

‘Carrying the fire’ Is God present in the post apocalyptic world of Cormac McCarthy’s novel *The Road*?^{1*}

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A man and his young son are struggling across the incinerated landscape of the United States, heading southwards to reach the coast. The child’s mother is no longer with them: she took her own life shortly after the boy was born, unable to face the possibility of being raped and eaten by cannibals in this bleak situation where only a few people are alive and everyone is desperately looking for food. The story, in Cormac McCarthy’s novel, *The Road*, which was written in 2006 and which won the Pulitzer Prize for 2007, is described by the environmental campaigner, George Monbiot, as ‘one of the most important environmental books ever written’. Among other things, it acts as a warning of the potentially dire consequences of a nuclear holocaust or of drastic climate change.

McCarthy speaks of ‘the intestate earth’,³ a planet that has no heirs and no future. We do not learn how the world became incinerated and barren, suggesting the inevitability of the destruction, a situation that would happen anyway regardless of possible causes. After all, we have tsunamis, earthquakes and the threat of severe global warming. According to scientific calculation, the world’s worst volcanic eruption occurred on Mount Toba 74000 years ago.⁴ The world has clearly been prepared for incineration in some form! I am reminded of the conclusion of Friedrich Dürrenmatt’s black comedy *The Physicists* where ‘round a small, yellow, nameless star there circles, pointlessly, everlastingly, the radioactive earth’, after nuclear power and the fate of the world have fallen into the hands of an insane psychiatric doctor.⁵ Is the cataclysm depicted in *The Road* the result of a nuclear holocaust, or the logical, disastrous consequence of climate change? Or is it the logical consequence of the presence of the fire deep down at the centre of the earth that comes to the surface in the molten lava of a volcanic eruption, such as we saw in the BBC television series *The Power of the Planet* in which the presenter descends into the crater of a volcano in Ethiopia and almost touches the fiery lava as it lurks and bubbles threateningly? Or is it a divine visitation, perhaps punitive, in which God purges us of our achievements and we start afresh, as Teilhard de Chardin writes:

'Man can never reach the blazing centre of the universe simply by living more and more for himself, nor even by spending his life in the service of some earthly cause however great. The world can never be definitely united with you, Lord, save by a sort of reversal, a turning about . . . which must involve the temporary collapse not merely of all individual achievements, but even of everything that looks like an advancement for humanity.'⁶

Our imagination is simply left with the desperate post-apocalyptic picture, which seems to offer no hope to the few survivors. Dürrenmatt's 'yellow star', the sun, round which his earth spins, is contrasted with McCarthy's equally poignant image in which, after perhaps incinerating the planet with global warming or helpless to prevent destruction by other means 'the banished sun circles the earth like a grieving mother with a lamp'.⁷ The man carries a revolver containing two bullets which he even tries to teach the boy to use, should their situation become irreparable.

So does the novel offer a picture that is in any way different from what McCarthy demonstrates in previous works? Is there any way in which God can be perceived as present in this grim scene? Critics see very little to hope for in this bleak world. If we look back to his great novel *Blood Meridian*, the ex-priest pronounces his verdict: ' . . . certainly the wise high God in his dismay at the proliferation of lunacy on this earth must have wetted a thumb and leaned down out of the abyss and pinched it hissing into oblivion'.⁸ It is a topsy-turvy world in which the abyss is above us or we are so far down even below the bottom of the abyss and God extinguishes us. But at least God is mentioned and acts, whereas in the final orgiastic, Dionysian dance of depravity in the novel the world has finally lost all contact with the divine.⁹ However, in *No Country for Old Men*, the novel McCarthy wrote before *The Road*, there is some hope of God's presence following the brutal events of the greater part of the work. When Sheriff Bell, anxious to make amends for failures earlier in his life, meets his uncle Ellis, he tells him: 'I always thought when I got older that God would sort of come into my life in some way. He didn't.'¹⁰ But he continues to wonder:

'Do you think God knows what's happenin?'

'I expect he does.'

'You think he can stop it?'

'No. I don't.'¹¹

Is God present in Cormac McCarthy's novel The Road?

But in his desire to be reconciled to his father, Bell has a dream in which he sees his father: 'And in the dream I knew that he was goin' on ahead and that he was fixin' to make a fire out there in all that dark and all that cold and I knew that whenever I got there he would be there.' Then he almost dashes the hope when he wakes up.¹² Yet the thought is present, to be taken up where he leaves off, in *The Road*.

So, despite the bleak picture which the author describes in unbelievably beautiful prose, *The Road* begins with more hope of the presence of God than the tale generally allows for. In one of his rare interviews, McCarthy is said to have claimed that the book is 'about goodness',¹³ and the distinguished film critic, Philip French, in his review of the film version of the novel, writes of the novel's 'harrowing, but ultimately life-enhancing qualities'.¹⁴ But when one critic expresses the thoughts of very many in his comment that 'in McCarthy's novel there is no hope . . . And yet the father and son go on, seeking to find meaning and purpose',¹⁵ the outlook for discovering the presence of God beyond human endeavour is, on balance, not very promising. Thus, the signs pointing to God's presence and involvement in this apparently hopeless situation must now be considered in detail to offset the grim scene before us.

While the author paints a bleak picture, the name of God and signs of God's influence are never far from his pen. Very early in the novel the father says of his son: 'If he is not the word of God, God never spoke.'¹⁶ The boy embodies for the father all the hope he might have in God, all the evidence he has of God's reality. At a particularly difficult moment, he tells his son: 'My job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God.'¹⁷ But the boy is also leading the father, directing his moral sense, while being protected physically by him. In the opening paragraph the father relates that in a dream 'from which he's awakened he had wandered in a cave where the child led him by the hand'.¹⁸ In this bleakest of opening two pages, the word 'light' occurs four times to at least counteract the force of what he says in the third line of his story: 'Nights dark beyond darkness and the days more gray each one than what had gone before.'¹⁹ While the father's love is solely for his son, the 'word of God' given into his keeping, and he sees his role as that of protecting the boy against all comers, his protective urge is throughout countered by the boy's strong moral concern for those they encounter and are unable to help, to such an extent that the child pesters his father to help fellow sufferers long after the event has ceased to have significance. Any respite and sustenance they find are short-lived. The father's developing illness marks this decline into apparent hopelessness. However, the boy gradually grows accustomed to

the situation and less dependent on his father, whose hacking cough and growing physical weakness signal that the child will eventually have to fend for himself, as long as this is possible in the conditions.

It seems that a balance is being maintained between total despair and the advent of some hope that the boy will be able to cope, at least in the short-term. While their hopeless situation is symbolized by the empty tin that is left between the father's feet once they have reached the coast and found tins of peaches to eat,²⁰ the fact that the father entrusts his revolver to the boy is a sign of trust that extinction is not absolutely guaranteed.²¹ But the father's act of firing off the flare pistol in the hope that somebody, perhaps God (in the boy's mind) might see them, signals another descent into futility.²²

An old man whom they encounter mocks the suggestion of the presence of God in a corrupt version of terms familiar to Moslems when he says: 'There is no god, and we are his prophets',²³ but a firm seed of hope is planted quite early in the story and recurs four more times in the text when the father reiterates the son's assertion that they are 'carrying the fire', words that the father has obviously repeated previously.²⁴ As mentioned above, the germ of this idea has already been present at the end of McCarthy's previous novel. The view of many readers is that this signals a tribute to the power of human effort against insuperable odds.

However, while sceptics rule out divine involvement, two converging views of the nature of literary creation and our interpretation of what we read can help us to a different conclusion where God becomes important to our quest. Marcel Proust writes: 'We feel that our wisdom begins where the author's finishes, and we would like him to give us answers, when all he can do is to give us wishes.' A few lines later he continues: 'The limit of their wisdom only appears to us to be the beginning of ours, so that at the moment when they have told us everything they could tell us, they have aroused in us the feeling that they have not yet told us anything.'²⁵ What a novelist writes is a stimulus to us to ask questions and to discover our own answers within ourselves. And in *The Art of the Novel*, Milan Kundera writes: 'A poet who serves any truth other than the truth to be *discovered* . . . is a false poet.'²⁶ It is a reasonable proposition that, given a substantial body of supporting evidence, a valid response can be evoked in the reader that is true for us that is not necessarily in the mind or intentions of the writer, and certainly not of other readers. I believe that the evidence, not only for God's initial commission to the father to protect his son, but also for a belief in the presence of God even in the depths of this poignant tale can be detected in *The Road* as the story unfolds and reaches its climax,

despite the dire prognosis present in much of the text and in the minds of many readers. The evidence for this must now be considered.

Mention has already been made of the frequent naming of God in the course of the story, even if the allusions are sceptical or despairing in their tone and implications. The use of the word 'fire' carries both negative and positive implications – the fire of destruction visited upon this world and yet also the 'fire in the earth' of Teilhard de Chardin when, in contrast to the fire of destruction, he says: 'If the Fire has come down into the heart of the world, it is . . . to lay hold on me and to absorb me.'²⁷ It is the fire of purging and re-creation. Before he dies, the father expresses his confidence that his son will continue to carry the fire. When the child says that he doesn't know where the fire is, the father utters words that are crucial to our understanding of the novel: 'It's inside you. It was always there. I can see it.'²⁸ This follows the father's expression of hope that his son will be able to continue the fight, as he watches him while they are sitting by the fire. 'He wanted to be able to see. Look around you, he said. There is no prophet in the earth's long chronicle who's not honoured here today. Whatever form you spoke of you were right.'²⁹ In his own mind he is directly refuting the nihilistic assertion of the old man previously mentioned who declares that 'There is no God and we are his prophets.' In Jeremiah the prophet announces the coming of the new covenant that the Lord will make with Israel: 'I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbour, or a man his brother, saying: "Know the Lord", because they will all know me, from the greatest of them to the least' (Jer.31:33–34).³⁰ And when, as recorded in Luke's Gospel, the Pharisees ask Jesus when the kingdom of God will come, he answers: 'The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, "Here it is" or "There it is", because the kingdom of God is within you' (Luke 17.20–21).

The father has seen that, just as our Lord is recorded as stating that 'where your treasure is there will your heart be also', his son's strong moral convictions and love of fellow sufferers have for a long time been evidence of a divine spirit written like an instinctive, natural law on his son's nature, carrying him forward. After the father's death when the boy is found by a stranger and his family, he asks the stranger, rather as if he is naively repeating what he has heard time and again from his father: 'Are you carrying the fire?'³¹ Though the stranger, unfamiliar with the secret held by the father and his son, is at first unable to understand the drift of the boy's question, he answers in the affirmative, and the boy is

also at once reassured on hearing that he has a family and that there is another boy present. There is also a girl in the family, suggesting hope for the future of the race. These people have somehow been able to stay together and are surviving for now at least. The boy, who has throughout been asking his father if the people they meet are 'the good guys' is able to take comfort in the fact that these people are indeed good and he can trust them.³² The boy trusts the stranger to cover his father's body with a blanket. The stranger trusts the boy to keep the revolver. The basis is there for the creation of a new family and for the boy's adoption into it.

In the final two pages of the novel, the new mother assumes importance. When the boy mourns his dead father and promises to talk to him every day, the mother welcomes and embraces him. Sometimes she talks to him about God, but when he tries to pray he finds that the best thing is to talk to his father. His new mother approves, saying that 'the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all of time'.³³ Human beings have been created by God to hand down the flame from generation to generation. At this point, the question whether any of them would survive long enough to carry any fire forward is almost transformed into the hope of new relationships, new faith and purpose. Through the sheer beauty and simplicity of the language the reader is almost made to suspend all gloom and disbelief and live in hopes that the bleak world of the author's creation up to this point is not the end of all things.

The last paragraph of the novel is enigmatic, confirmed by the final word 'mystery'. There is a picture of trout morphing into shapes like worms resembling the beginnings of maps of the world: 'Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they live all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery.'³⁴ Man is the newest of creatures. He is the latest created being. What has been done to the world cannot be undone. The picture again reverts partly to one in which, in the words of *Blood Meridian* already quoted, man is 'pinched . . . hissing into extinction'. Yet goodness has emerged from the ruins and new relationships of goodness, faith and service have been created. An objective look at the state of the post-apocalyptic world depicted in the novel might tell us that these new hopes are ultimately to be dashed. But within the terms of the novel and of our experience of immersion in its beauty God has been seen throughout the work, and especially in its conclusion. One could be forgiven, however, for looking back at the brief exchange between Bell and Uncle Ellis in the previous novel in which God is said to know what is happening, but is unable to prevent it. On that basis, a sceptic might well say that if God is power-

Is God present in Cormac McCarthy's novel The Road?

less, any love God might have for the incinerated world is meaningless.

But in one final glimpse of my truth discovered in this novel, following Proust's advice, I am reminded of the words from Paul's letter to the Corinthians: 'God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of the world, and the despised things – and the things that are not – to nullify the things that are' (1 Cor. 1.27–28). With the eye of faith, one can see the end of this world as the beginning of the new. One can see God creating a world from the ruins of what no longer exists. Just as the German nation saw 1945 as 'zero hour' from which everything must rise from the ruins, I believe that our author sees that humankind, though it cannot remake what is destroyed, can carry the fire forward and that, just as the book closes in mystery, all things are possible and the name of God has not been named in vain throughout the course of this work. What the future holds, none can ever know. But the final paragraph of the novel holds also the suggestion that a new world is beginning. McCarthy speaks of 'vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its *becoming*.'³⁵ The proximity of death and physical extinction does not exclude the reality of faith here and now. 'The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.' (John 1.5) In this novel we have in the here and now a priceless tenderness in the hearts of human beings and hope in new relationships in a writer who has a glimmer of hope in humankind, and who has succeeded in recreating a new work of beauty from the ruins of the old. Thus, just as 'against all hope, Abraham in hope believed' (Rom.4.18) that his race had a future, we are lured into a belief that a new world of people indwelt by the divine spirit might, after all, just be possible and if brief, once seen, cannot be extinguished from our consciousness.

NOTES

- 1 McCarthy, Cormac, *The Road* (London, Picador, 2007).
- 2 Dr Gordon Leah is a retired languages teacher and Methodist local preacher He is the author of four textbooks in German, of numerous articles for religious and educational journals and of books of meditations on contemporary stained glass.
- 3 *The Road*, p. 138.
- 4 See Winchester, Simon, *Krakatoa* (London, Penguin, 2004), p. 309.
- 5 Dürrenmatt, F., *The Physicist* (London, Samuel French, tr. by James Kirkup, 1963), p. 53, my translation.
- 6 de Chardin, Teilhard, *Hymn of the Universe* (London, Collins Fontana, 1970), p. 30.
- 7 *The Road*, p. 32.
- 8 McCarthy, Cormac, *Blood Meridian* (London, Picador, 1990), p. 244.
- 9 *Blood Meridian*, p. 331–35.

Is God present in Cormac McCarthy's novel The Road?

- 10 McCarthy, Cormac, *No Country for Old Men* (London, Picador, 2005), p. 267.
- 11 *No Country for Old Men*, p. 269.
- 12 *No Country for Old Men*, p. 309.
- 13 article in *The Observer*, 20 December 2009, p. 43.
- 14 article in *The Observer* review section, 3 January 2010, p. 13.
- 15 Cowley, J., *The New Statesman*, 26 November 2007, p. 51.
- 16 *The Road*, p. 3.
- 17 *The Road*, p. 80.
- 18 *The Road*, p. 1.
- 19 *The Road*, p. 1.
- 20 *The Road*, p. 254.
- 21 *The Road*, p. 305.
- 22 *The Road*, p. 258.
- 23 *The Road*, pp. 180–81.
- 24 *The Road*, p. 87. Also pp.136, 231, 298, 303.
- 25 Proust, Marcel, *On Reading* (Fr, 'Sur la lecture', France, Actes Sud, 1998) p. 32, my translation.
- 26 Kundera, Milan, *The Art of the Novel* (London, Faber & Faber, tr. by Asher, L., 1988) p. 117, author's italics.
- 27 *Hymn of the Universe*, p. 28.
- 28 *The Road*, p. 298.
- 29 *The Road*, p. 297.
- 30 Biblical references are from the New International Version and are given in brackets in the text.
- 31 *The Road*, p. 303.
- 32 *The Road*. The first of the eleven references to this occurs on p. 81.
- 33 *The Road*, p. 306.
- 34 *The Road*, p. 307.
- 35 *The Road*, p. 307, my italics.