for Old Men* secured the 2007 Oscar for best picture, the 2009 film *The Road* (starring Viggo Mortensen, Kodi Smit-McFee and Charlize Theron)—based on McCarthy's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Road* (2006)—has garnered numerous nominations and several awards for best cinematography and best actor (Mortensen). The film captures, in stunning fashion, typical McCarthian themes including the cold indifference of the universe, whose unnameable mystery escapes human cognition. It also implicitly captures McCarthy's view that evil is an ontological necessity flowing from a Gnostic creational *pleroma*, and suffering, violence and loss are woven into the fabric of reality. In such a world, McCarthy's typical characters steep themselves in an *agon* of violence and brutality, and transformation is (nearly) absent. In light of themes like these, many scholars have interpreted McCarthy as a wholesale nihilist, for whom human transformation and instantiation of the good in the violent wasteland of late modernity is impossible.¹ However, such interpretations miss McCarthy's constructive vision, whereby he seeks to offer a way forward for a humanity locked in the "Waste Land."² Nowhere is this constructive vision more evident than in *The Road*, both in the film and in the novel.³

In its depiction of a nameless father and son traversing a timeless, colorless, post-apocalyptic wasteland, *The Road* offers up McCarthy's vision of the major possibilities for being human in a post-Christendom world shorn of its transcendent referents.⁴ In the face of the void,

¹ Vereen Bell forwards this interpretation (roughly) in his very influential book, *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy*. In the closing pages, for instance, he states that in McCarthy's fiction, "nothing can be taken to stand as the truth" (Bell, 135). For the more moderate view that McCarthy is an optimistic nihilist, Cf. Busby, 227. Busby notes that in the Border Trilogy, the border serves as a metaphor "for a complex and oxymoronic melding of nihilism and optimism, good and evil, illusion and reality..." through which McCarthy presents a worldview of "nihilistic optimism." Especially in *The Crossing*, storytelling has the capacity to provide synthesis.

² I am indebted to Cant for drawing my attention to McCarthy's continued engagement with and evocation of T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," which he says is emphasized "more powerfully" in *The Road* than in any other McCarthy novel (Cant, 269).

³ In opposition to the nihilistic reading, Edwin T. Arnold argues that even amidst his celebration of violence and evocation of the chaos and mystery of the world, McCarthy's works also display "an essentially religious" conviction of "the need for moral order," holding forth as well the possibilities of grace and redemption (Arnold, "Naming," 46). In this paper, it is my intent to argue that an interpretation like Arnold's is essentially right.

⁴ Commenting on *The Crossing*, Wade Hall, suggests that in shifting from Kentucky to the Mexican-American border, McCarthy's "new literary terrain provides a stark, elemental landscape where his human comedies and tragedies can be enacted in Greeklike sparseness.... It is a world stripped to its

despairing attrition, provincial narration, and an expansively charitable tending of being's mystery are three such possibilities, all of which are developed in the film.

In opposition to the nihilist interpretation, then, I will argue that "the Man" in *The Road* is transformed; he is converted from despair and provincial re-narrating, to the expansive activity of "tending" the fire of being. This tending enjoins the Man to see the lives of others, even in a wasteland of violence and brutality, as part of his own life, and calls him to sacrificial charity. Yet, I will also argue that transformation in *The Road* is anchored in an ontology of necessary violence. This ontology is not only profoundly anti-Christian, but on a practical level cannot sustain a defensible ethic of charity. So while McCarthy's work, embodied in the film, does not endorse practical or ethical nihilism, it ultimately offers no way to avoid it.

Before proceeding, a methodological note is in order. With respect to the novel, the film adaptation of *The Road* is at once firmly faithful to McCarthy's vision, as well as creative work of art in its own right. While there are numerous interpretive methods one could adopt with respect to the film, my aim is to examine McCarthy's own ontology, anthropology, and ethics as they are latent in the film. Hence, I my method will be to interpret the film with McCarthy's novel (and occasionally his other works) functioning as a hermeneutical lens. This will prove especially important for those moments in which dialogue in the novel, absent in the film, crucially informs cinematic choices on camera angles, perspective, and narrative arc. One justification of this interpretive approach, among others, is that McCarthy himself played an intimate role in both the writing and production of the film.

II. Facing the Void

In *The Road*, an apocalypse has occurred, plant and animal life have largely ceased, and ubiquitous ash blankets the colorless landscape. There is no time-keeping, and most of the surviving humans are roving cannibals. Rather than transforming the world, the apocalypse iconically extends McCarthy's vision of the present vacuous state of the world; hence, we are never told what the disaster is, but only that it has occurred. *The Road* tells the story of an unnamed "Man" and his son trying to survive both winter and cannibal attacks, traversing the ruined landscape of the American south in order to reach the sea and escape the cold. From Coke cans and hammers, birds and plants, to the transcendentals of truth, goodness and beauty, things and their names are disappearing; truth-telling language is "shorn of its referents, and so of its reality." The epic wreckage depicted in the film, the homogenized flatness of surfaces and colorless landscapes, as well as the seeming pointlessness of the journey to the sea, reflect McCarthy's novelistic comments on the man's thoughts:

essentials where time is largely irrelevant. Like a play by Aeschylus or Aristophanes...the novel tells a primal story whose universality is not confined to one place or time" (Hall, 191). Each of these characteristics also mark *The Road*, which, as a post-apocalyptic work, amplifies them all the more. Part of this universalization is the "road" metaphor itself, which in *The Crossing* is explicitly said to belong to all people as their stories form part of a grand matrix. What is more, inasmuch as *The Road* is set back in Appalachia again, I think this is perhaps McCarthy's *most universalized* novel. In the ruined, ashen landscape of *The Road* he imports the "optical democracy" of the New Mexican deserts into a post-apocalyptic Kentucky, amplifying the "optical democracy" of the former into a full-fledged democracy not only of the eye, but of all the senses.

He tried to think of something to say but he could not. He'd had this feeling before, beyond the numbness and the dull despair. The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true. More fragile than he would have thought. How much was gone already? The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality. Drawing down like something trying to preserve heat. In time to wink out forever. (88-89)

In the post-Nietzschean world of *The Road*, the ubiquitous ash covering the earth and floating in the air signify that fact that all human assurances, including God, are gone. McCarthy captures this beautifully in the novel, saying that “[the Man] looked at the sky. A single gray flake sifting down. He caught it in his hand and watched it expire there like the last host of Christendom” (16). McCarthy’s view, beautifully embodied in the film, is that the world is utterly indifferent to, and slips out from under, human attempts to capture its meaning or become its sovereign.⁵ But this is no despairing affirmation of the meaninglessness of the world. Rather, it reflects McCarthy’s view that the world is replete with mystery, a perpetually becoming tale that is “made new each day,” and whose intractability leaves human beings in a “blessed” epistemic darkness. It is blessed, because it is in the dark that both the discovery and affirmation of the world’s mystery, and living well as human beings, can become actualized possibilities.⁶

However, these are only *possibilities*. Human beings can respond to the void in other ways, as the suicide of the Man’s wife, and the film’s roving cannibals aptly remind us. Indeed, some of McCarthy’s most famous narratives of brutal and senseless violence constitute not an endorsement of nihilism, but his vehement critique of it. For example, Judge Holden, McCarthy’s Nietzschean *Übermensch* in *The Blood Meridian*, responds to the inner void by “the letting of blood” (*Blood Meridian*, 329), a lust for epistemic certainty, and dominance of the earth.⁷ Indeed, as the *gerente* Quijada tells Billy in *The Crossing*, “The world has no name...The names of the cerros and the sierras and the deserts exist only on maps. We name them that we do

⁵ I am indebted to Cant for calling my attention to the indifference of the world, and thus the insignificance of humankind, as a prevalent theme in McCarthy’s work (Cant, 253). In his description of the world in *Outer Dark*, Vereen Bell emphasizes that it is not just indifferent, but hostile, “an incoherent and unrationalized gestalt of mass and process, without design or purpose, unless it is that some demented and unapproachable God invisibly presides” (Bell, 38).

⁶ Cf. McCarthy’s *The Crossing*, 411, and *The Road*, 114. For the crucial concept of the world as a tale in McCarthy’s work, I am indebted to Dianne Luce’s article, “The Road and the Matrix: The World as Tale in *The Crossing*” (Cf. works cited list).

⁷ Here we recall Judge Holden’s summation of his own project: “The man who believes the secrets of the world are forever hidden lives in mystery and fear.... But that man who sets himself the task of singling out the thread of order from every tapestry will by the decision alone have taken charge of the world and it is only by such taking charge that he will effect a way to dictate the terms of his own fate” (*Blood Meridian*, 198-99). As we will show later on, Papa himself exhibits affinities to the Judge’s project when he pulls out the separated (tapestry) pieces of the map along the journey to the sea: “He drew stick figures on the map. This is us, he said.” Papa recalls poring over maps as a child, or looking up his family in the phonebook: “Themselves among others, everything in its place. Justified in the world” (182). Papa seeks the old reassurances, the securing of order against fear, uncertainty and death. Much like Nietzsche’s critique of metaphysics, McCarthy suggests through Holden that these gropings for certainty are a denial of the world’s mystery, and thus one port of entry into complete nihilism.

not lose our way. Yet it was because the way was lost to us already that we have made those names. The world cannot be lost. We are the ones..." (387).⁸

In McCarthy's vision, we are the lost ones, not the world, and numerous scenes in the film are designed to emphasize that it is the Man himself who is lost. As father and son traverse the wasteland, the ashen void of the external world is matched by the man's own internal void, tempting him toward despair.⁹ Such despair was the option chosen by his late suicidal wife, who embraces "eternal nothingness."¹⁰ On the night of her suicide, she tells the Man, "There's nothing left to talk about. My heart was ripped out of me the night he was born." She also tries to get the Man to let her take the boy with her into oblivion. In the end, after she coldly pushes him away and refuses to say goodbye to their sleeping boy, the Man, recalling the scene, says "She was gone. And the coldness of it was her final gift. But she died somewhere in the dark. There's no other tale to tell." Having chosen, with Faulkner, grief over nothing, the Man has nothing left to say.

For the Man, things and hence their names are disappearing, and there is no truth-telling language with which to tell stories of hope, beauty, or goodness again. The inner pull in the Man toward despair, and the inability to speak truth, goodness, or hope into being for his boy, are intimately connected. The novel captures this aptly as the narrator says "[The Man] could not enkindle in the heart of the child what was ashes in his own" (154).¹¹ Instead of relying on inner

⁸ Contradicting his earlier claim that "the only mystery is that there is no mystery," Judge Holden echoes the *gerente's* comment to Billy: "Even in this world more things exist without our knowledge than with it and the order in creation which you see is that which you have put there, like a string in a maze, so that you shall not lose your way. For existence has its own order and that no man's mind can compass, that mind itself being but a fact among others" (*Blood Meridian*, 245).

⁹ I was led to this interpretive possibility by Brady Harrison's analysis of the connection between the inner and outer void in *Blood Meridian*, in which "the void without speaks to the void said to lurk within the Western consciousness" (Harrison, 35).

¹⁰ *The Road*, novel, p. 53.

¹¹ I am indebted to Brady Harrison for drawing my attention to McCarthy's narrative practice of connecting the void of landscapes with the internal void of characters (Harrison, 35ff.). Throughout *The Road*, the ashes of the world reflect the man's internal void, and the latter is directly linked to the problem of memory and the telling of stories, for "He could not construct for the child's pleasure the world he'd lost without constructing the loss as well..." (154). A large portion of the option of despair, which we cannot develop here, has to do with the reality of evil and suffering in the world. The man's wife justifies her choice of suicide by contending that "We're the walking dead in a horror film," and that "They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us and you wont face it" (55-56). She has taken death for a lover and in the face of evil and suffering in the world, takes the advice of Ivan Karamazov quite literally when he says "I...respectfully return [God] the ticket" (Dostoevsky, 272). The theme of theodicy is also evident in McCarthy's many echoes of the Book of Job. In a harrowing moment in which the man is sure that he and the boy will be found by cannibals, he prepares to kill the boy and himself, repeating the words of advice given to Job by *his* wife: "Curse God and die" (114; Cf. Job 2:9). In addition, the man echoes the most famous affirmation of God's reality in Job, turning it instead into a Job-like interrogation of God: "He raised his face to the paling day. Are you there? he whispered. Will I see you at the last? Have you a neck by which to throttle you?" (11). (Cf. Job. 19:25-26: "For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God").

monologue, the film captures this brokenness visually, by having his mirrored reflection split in two by a rivulet of blood, and by the scene in which the Man removes his wedding ring, and slides it across a crack in the asphalt of the road they are traveling on. When the boy expresses his wish to be with his mom, his wish to die, the man tells him to “stop thinking about her.” “How do I do that?,” asks the boy. The man has no answer, and immediately starts thinking about her, and the beauty and goodness of their life together that he has lost.

III. Loss and Beauty in The Word of God

In McCarthy’s novel, *The Crossing*, a blind man tells Billy, the main character, that in losing his memory of the “mundo frágil” which he once saw and knew, he has discovered that “in the deepest dark of that loss that there also [is] a ground and there one must begin” (291). Likewise, while the despairing embrace of nothingness perpetually haunts the Man’s journey in *The Road*, he does have a ground from which to begin resistance against it, where his deepest loss is instantiated. This ground is the boy himself, whose presence perpetually reminds the Man of his wife, and the life he has lost.

If the blind man in *The Crossing* is right, the Man in *The Road* must begin with the boy. Very early in the film, then, after gazing into a trash can full of human bones, the man’s very first inner monologue mentions the “old stories of courage and justice” which he tells the boy, but finds difficult to remember. The names of courage and justice, after all, have largely exited the world with their referents. But turning from the bones, he looks at the boy and says “all I know is that the child is my warrant. And if he is not the word of God, then God never spoke.” In this scene, truth-telling stories and resistance to the void are intimately connected. Because the boy is there, as a divine word, the Man *does* yet have another tale to tell. In the telling, the Man enacts his threadbare refusal to take nihilistic death as a lover.

Yet, the Man’s deepest reminder of grief and loss, the boy himself, is also the last remnant for the Man of all that is beautiful and good in the world. In the novel, the man looks at the sleeping boy by firelight, and weeps not over “Death,” but over “Beauty and goodness. Things he’d no longer any way to think about at all” (130). Later, he reflects on the boy, thinking to himself that “All things of grace and beauty such that one holds them to one’s heart have a common provenance in pain. Their birth in grief and ashes” (54). So it is that with the boy, whose very presence is both “grace and beauty” and the living reminder of grief and loss, that the man must begin, if he is to be transformed and live as a human being in the wasteland. Indeed, throughout the film, *every* moment in which the Man tries to either remember or speak about goodness, beauty, justice or courage, the boy is his occasion. “If he is not the word of God, then God never spoke.”

But what is the content of this divine word? It is no Christian Incarnation. Rather, the boy *compresently* instantiates grief, suffering and loss on the one hand, and beauty, goodness and hope on the other. Among other things, this vision reflects McCarthy’s theological debt to Jacob Boehme’s Valentinian Gnostic view that evil, suffering and loss are necessary divine creative potentialities, built right into the *pleroma* or protoforce that generates the physical world in its creative becoming.¹² The Gnosticism in question here is, importantly, a type of ontological

¹² Milbank 304; Arnold, “Sacred,” 22-23.

monism in which good and evil are, at bottom, one thing.¹³ As the locus of beauty and goodness on the one hand, and both the memory of loss and the threat of future loss (in the prospect of death by either starvation or violence) on the other, the boy is an instantiation of the word of God, the creative *logos* by which the world was made and is remade, a world in which suffering and loss as well as beauty and goodness are eternally and ontologically intertwined in the mystery of the world's becoming.

The film subtly portrays this point in a flashback scene, in which the man and his wife argue over her desire for death. As they argue, in the unfocused background, the boy is drawing a mural on the wall in which he depicts himself as a demon-child with the dove of the Holy Spirit coming out of his breast. As a compresent instantiation of the ontologically necessary evils of suffering as well as goodness, he can occasion despair, as is the case for his mother. But for the Man, the boy continually embodies that ground at which he can begin to see the mystery of the world aright, without giving into nihilistic despair.

IV. Beginning to Tend the Fire of Being

As the film progresses, the boy himself occasions the man's sporadic movements toward McCarthy's constructive vision of living rightly in a world of mystery that includes both beauty and loss. "Carrying the fire" is the McCarthian phrase denoting the human task of creative participation in the world's becoming in the face of darkness and loss. In the case of the Man, this initial carrying of fire involves evoking the Forms through rituals, and through speaking words that bring his memories, both their goodness and grief, into the present for the boy.

In one of the most moving scenes of the film, the man is washing another man's blood and brain matter out of the boy's hair in an ice cold stream of gray and green water. As the boy weeps while he is washed, only wrecked trees in shades of grey and black surround the pair. Here the man performs a baptism in the wasteland, an allusion to McCarthy's words in the novel: "So be it. Evoke the forms. Where you've nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them" (74).¹⁴ Notably here, the ceremony is intimately linked with the only direct act of lethal violence in the film, in which the Man saves the boy by shooting his cannibalistic captor through the head. True to McCarthy's Gnostic vision, the goodness of the baptismal sacred is intertwined with violence and loss.

Elsewhere, the constructive task of calling forth the forms *ex nihilo* is directly tied to the problem of memory and loss. How can the Man tell a story to his son, recover the lost world or

¹³ An anonymous Valentinian quoted by Irenaeus claims that, "the Father of all contains all things, and that there is nothing whatever outside of the Pleroma..." (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 2:4:2). McCarthy's view, heavily influenced by this sort of monism through Jacob Boehme, is that ultimately good and evil are one. The basic monistic Valentinian view, which I am not sure whether McCarthy agrees with, is that God is the only reality, who is both "cause of the generation of all that is" and the one in whom all generated things are contained (Cf. Valentinian Treatise source quoted in Hippolytus Refutation).

¹⁴ In *The Crossing*, the blind man contrasts this perpetual task of evocation with the human effort to ossify and contain the truth, illustrating the latter through the imagery of the ciborium—a man-made container used to hold the Holy Eucharist: "The key to heaven has power to open the gates of hell. The world which he imagines to be the ciborium of all godlike things will come to naught but dust before him. For the world to survive it must be replenished daily. This man will be required to begin again whether he wishes to or no" (293).

the past without also constructing the loss? It is only in his sporadic acceptances of inevitable loss that the man is able to tell the stories anew, loss and all, and thus participate, through the telling, in the creative becoming of the world in its mystery.

On this point, the extreme minimalism of the dialogue in the film is utterly faithful to McCarthy's own austerity of style. Every word spoken in the film pays its way in. However, this is no mere stylistic choice. Implicit in the scant dialogue is McCarthy's view that every spoken word of remembrance, every tale told, does some violence to its origins. In the novel, the man recalls his beautiful wife in a rose gown, thinking to himself that "each memory recalled must do some violence to its origins.... So be sparing. What you alter in the remembering has yet a reality, known or not" (131).

Earlier in the film, the man struggles to say *anything* at all about the past; he has nothing to say. What is at stake is not only the Man's own temptation to embrace the nothing, but also the boy's desire to give up hope and die. When the boy expresses this desire, to be with his mom by dying, the man tells him that the two of them just need to forget about her. Here is a crucial turning point for the Man, both in the film and in the novel. In the film, several scenes show the two walking amidst vast wreckage of telephone poles, cities, and a wide grey horizon. In the next scene, in which the boy expresses his desire to die, the road narrows to a pinprick on a high overpass, and the jack-knifed semi-truck in which the two sleep symbolically blocks any further passage on their journey. After the man has nothing to say to the boy except that he forget, he later climbs out of the truck, walking to the edge of the overpass. The man looks at his wife's picture, and then casts it off the overpass. He then removes his wedding ring. With the camera intimately following the movement of the ring, the man slides it along a small crack in the road, and then subtly steers the ring onto an unbroken surface. No less subtle than the film, the scene in the novel evokes McCarthy's former Catholic heritage, including contrition (kneeling in ashes), confession ("I'm sorry"), penance (coughing up blood and saying her name), and absolution ("It's okay").

Having faced his grief and rejected his wife's despair, the next morning (in the novel) the Man is able to speak her loss into the present for his son: "She's gone isn't she. And he said: Yes, she is" (58). In the film, a scene at a waterfall immediately follows this narrow point in the road. The boy sees a colorful rainbow in the grey mist, and the two strip naked to frolic together in the icy water. Much like Kierkegaard's Abraham in *Fear and Trembling*, the Man is able to receive his son back again, with joy for the first time.¹⁵ As the film proceeds, the man is newly able to kindle the fire of hope in his son's life, by bringing memories into the present, loss and all. The Man discovers a piano, and is brought to the ground in tears and grief over the memory of his wife. But he sees the boy, and slowly plays a few untuned bars for him, saying, "Your mother played really well." The boy responds, "I don't remember." But the story is nonetheless retold. Elsewhere, when the boy asks what happened to the Man's friends, he tells the boy that they died, and that he misses them now. There is inevitable loss even in these most sparing moments of re-telling, and yet the blessing of telling, of evoking the forms in story and action, is no less real. Hence McCarthy recounts the Man's thoughts in the novel in this way: "Not all dying words are true and this blessing is no less real for being shorn of its ground" (31). So the

¹⁵ Of course, in the case of *Johannes de Silentio's* Abraham, the joy was there all along.

man resolves to “Make a list. Recite a litany. Remember” (31).¹⁶ He has begun the task of tending the fire of being in the wasteland.

V. From the Road to the Matrix

It is one thing to realize that one must be about the business of re-citing, re-telling and remembering, and another thing to expand its horizons to the inclusion of stories other than one’s own. After the turning point in the film, at the narrow point in the road, the film turns its attention to ethics and the possibility of alterity and charity in the wasteland. As the man “carries the fire” in his minimalist, yet real efforts at telling stories, he limits his stories, his fears and hopes, to his own memories of the past and the prospects for the future lying ahead of him and the child. This is where the boy, throughout the remainder of the film, exhibits a universalizing impulse that is not acknowledged by the man until late in the story. Whereas the man sees the evocation of form, the reciting of litanies and telling of stories, as a provincial or private matter, isolated from the stories of others, the boy has a vision that is universal in scope.¹⁷

As Dianne Luce has noted in her article, “The Road and the Matrix,” in McCarthy’s fiction the images of “road” and “matrix” call forth precisely these distinctions (Luce, 196). The road, in its limited linearity and scope, is the emplotment of one person’s story, journey or memory, while the matrix exemplifies the rich tapestry of the world as tale, a tapestry composed by the “weaving God” in which all stories are woven together (Luce, 196). This recalls the words of the old priest to Billy in McCarthy’s novel, *The Crossing*, not only that “All is telling” (155), but also that “Ultimately every man’s path is every other’s” and that “There are no separate

¹⁶ This clear connection between the sparks of the campfire (as blessed “dying words”) and the fire on the ridge (inspiring Papa to “recite a litany”) draws a link between the fire-destroyed world and the fire that father and son are supposed to carry. Is there interpretive significance to the fact that the physical world has been destroyed by fire, while the goal is for father and son to keep carrying the fire? If the floating ash is a metaphor for things being burnt out, meaning and existence itself shorn of its foundations or moorings, then what are we to make of the goal of tending the fire within? If the fire they are supposed to carry means participation in the matrix of the world, in its perpetual weaving through re-memory and narrative, then the ashen landscape would signify an exploded, over-cooked version of this, a critique of the attempt to master the meaning of the world—like Papa with his maps, like Judge Holden with his lust for epistemic dominance—constructing the whole through a comprehensive hierarchy of being and forms, or else mastering it through some form of Enlightenment rationalism. The meaning implicit in the novel is that these attempts to secure meaning and eradicate mystery turn the fire into an inferno, destroying both meaning and the proper human task in the process.

¹⁷ In this respect, and throughout the whole of the novel, the man bears remarkable resemblance to Billy in *The Crossing*. Billy too has a provincial vision of life within the linear limits of his own story. Like the fatalistic diva, says Luce, “Billy’s idea that life consists only in the linear flow of experience, discounts the rich matrix of passion and value that McCarthy suggests is life itself and is achieved in the intersection of human *jornadas*, in the dynamic tales we create of ourselves and others, tales which alone formulate meaning and values as we witness and are witnessed by one another.” Luce, “Road and Matrix,” 201.

journeys” (156-57).¹⁸ In *The Road* the boy embodies this truth, utterly unable to see the journeys of others on the road as separate from that of his own and his father’s.

By contrast, the Man is fixated on maps, isolating their story, their road to the sea, as the only meaningful or important one, reducing the matrix of the world’s mystery to a line on a map. “Everything depends on reaching the coast,” he says, even though the same wasteland awaits them there. At one point in the film, the man revisits his childhood home, fixing his place and story in the world by pointing to a pencil mark on a wall that measured his height as a boy: “That’s me.” By contrast, as the man tears up while recalling his private history the boy makes a normative comment, “I don’t think we should be doing this,” and goes outside. A parallel moment in the novels occurs when the man “spread(s) out the pieces of the map in the road and studied them. He put his finger down. This is us, he said. Right here. The boy wouldn’t look,” for he is preoccupied with the fate of a boy they left alone on the road behind them. In the film, as the Man turns over the couch cushions in his old home, the patterns on them form a matrix, with colors standing out from the grey. At the same time, the boy sits on the porch, scribbling a scrambled matrix with a fistful of brightly colored crayons. He sees another boy, alone, and dropping his crayons pursues in order to help. The Man runs out and holds him back, and they leave the boy behind.

However, as the film progresses, the boy’s charitable vision of what it means to “carry the fire” begins to effect a transformation in the man. For instance, when the two run into an old blind man who has fallen in the road, the boy begs the Man to give him something to eat. “He’s not getting any food,” says the Man. But, he gives in to the boy’s pleadings, and offers one can of food. After further pleadings, the Man actually invites the stranger to share dinner, even though he tells the boy not to help him up. When the boy holds the old man’s hand as they are walking, the Man tells the boy “don’t hold his hand.”

Later, a starving man steals the cart containing all of their supplies, but leaves the Man’s sleeping boy unharmed. The Man tracks the thief down, and ignoring pleas for mercy from both the boy and the thief, he forces the thief to strip naked, leaving him freezing on the road and consigning him to certain death. In this act, the Man betrays the stories of goodness and carrying the fire that he has told the boy:

Man: “There aren’t many good guys left. Watch out for the bad guys and just keep carrying the fire.”

Boy: “What fire?”

Man: “The fire inside you.”

Boy: “Are we still the good guys?”

Man: “Yes we’re still the good guys. Of course we are.”

Boy: “We always will be, not matter what happens?”

Man: “We always will be.”

In the novel, the boy no longer wants to hear any stories from him: “Those stories are not true...in the stories we’re always helping people and we don’t help people” (268). In his merciless act against the cart thief, the Man shows himself to be no better than the cannibals who

¹⁸ Luce’s insights here are especially apt: “The priest comments explicitly on the role of witnessing others’ lives as a solution to the problem of living one’s own—as a way of breaking out of the relentlessly linear road narrative of one’s life and connecting into the larger matrix of the world by witnessing and being witnessed.” Luce, “Road and Matrix,” 198.

devour other human beings in the wasteland. The forgotten portion of the Man's task, toward which he is only starting to turn, is that in the telling of new stories he must also recognize the mystery of the world and eliminate his cherished illusions of self-assurance, on the underside of which grows his fear for the boy and dread of death.¹⁹ It is this fear that keeps the Man from "carrying the fire" with the fullness of non-provincial charity. However, the boy isn't done with him, as evidenced by their conversation after having left the cart thief alone on the road. Part of the significance of the conversation lies in the fact that the Man has been slowly dying, and both he and the boy know it:

Man: Stop sulking...he's gone.

Boy: He's not gone.

Man: What do you want me to do?

Boy: Just help him papa! Help him. He's just hungry. He's gonna die.

Man: He's gonna die, anyway.

Boy: He was so scared.

Man: I'm scared...understand. I'm scared. You're not the one who has to worry about everything.

Boy: YES I AM! I am the one...okay?!

The Man then pushes the cart back up the road, looking for the now absent thief. After putting their own lives at great risk by yelling to summon the thief, they leave the man's clothes there, with a can of food.

What the boy's perspective suggests is that "carrying the fire" means not only participation in the world's becoming through the telling and retelling of one's own story, one's own road, but also involves an ethics of charity contained in the vision of the world as a single tale, a matrix in which each story necessarily participates in that of the other.²⁰ Thus does the boy's mode of action in the world effect yet another transformation in the Man toward sacrificial charity, exhibited by the Man's willingness to cast off all concern for safety by hollering up and down the road in search of the cart thief.

¹⁹ For an elaboration of this theme and interpretation of another "map" passage in *The Road*, see note 7 above.

²⁰ In his recently published book, *Cormac McCarthy and the Myth of American Exceptionalism*, Cant argues that McCarthy's constructive vision is essentially Nietzschean, in that it calls for the "ardentheated" creation of meaning: "McCarthy addresses the potentially annihilating implications of this human insignificance, and, like Nietzsche, suggests that it must be opposed, not by belief in life's inherent meaning, but by man's inherent vitality, by his 'ardentheated' efforts to create his own meaning in an absurd world" (Cant, 253). Such ardentheartedness is very much akin to Nietzsche's conception of the *amor fati*, the love of fate and resigned yet strong acceptance of the eternal return of the same. Where Cant's interpretation founders, however, is when he forgets that it is not only the "dark" Nietzsche whose mode of living is fueled by the will to power, as in the case of a Judge Holden, for instance. Cant fails to recognize that even Nietzsche's great-souled *Urbemensch*, who exhibits aristocratic virtues by gift-giving out of his own fullness, is also driven precisely by the will to power. In the end, Cant's analysis simply cannot account for the vision McCarthy puts forward in the boy of *The Road*. The boy acts not out of self-interest, a position of abundant or virtuous self-sufficient will-to-power, but out of virtues that are far more Christian in character: compassion, charity, and a gift-giving that seem devoid of self-interest or power. Where Cant is right on target, however, is in his capturing of the voluntarist impulse in McCarthy, which I suggest is a nominalist theme which Nietzsche and McCarthy have very much in common.

As the film concludes and the Man lays dying, his transformation from despair and provincial story-telling to sacrificial charity is summed up. First, he speaks to the boy in a way that shows his non-despairing acceptance of the ontologically necessary compresence of good and evil, beauty and suffering: “If I were God, I would make the world just so, and no different...And so I have you. I have you.” The parallel quotation in the novel is even more revealing: “All things of grace and beauty such that one holds them to one’s heart have a common provenance in pain. Their birth in grief and ashes. So, he whispered to the sleeping boy, I have you” (54). Second, the Man has a newfound trust in goodness and the prospect of charity. He does not shoot the boy with their final bullet. And, instead of repeating his earlier comments to the boy that “we’re the good guys,” and to “watch out for the bad guys,” he says: “You need to find the good guys, but you can’t take any chances.” In the novel, again, the Man’s last recorded thoughts reveal even more: “Goodness will find the little boy. It always has. It will again” (281). Incidentally, in case you were wondering, goodness does find the boy.

VI. A Response to McCarthy’s Vision in *The Road*

McCarthy’s vision, as exemplified in *The Road*, does not aim at endorsing nihilism, where nihilism means the denial of truth and ultimate meaning, as well as a practical or ethical nihilism that follows from this which cannot critique morally reprehensible human violence. There are indeed both substantive ontological claims about truth and meaning, and a constructive ethics and vision of human transformation in McCarthy’s work. However, McCarthy’s ontology, and the ethics and view of human transformation that flow from this, are fundamentally anti-Christian, in a way that also does not ultimately escape nihilism, especially on the practical or ethical level. After some brief comments on memory and virtue, I will say why I think this is so.

I begin with a positive contribution made by the film. *The Road* embodies the philosophically interesting and practically important point, that a person’s memory is no mere intellectual virtue unconnected to the will, but in fact an intellectual capacity directly linked to moral virtue. Here the film is in good company with recent empirical and philosophical work on memory, which shows that what and how we remember largely depends on our desires, motivations and emotions. Moral character and good memory are, in this view, inextricably bound together.²¹ In the film, both what and how the Man remembers directly influences his ability to either curb or augment despair in himself or the boy, and determines the shape of his ongoing ethics in the wasteland. In this way, the film issues an apt illustration of the aretaic handling of memory and its direct bearing on how we live, and indeed on what we are even morally capable of appreciating. In its subtle treatment of memory, and the morally virtuous handling of memory in the face of loss and grief, the film has a profoundly positive contribution to make to those who seek transformation amidst brokenness.

I turn now to my main response, the point of which directly bears on the compatibility of McCarthy’s ontology and ethics with Christianity. First, I suggest that McCarthy’s implicit

²¹ For example, cf. John Spano, who is currently working to oppose the widespread view that an excellent functioning memory is not morally praiseworthy. Spano draws on recent empirical work on memory, showing that it “reveals a deep integration between one’s will and memory. What and how we remember largely depends on our desires, motivations, and emotions. This suggests that a properly functioning memory cannot be properly understood apart from a person’s character.” John Spano, “Good Memory” (Unpublished Manuscript, Baylor University, 2010).

endorsement of process philosophy is, arguably, compatible with Christianity, and specifically with the Catholic sacramentalism that forms part of McCarthy's own (rejected) background. *The Road* (especially the novel) clearly reveals McCarthy's view that the old alliance between Catholic sacramentalism and a Greek ontology of substances and essences has foundered. However, whether conscious of this or not, this apparent critique of Catholicism—his supposition that foundations cannot be built “beneath” the aesthetic surface of being *qua* narrative of becoming—is itself a fundamentally Catholic, and sacramental view. Because the divine *Logos* proceeded from the self-giving plenitude of the Triune God and became *flesh*, and this word continues to be both signifier and signified in the Eucharist, human language itself aesthetically and analogically participates in the gratuitous excess and peaceability of the divine rhetoric. It is perfectly coherent from *within* the Christian tradition to argue, from a sacramental understanding of reality, that we share in the life of God *aesthetically* through our words and their analogical participation in the Word.²²

Where McCarthy diverges from a Catholic vision, then, is not in his rejection of an old Christendom of substances and stable forms in favor of a storied account of being *qua* becoming. Rather, he departs from the Catholic vision in two ways, and I will contend that both departures together preclude an answer to nihilism. The first departure is the ontological monism of McCarthy's Valentinian Gnosticism, implicit in the film, which holds that evil, violence, suffering and loss are necessarily stitched into the fabric of becoming, and are ultimately one with truth, beauty and goodness. The second departure is the supposition that language always disassembles and violates its origins in the act of re-telling. This second departure is, in fact, a betrayal of McCarthy's own process philosophical view, for it implicitly separates the linguistic-aesthetic domain of human telling from the “real” world of which it is a poor reflection, and which lies behind or beneath such dissembling. This view assumes that beneath any signifier is a signified reality that can never be recovered. It is not difficult to see the contrast here between this perspective and the sacramental one in which the Eucharist *both signifies* the divine logos, and is precisely the *Ding an sich*, the thing in itself.²³ In this sacramental economy words and stories analogically partake of the plenitude of divine rhetoric offered in the Eucharist.²⁴

These meta-level concerns matter a great deal, especially when we cash them out in terms of the prospect of human transformation and an ethics of charity. So, I will now narrow my focus on the Man, and his transformation through participation in the world as tale. The question I have is this: Given the ontological and semiotic commitments above, what *must* the Man's participation be like, and what kind of transformation or charitable ethic follows?

²² While he does not take this reading nearly as deeply as he could, Jason Ambrosiano agrees with the point I am making here, noting “Catholicism's implicit semiotic agreement with postmodernism's ‘academic brother,’ poststructuralism” (Ambrosiano, 83).

²³ The contrast between such sacramentalism and McCarthy's vision is best exemplified in the gypsy's words to Billy in *The Crossing*: “...the world was made new each day and it was only men's clinging to its vanished husks that could make of that world one husk more...La cascara no es la cosa” (The husk is not the thing) (411).

²⁴ Ambrosiano's comments here are helpful: “The semiotic structure of the Catholic transubstantial Eucharist is notably elevated above that of temporal language, pre- or poststructuralist. It does not signify the concept of Christ nor the sound image signifying that concept; it is Christ. As sacred flesh and blood, it is not the bearer of meaning; it is meaning” (Ambrosiano, 83).

Consider first the Man's acceptance, in his dying words to the boy, of the ontologically necessary compresence of good and evil: "If I were God, I would make the world just so, and no different....And so I have you. I have you." Importantly, this is no mere acceptance of the justifiable reality of evil-presupposing goods. Rather, the thought is that nothing can be made whole in this life; that there is no prospect of grace, beauty, or goodness apart from their *ontological* coexistence with evil and suffering. The boy himself is the locus of this truth for the Man; his beauty goodness cannot be enjoyed or appreciated apart from the prospect of suffering and evil. For the Man, seeing that this is true without giving into despair, is a precondition for his transformation and fire-carrying participation in the world as tale. As we have seen above, such participation involves both speech and action. I want to suggest that neither form of participation ultimately offers resources for escaping practical or ethical nihilism.

Given the implicit ontology sketched thus far, what *must* the Man's transformative participation be like? I begin with language, and will move presently to action. With respect to language, the film and the novel suggest that language *necessarily* dissembles, does violence, creates loss even as it tells a new story. Hence one character in a McCarthyian film script says to himself, "I began to see all symbolic enterprise as alienation."²⁵ In all human telling, we reconstruct loss in the telling, do violence in our signifiers to the original signified, thus passing along that violence when we talk to others. Every human interaction involving words is an act of violence. Then, assuming some kind of entailment between enacting semiotic violence and the exercise of power, McCarthy's view isn't too far from a defensible interpretation of Nietzsche's will to power as transcendental event: That in *every* of semiotic human interaction a will to power is operative. The view is also not too far from Foucault's supposition that modes of discourse are just disguised assertions of power over the other. It is difficult, to say the least, how this view can sustain a notion of human transformation toward the good, or an ethic of charity.

I argue that it cannot, and the easiest way to see this, in the film, is through a strange and unjustified asymmetry in favor of the good. The world in its becoming is both goodness and evil, beauty and loss, where the one cannot be had without the other. Accordingly, the Man's participation in this becoming includes both good and evil, beauty and loss. However, with respect to evil and loss, his participation is *limited* to his memory and story-telling; he cannot remember, or utter words that call forth beauty and goodness, without reconstructing the loss or doing some violence to the original. Committing violence through re-remembering speech is, for the Man, both a precondition for and constitutive element of his transformation.

But what about action? The asymmetry shows itself here. The Man and boy are the "good guys," a label that involves their refusal to be cannibals, but also (ideally) the ethic of sacrificial charity. In *action*, then (unlike in words), the implicit normative view is that they are to participate in the *goodness* of the world's becoming, but not the loss, evil or badness. So, the view seems to be that while *semiotic* violence is essential to our transformative human task, *physical* violence is not. But, what justifies this asymmetry? It is certainly true that, in spite of and in response to necessary evils, we could participate in the world's becoming by being the "good guys." But if good and evil are ontologically necessary aspects of the world's becoming, then why not, in response to and in spite of necessary goodness, participate in this becoming by being *bad guys*? Qualitatively, given the ontological compresence of good and evil, it looks like the same sort of participation. So, why not eat people?

²⁵ Cited in Luce, "Road and Matrix," 205.

Perhaps the thought is that while violence and loss are semiotically unavoidable, we are not supposed to *produce* them through other sorts of action. But then it seems arbitrary to endorse production of charity in action. Why not just talk about it? We can put the asymmetry here more pressingly: In speech, violence is inevitable, but also essential for the transformative project to work. In action, however, violence is mysteriously incompatible with transformation. I propose that McCarthy has neither the metaphysical nor metaethical-normative resources in place to tell us *why* we should respond to the void with sacrificial charity, rather than with physical violence. If the creator god is weaving loss and violence into the tapestry of the world, why shouldn't we do the same in speech *and* action? We are participants, after all.

This is closely related to the issue of the Man seeing the world as a matrix, which is supposed to motivate the viewer to rank the boy's universal charitable ethic over the Man's self-regarding prudential one. The implicit claim, in both film and novel, is that the world's being a matrix of interconnected stories entails an ethic of charity. My story *is* yours, so I *should* be good to you, even in the wasteland. Unfortunately, the descriptive claim that our stories are all interconnected, does not *in itself* get us from a selfishly prudential ethic to a normative ethic of charity. This is all the more true when the matrix in question, the "world as tale," necessarily involves both good and evil, beauty and loss, *and* I can't experience the beauty or goodness without the evil or loss. If I enact violence against you, and our stories are interconnected, then I do violence against myself. But that's fine, since I need loss and violence to be instantiated, for there I also receive goodness and beauty. This kind of matrix, if it exists, can neither produce nor consistently sustain an ethic of charity, for it is locked in a matrix of intersecting stories tied together by inevitable violence and loss.

I take it that an ethic of charity is only sustainable when it participates in an *unnecessary* and *gratuitous* response to (but not only to) what has gone *wrong* in the matrix.²⁶ Here I have in mind a self-diffusive kind of charity, participating in the love of the triune God, that need not siphon its being or plenitude off of any necessary evil. Now, this is not to deny the simpler point, easily taken from the film, that sometimes firmly facing evil, loss and suffering in one's life is a precondition for being transformed to the life of charity. People who have deeply grieved the loss of a loved one, without giving into despair, *often* have a deeper capacity and sensitivity toward others in their losses. What it is to deny, rather, is that transformation toward charity, as well as appreciation of the beautiful and the good, requires either acquiescence to or violent participation in, the necessity of evil, suffering, and loss. I hope to have shown that this latter McCarthian view, implicit in the film-version of *The Road*, ultimately offers neither a way out of practical or ethical nihilism, nor a defensible vision of human transformation and correlative ethic of charity.

²⁶ This is *not* to say that charity has to be something like a "pure alterity" in order to count at all. As virtue ethicists Robert Adams and Neera Badhwar have recently pointed out, even in its best forms, other-regarding benevolence always involves at least *some* element of non-reprehensible self-regard.

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