

ANALYSIS

God in *The Road* (2006)

Cormac McCarthy

(1933-)

“Though the novel takes no absolute position on the existence of God and the role of the divine, it expresses with some force the value of belief as an essential ingredient of hope, seen especially in the father’s sense of the boy’s divinity and in the child’s blending of kindness with his assent to God’s presence and goodness.”

Steven Frye
Understanding Cormac McCarthy
(U South Carolina 2009) 175

“The science-fiction writer John Clute cuts through the critical clutter: ‘The central riddle of *The Road* is God.’ I could not agree more, but I cannot quite agree with his final opinion: ‘It is a story for one find it impossible to think of as being redeemed by a Christ. It is a story about the end of the world in which the world ends.’ In other words, Clute’s answer to my question is—nothing, there’s nothing at the end of the road. Such a statement—‘in which the world ends’—strikes me as too categorical for *The Road* or for McCarthy’s work as a whole, of which *The Road*, presaged over and again from *The Orchard Keeper* onward, is both a logical continuation and a kind of termination. I believe, with Edwin T. Arnold, that McCarthy’s work is grounded in moral choice....

In the earliest...drafts, with the working title ‘The Grail,’ the father thinks of himself as neither believing nor disbelieving in God, then goes on to say that the idea that God had ‘looked upon his work’ and then ‘despaired of it,’ abandoning man, did not seem ‘unlikely.’ So it is clear from the very beginning that ambivalence about God was to form a central theme of *The Road*....

Most readers tend to think that the unspecified catastrophe in the novel is man-made, but if so, why does McCarthy deliberately fail to say so, either in the novel or in subsequent interviews? What if it is God-made or, perhaps worse, a catastrophic accident? McCarthy remarked somewhat facetiously in a recent interview in the *Wall Street Journal*: ‘I don’t have an opinion.... But it could be anything—volcanic activity or it could be a nuclear war. It’s not really important’.... The disaster may not be caused by man, but the episode with Ely [Postmodernist] can only reinforce a case against any God other than a totally absent one, no matter how eccentric or contrived Ely himself may be. And his pronouncement—a brilliantly succinct Nietzschean-Islamic oxymoron—may be the ultimate expression of atheistically existential angst.... The key word, for my purposes, is ‘unremarked,’ a word which seems to indicate a nonexistent or uncaring God.... These passages point convincingly to nothingness and doubtless are among the major reasons the novel has been labeled nihilistic or godless....

The textual case for God, or more specifically, a Christ-like figure in the boy, difficult to imagine without some a priori God, however aloof, comprises more evidence than the negative case, and I think more convincingly. We can understand much of the material by stringing it together, almost without explication, beginning with this passage, which is the first description we hear of the boy: ‘He knew only that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke,’ a passage that seems to allow a laconically twofold interpretation, while clearly alluding to the Logos: ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God,’ and to the ‘Word [...] made flesh’ of John I:I and 14.... [The] figurative fire will become a central motif for the boy’s sacred nature, which the father will continue to assert, as when he asks Ely: ‘What if I said he’s god?’ a role the boy will eventually take for himself. In an early version of this scene with Ely, the father asserts three times that he thinks the boy is ‘a god’....

When later the boy replies to his father, saying that he is the one 'who has to worry about everything,' saying, 'Yes I am...I am the one,' he is echoing Jesus in a number of instances—I am the way, the truth and the light (John 14:6)... Suffice it to say the proclamation 'I am,' particularly as avatar, is among the strongest phrases in the Old and New Testaments, the latter inevitably an echo of God's pronouncement to Moses: 'I AM THAT I AM' (Exodus 3:14). Not only does the boy offer to take responsibility, he offers to do so in unmistakably religious language, with none of the equivocation or contradiction so evident in Ely's negative discourse. The boy, born after the disaster, has been raised, we must assume, without church or scripture, and his scriptural echoes must therefore issue forth from narrative design or divine inspiration. They cannot be—not in a Cormac McCarthy novel—inadvertent echoes or unintentional allusions. It is also revealing to note that McCarthy added the phrase 'I am the one.' In the original draft the boy merely says 'Yes I am'....

[The] fire motif, pervasive in McCarthy's work, appearing in novels such as *Outer Dark*, *Blood Meridian*, and *No Country for Old Men*, was evident from the earliest typescript, 'The Grail,' in which the father tells the boy that he has the fire inside him and that, in a phrase later crossed through, 'Its very strong.' Is that the figurative fire of civilization? I think it means—textually, in this novel—less something vaguely Promethean than the literal belief in or presence of God or at the very least some entrapped divine spark of the Gnostics.... Alongside the fire motif runs a continuing light motif—when there is in this darkest of worlds no source of light—that only reinforces the sacred nature of the boy: 'There was light all about him' and 'when he moved the light moved with him'.... The boy incarnates some second coming....

Evidently in editing, McCarthy wanted a more subtle rendition of the boy's blessedness, just as he apparently wanted to tone down the title from 'The Grail' to *The Road*, but the combination of the *grail* and the *blessed child* in the early drafts clearly conveys McCarthy's sense of the boy's role in unmistakably Christ-like iconography.... It is a Hemingwayesque burying of the all too obvious—the famous iceberg technique—to strengthen the power of the passage.... There could be a dissertation on...the meaning of *fire* and *light* as God and Christ in Jacob Boehme and Cormac McCarthy—[it] means divine essence, the stuff of God (not unlike the Tao or Brahman, or in quantum physics the matrix of Max Planck, or even the so-called god-particle of recent physics).... The central question would seem to be precisely that: Does the Christ-like figure of the boy transcend—or reverse or compensate for—such an absence or withdrawal [of God]....?

If McCarthy didn't want us to read it in the way I just have, why did he write it that way? Why say goodness will find the boy and have goodness find the boy? Why drag out a deliberate and undisguised *deus ex machina*—no one could seriously argue that McCarthy was unaware of the fact—if what you want to do is deny any sort of *deus*? And it is not just goodness that finds the boy but a new and this time caring mother, the mother that does not exist for the long list of road warriors that inhabit all of McCarthy's novels, the mother absent or defective in every single one of them, including most especially this one, and not just goodness but warm caring affectionate understanding maternal goodness—quite the opposite of the mother who has abandoned the boy—the only such maternal goodness, all one short paragraph of it, in virtually all of McCarthy's work. If the message according to Clute is meant to be nothing more than the withdrawal of whatever Gnostic substance there is out there, why have as the subject of the last paragraph of the plotted novel a mother who is not only all of the foregoing, but also a mother who understands how to explain the unexplainable without attempting to force any belief on the boy?...

Here I am reaffirming Jay Ellis's optimistic reading of '[t]he ending [that] provides us for the first time in a McCarthy novel with a full family,' but I want to go a step beyond that assertion and nail my reading in a text that is pure McCarthy: 'She would talk sometimes about God.' That sentence describes an intentionally and pointedly repeated action, not the indefinite future of '[s]he would talk to him sometime about God,' but 'She would talk to him *sometimes* about God,' that single letter 's,' showing us a continued and continuing action, opens us to the only remotely happy ending in all of McCarthy's work, scented as it is with the boy's breath that is the breath of God....

In the deep mountain hollows and coves where the trout *once* lived, emblematic of the entire natural world, all of nature was older than man and all of it, everything, hummed with the essence of life. It is no coincidence that the final word of the novel is 'mystery'.... The trout, whatever else it is, is a fish, one of

the most obvious and unmistakable of Christian symbols. Perhaps we can best read these final words as McCarthy's ultimate poetic commentary on his own creation, on his own version of what seems a kind of Christian existentialism. Regardless of how we conceive of God—even as transcendent or removed or absent—the divine becomes immanent in the love between the father and the boy.... As in Christian existentialism, there are no easy answers in this novel, only difficult questions and the need for what Janet Maslin called in her review, 'an embrace of faith in the face of no hope whatsoever'...."

Allen Josephs
"The Quest for God in *The Road*"
The Cambridge Companion to Cormac McCarthy, ed. Steven Frye
(Cambridge U 2013) 133-43

"The post-apocalyptic and wasted world has often been misread as simple metaphor, as an existential void in which father and son can only find meaning in the brief and contingent love that binds them, in a universe devoid of hope or God. Read carefully in the context of the tradition that informs McCarthy, a new and more informed reading emerges. Father and son wander a typological wilderness, vividly reminiscent of the Old and New Testaments, where they ponder the existence of God, the role of goodness and decency, and, similar to Christ, encounter a Satan figure Ely who tempts them to abandon all hope and faith. Clearly theirs is a spiritual trail prefigured in the Bible, and father and son must decide whether human kindness is worth preserving, with the question of God emerging frequently in discussion...."

The boy has emerged in the novel as a messianic figure, unselfishly concerned with others in a wasted world. His father has died, but before his death he encourages his son to talk to him when he is gone. After being taken in by a family, the mother encourages the boy to pray, but he has difficulty doing so by speaking to God directly. His prayers resolve themselves in conversations with his father. The woman does not admonish him for this as one might expect from a more conventional Christianity, nor does she encourage him to try again to pray. Instead, she says, 'the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all of time.' From her point of view—from the perspective of existential Christianity—speaking to the father who loved the boy unconditionally is a powerful form of prayer, because God was present in the relationship that bound them. In this way, in addition to other philosophical and theological perspectives, existential Christianity is a worldview that emerges throughout his works."

Steven Frye
"Histories, Novels, Ideas: Cormac McCarthy and the Art of Philosophy"
Cambridge Companion (2013) 8-10

The father transcends gender in mothering his son, "holding him, rocking back and forth"—while also considering whether he will be able to end his suffering, if necessary. In contrast to his wife: "This is my child, he said. I wash a dead man's brains out of his hair. That's my job." He promises the boy, "My job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God. I will kill anyone who touches you"....

The father encourages his son to have faith that, as the boy says, "nothing bad is going to happen to us.... Because we're carrying the fire." He gives the boy something to believe in, that they are the Good Guys, with a mission from God. Fire has been a symbol of civilization for millennia, as exemplified by the Olympic torch, and is also a symbol of freedom, as exemplified by the Statue of Liberty. McCarthy is contradicting the secular elite academics—the Feminists, Marxists and other totalitarians—who since the 1960s have been characterizing Americans as the Bad Guys. McCarthy is carrying the fire.... This man overcomes deterministic forces and retains his humanity, as by refusing to eat a dog. He assures his son that they will never be cannibals either and the boy has faith "Because we're the good guys... And we're carrying the fire." Under the circumstances they cannot afford to set the standard of civilization very high: They agree not to eat anybody.

Suddenly coming upon themselves reflected in a mirror, the man almost raises his pistol, as if he can no longer distinguish himself from the barbarians. "It's us, Papa, the boy whispered. It's us." When he looks into the boy's face "he very much feared that something was gone that could not be put right again." By continuing to encourage the boy, he raises his own spirit: "This is what the good guys do. They keep trying. They don't give up." He is rewarded for reaching deeper into himself, for never giving up, when he

uncovers a buried hatch to an underground bunker stocked full of canned goods. Seek and ye shall find. “Oh my God,” he says three times, then a fourth time, including a line that conflates his Christ-evoking son with God: “Oh my God. Come down.”

What they discover is more hard-won than what Robinson Crusoe and Friday find on their island or what Huck and Jim find in the house floating on the river. They have found another sanctuary—a “tiny paradise”—always temporary of course. Significantly, the man finds what he needs not by praying to God in the sky but by having the guts to be self-reliant and keep digging. Preparing to eat a meal, it is the boy who prays, thanking the people who stored this food and hoping “that you’re safe in heaven with God.” The man awakens from a dream of being “visited by creatures of a kind he’d never seen before.... He thought that they’d been crouching by the side of his cot as he slept and then had skulked away on his awakening”—an experience of the spiritual or paranormal. The “creatures” may be (1) hallucinations, hence meaningless; (2) space aliens who might save or exploit what remains of the human race; (3) the spirits of the people who stored the food in the underground bunker; or (4) since the word “skulked” may have a negative connotation, they may be cannibal spirits.

Further along the road they come upon the opposite of spirituality: They overtake a bent old man with a cane who “smelled terrible” and personifies Postmodernism, as he: (1) rejects the past: “not one for looking back”; (2) is rootless: “You can’t stay in one place”; (3) isolated and solipsistic: “It’s better to be alone”; (4) selfish: “I wouldn’t have given him mine”; (5) anti-human: “Things will be better when everybody’s gone”; (6) Atheist: “There is no God”; and (7) amoral: “I live like an animal.” In contrast the boy has a heart and persuades his father to be generous to the old man because they are the Good Guys. The bitter old Atheist is suspicious of the boy’s goodness: “Maybe he believes in God.... He’ll get over it.” The Postmodernist is virtually blind: “with his cane, tapping his way”....

The burned landscape seems evidence of a nuclear holocaust—gray cities tilting, tall buildings softened by the heat from the blast, long rusting lines of cars on the interstate with melted tires and incinerated drivers. The man continues to hope it will be brighter at the southern coast, though “for all he knew the world grew darker daily.” For the sake of the boy he must have faith, and he is inspired by another memory of his wife: “When he went back to the fire he knelt and smoothed her hair as she slept and he said if he were God he would have made the world just so and no different.” Now, having lost his wife and the world, “There were few nights lying in the dark that he did not envy the dead.”

Coughing all the time now, anticipating his own death, the father sees his son as “standing there in the road looking back at him from some unimaginable future, glowing in that waste like a tabernacle.” The boy is holy. Near the coast they leave their cart behind. They reach a crossroads and the father knows that “this was the place where he would die.” Now, reversing roles, the boy takes care of his father, who gives him final instructions: “You need to find the good guys... You have to carry the fire.... It’s inside you.... You’re the best guy.... Just don’t give up.” When the boy expresses concern again for the little boy they left behind, his father assures him, “Goodness will find the little boy. It always has. It will again.” These are his last words, expressing a faith that is confirmed by the plot of the novel. The boy is saved at least twice by providential goodness: when they are starving to death and find the underground bunker of food and at the end when a family of good guys finds him on the road.

After three days of mourning, the boy returns to the road. The “road” is a metaphor of current history, the prevailing “way” of life at the moment, an artificial contrast to the Tao, the divine way of Nature. At this “crossroads” a bearded man with scars and a shotgun upsidedown over his shoulder approaches the boy and smiles. He has known the boy was there in the woods with his father and did not bother him. He expresses compassion and the boy asks, “Are you one of the good guys?” The man pulls back his hood from his face and “He looked at the sky.” The sky is the archetypal space of transcendence. The birds are dead now, but hope survives in human form. The boy feels he can trust this man because he has children and did not eat them. The road of this man “crosses” the barbaric main road, forming a cross evoking Christ, who said “Suffer the little children to come unto me.”

This good guy is leading an archetypal family—the basic unit of human civilization—gender balanced including a woman, a boy and a girl. The reader is relieved to see this woman redeem womankind from the

mother who abandons her child. This woman is introduced embracing the boy, a child not even her own: “Oh, she said, I am so glad to see you.” His mother had only one child, this woman is welcoming a third. Also unlike his mother the Atheist, this woman “would talk to him sometimes about God.” And she encourages him to talk to the spirit of his father.

The last word of the novel is “mystery.” In his own voice the narrator is agnostic as objectivity requires, but his story emphasizes that from belief in God the man derives: (1) the strength to endure; (2) humanity and morality—“the fire” of civilization; (3) faith in providential help for the Good Guys; (4) inspiration not to “lose heart”; (5) the basis for comforting and maintaining communion with his son as a spirit after death: “I’ll talk to you every day, he whispered.” The boy “tried to talk to God but the best thing was to talk to his father and he did talk to him and he didn’t forget.” (6) His father saved him by teaching him to internalize the power of God through faith. Confirming the novel, scientific studies have consistently shown that belief in God significantly improves mental health. Faith empowers.

Unlike the hero of *The Road*, in interviews McCarthy has expressed a bitter rejection of immortality: “As for me my only hope is for eternal nothingness and I hope for it with all my heart.” Ironically, these are almost verbatim the words of the mother in the novel who abandons her child. McCarthy is a religious Existentialist, humanist and theist who does not “abandon the child.” Humane and practical, he carries the fire out of duty as a man, despite his feeling that ultimately “The point is there ain’t no point.” The fire, the God within—that is the point in *The Road*.

Michael Hollister (2014)