

Hanna Boguta-Marchel

## Biblical Undertones of the Father-Son Relations in the Fiction of Cormac McCarthy

The work of the increasingly renowned, Pulitzer-prize-winning American novelist, Cormac McCarthy, for all its grim, dismal, and at moments genuinely macabre implications, strikes the reader with a number of biblical themes and undertones. One of the topics prevalent in McCarthy's fiction and imbued with allusions to the biblical archetype is the motif of fatherhood and sonship as well as the matter of the father-son mutual relations. The biblical paradigm of this bond may be recapitulated as a string of seemingly irreconcilable paradoxes: undivided unity and absolute autonomy, total submission and unmitigated freedom, constant concurrence and each-time independence, being a child (Jesus) and a father (God) at once. In my paper I discuss this motif with regard to the biblical prototype in three of McCarthy's novels: *Blood Meridian*, *Child of God*, and *The Road*.

### ***Blood Meridian: The Death of the Father***

*Blood Meridian, Or the Evening Redness in the West* (1985), set on the borderlands between Mexico and the United States in the second half of the nineteenth century, recounts the bloody passage of the – historically factual – Glanton gang of brutish and inhumanly violent outlaws and scalp-hunters who have a contract with local governors to provide Mexicans with the scalps of Apache Indians who terrorize the isolated borderland villages and towns. The novel begins with the sentence “See the child” (3) – seemingly an ironic echo of Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man*: “Behold the child, by Nature's kindly law / Pleased with a rattle, tickled with a straw.” Obviously, the image of the protagonist (“the kid” as he is namelessly referred to) that McCarthy offers at the beginning of *Blood Meridian* has nothing in common with the idyllic vision propounded by Pope. Its predominant mood is a deeply tragic sense of loss: the father lost the mother of his child when she was delivering it into this world. Of the “night” of his son's birth he says, “God how the stars did fall. I looked for blackness, holes in the heavens” (3). The kid lost not only his mother, whose name he does not even know and his sister “that he will not see again,” but ultimately also his father who now “lies in drink” and is unable

to provide his son with the most basic nurturing. The father-son relationship therefore becomes peculiarly reversed at the very outset: “the child,” compelled to take upon him obligations going far beyond his age, comes to be “the father of the man” (3). This situation is obviously far removed from the biblical ideal, in which the Son gradually comes to form a transcendental oneness with the Father through radical submission and profound freedom.

The theme of fathers and sons recurs on different levels a number of times throughout the novel. It appears most explicitly in one of the stories Judge Holden (the most brutish of all the scalp hunters) relates to his companions (142-145). It is a tale about the father who is unable to provide for his family other than by dressing as an Indian and robbing those who pass the road near his house yet without inflicting any kind of physical injury on them. One day he tries to rob a young traveler, who nevertheless manages to show him how shameful his way of living is and encourages him to repent and “take his brother into his heart.” The traveler is then invited to dine with the family; they all talk and become quite affectionate towards one another. In any event, when the man walks the traveler to the crossroads, he kills him with a rock, takes his clothes, his watch and his money, buries him by the side of the road, bloodies his own body with a flint, comes back to his family and tells them that they have been attacked by robbers and that the young wayfarer was murdered. His wife time and again comes to visit the traveler’s grave, bringing flowers and grieving over his tragic fate as if he were her own child. On his death bed the father of the family reveals the truth to his son, upon which the boy with jealousy and hatred scatters the bones of the dead traveler, leaves his family, and himself becomes “a killer of men.” Yet the vital import of the judge’s story concerns the destiny of the young traveler’s son who was at that time still in his mother’s womb and was therefore born and raised without his father:

All his life he carries before him the idol of a perfection to which he can never attain. The father dead has euchered the son out of his patrimony. For it is the death of the father to which the son is entitled and to which he is heir, more so than his goods. He will not hear of the small mean ways that tempered the man in life. He will not see him struggling in follies of his own devising. No. The world which he inherits bears him false witness. He is broken before a frozen god and he will never find his way. (145)

Judge Holden’s claim is that witnessing the father’s struggle with his own weaknesses as well as gaining independence through the experience of the father’s death are essential elements of the son’s upbringing.

Interestingly (and quite ironically since it turns out that no one is “entitled” to his death), it is the judge himself who functions as the major father figure in the novel, and it is the kid who seems to be both most attracted to and most subjugated by the judge’s fatherly influence. All throughout the book, the judge manifests a peculiar interest in children (usually deplorable and terrified survivors of the massacres carried out by the gang) and coming into confidential contact with them belongs to his numerous “gifts.” Yet this contact invariably proves to be noxious and ultimately deadly for the young ones: the narration either explicitly describes their violent murdering by the judge (“in the morning the judge was dandling [the Apache boy] on one knee while the men saddled their horses. Toadvine saw him with the child as he passed with his saddle but when he came back ten minutes later leading his horse the child was dead and the judge had scalped it”; 164), relates the finding of their mutilated bodies (“In the meantime someone had found the boy. He was lying face down naked in one of the cubicles”; 118), or simply tells of their obscure missing (191, 239, 333).

Although there is scarcely any exchange between the judge and the kid until their two final encounters in San Diego and in Griffin, the kid is repeatedly reported to be carefully “watching” the judge (5, 243, 281, 282), and when the ex-priest Tobin tells him to “study the judge,” he answers, “I done studied him” (122). He knows that the judge poses lethal danger to his own self, yet he is compelled to listen to his speeches and unable to shoot him despite being granted a few singular occasions to do so (285, 291, 298). The judge’s exceptional treatment of the kid is also merely suggested throughout the novel by his querying glances across the fire, to be fully revealed only at its closing. When Holden visits the kid in the San Diego prison, he asks with well performed bitterness, “Don’t you know that I’d have loved you like a son?” (306). He accuses the kid of being the sole cause of the tragic finale of the gang’s venture: “You put your own allowances before the judgments of history and you broke with the body of which you were pledged a part and poisoned it in all its enterprise” (307). The kid’s fault, according to the judge, consisted in the unwillingness to participate in the mission wholeheartedly, in an insufficient degree of ingenious cruelty and forthright ruthlessness: “There’s a flawed place in the fabric of your heart. Do you think I could not know? You alone were mutinous. You alone reserved in your soul some corner of clemency for the heathen” (299). Holden owns up to his singular attitude to the kid and bewails the frustration of his prospects toward his person: “I recognized you when I first saw you and yet you were a disappointment to me” (328).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In this case, like in his many other utterances, the Judge’s rhetoric echoes biblical wording – here alluding to Jesus talking to Nathanael: “Nathanael saith to him: Whence knowest thou me? Jesus answered, and said to him: Before that Philip called thee, when thou wast under the fig tree, I saw thee” (John 1.48 Charles Thomson Septuagint Bible).

Before they meet in Griffin for the very last time, the kid, already referred to as “the man,” comes to participate in another father-and-son exchange, this time acting the part of the destructive parent. He encounters a group of ragged boys, “violent children orphaned by war” (322), and is humiliated by the oldest of them who refuses to believe in his scalp-hunting past. Notably using rhetoric resembling that of the judge, the fifteen-year-old boldly asserts, “I knowed you for what you was when I seen ye” (322). The kid did not dare to shoot the father-judge, but this time, given the chance to act out the role of the deadly parent, he kills the boy who repudiated his authority and protested at being called “son” (“You aint callin me a liar are ye son? / I aint ye son”; 321). This way he only extends the fatal succession of sons-without-fathers by in turn orphaning the boy’s younger brother. “Randall you take a good look at the man that has made you an orphan,” the other boys tell him. “The orphan turned once to look back at him and then he hurried to catch up” (323).

When the man reaches Griffin, which, as the boys boastfully proclaim, is “full of whores” and “set up to be the biggest town for sin in all Texas” (319), he notices Judge Holden in the first tavern he enters. The judge immediately takes up the fatherly discourse he used in the San Diego prison thirty years before: “Do you believe it’s all over, son?” (327). The man makes inept attempts to withdraw from the father-son exchange, yet he is overwhelmed not only by the judge’s enormous figure, his “great corpus” which “enshadowed him from all beyond” (327), but also by his powerful speech. He speaks of order and agency, of the dance, the war, and the game, of ceremony, ritual, and death. He speaks as the one who found his destiny, who fulfilled the role of agent and executor of order, and the only one who will ultimately prevail since he “has offered up himself entire to the blood of war... has been to the floor of the pit and seen horror in the round and learned at last that it speaks to his inmost heart” (331). The man, since he failed to wholly give himself up to that gory game, must be sacrificed in a sanguinary ceremony, a ritual that “includes the letting of blood” (329).

What actually happens in the final scene of the novel, remains a mystery. The man enters the jakes at the back of the tavern and sees the judge “seated upon the closet.” He is taken in and “gathered” against Holden’s “immense and terrible flesh” (333). The doors close and we are not authorized to witness the episode that takes place inside. The narration only relates the conversation of three men who meet in front of the jakes.

In the mudded dogyard behind the premises two men went down the boards toward the jakes. A third man was standing there urinating into the mud.

Is someone in there? the first man said.

The man who was relieving himself did not look up. I wouldnt go in there if I was you, he said.

...

The first man watched him go and then opened the door of the jakes.

Good God almighty, he said.

What is it?

He didnt answer. (334)

In the last paragraph of *Blood Meridian*, the narrator, with a telling use of the present tense, presents an image of the triumphant judge: "Towering over them all is the judge and he is naked dancing, his small feet lively and quick and now in doubletime and bowing to the ladies, huge and pale and hairless, like an enormous infant. He never sleeps, he says. He says he'll never die" (335).

Interestingly, the final image of the judge compellingly underscores his paradoxical child-like attributes; he is "pale and hairless, like an enormous infant" (335). This double nature of Holden as both an immense, massive, and savagely callous giant and an eerily puerile, soft-skinned neonate has been repeatedly hinted at throughout the whole novel. When the kid sees him for the first time in Nacogdoches, the judge is depicted as "an enormous man... smoking a cigar," "his face... serene and strangely childlike," "his hands... small" (6). When the members of the gang enter Chihuahua as triumphant victors and are invited to use the public baths, the judge makes his typically effective entrance, disrobing "last of all." He "walked the perimeters of the baths with a cigar in his mouth and a regal air, testing the waters with one toe, surprisingly petite. He shone like the moon so pale he was and not a hair to be seen anywhere upon that vast corpus" (167). As he approaches the desert wells together with the "idiot" he appropriated, what strikes in the image of the judge is the "pale pink beneath his talc of dust like something newly born" (282).

I therefore suppose that, having in mind the significance of the father-son relationship in the novel, we may risk reading the final scene as a kind of circular return to the image with which *Blood Meridian* commenced. As I have already noted, at the beginning of the book we are told that the mother died giving birth to her child and we witness a reversal in which the son takes on the position of the father. At its ending, we again testify to an exclusion with a simultaneous replacement: the grown man is in turn "eliminated while metaphorically giving birth to his own enormous infant, his father."<sup>2</sup> He is explicitly "the child the father of the man," and "all history [is] present in that visage" (3).

The kid is a son who had been deprived of the developmentally crucial experience of witnessing his own father struggling with his weaknesses. The father's untimely surren-

<sup>2</sup> This is John Vanderheide's depiction of the situation though his text is wholly concerned with the judge as artist-creator, not as father; 182.

der and death led to a premature father-son replacement, never giving the kid a chance to acquire the necessary ability of accepting the child in himself. In a sense, *Blood Meridian* may therefore be read as a constant search for the lost father. The members of the Glanton gang all somehow sense the graveness of the judge's words when he says that the son without the father "will never find his way" (145); although their own drives and desires are mostly unidentified, they are also compelled to submit to Holden's authority and go on with the continual obscure pursuit which will cease only with their deaths.

### ***Child of God: Ill-Defined Roles***

Lester Ballard (*Child of God*, 1973) is another fatherless figure whose early years are marked by traumatic loss. However meaningful they must have been for his subsequent anomalous development, the facts concerning his childhood period are recounted with surprising, though typically McCarthian, scantiness. From the relations of anonymous narrators we merely learn that Lester's mother abandoned the family ("They was just the one boy. The mother had run off, I don't know where to nor who with"; 21), after which the father committed suicide by hanging himself in the attic of their family house. The senior Ballard is therefore more explicitly a victim than the father of the kid from *Blood Meridian*, and Lester, in his "chronically perverse childishness," will repeat an analogous pattern of "holy victimization" (Ciuba 168-169). In a warped imitation of his parent, in a kind of wayward, "prolonged homecoming" (Ciuba 170), Lester senses the degradation and self-depreciation of suicide, and thus inverts the same aggressive impulses against others, himself becoming a serial killer.

Just like the kid, Lester Ballard is deserted by his father abruptly and too early, and, similarly to the kid, he is never able to fully mature into an independent grown-up – an adult capable of accepting and parenting the child within himself. It is only at the ending of the novel, when, after committing his macabre murders and collecting the bodies of his female victims in deep caves, he experiences a symbolic rebirth. Emerging from the underground "swaddled up in outsized overalls and covered all over with red mud" (192), he finally seems to feel in place. "I'm supposed to be here," he says entering the county hospital (192). Yet, as in the case of the kid, Lester's obscure quest must end in death, after which he is returned to the earth ("Ballard was scraped from the table into a plastic bag and taken with others of his kind to a cemetery outside the city and there interred. A minister from the school read a simple service"; 194) – to the womb that symbolically brought him back to life.

This destructive lack of clear boundaries between parent and child (with both the kid and Lester forced to act out adult roles before becoming properly mature) is dismayingly

represented in the scene of incest between the primitive dump keeper and one of his promiscuous teenage daughters. Reubel, with whom Ballard occasionally drinks bootleg whiskey and exchanges casual remarks about recent local events, “had spawned nine daughters and named them out of an old medical dictionary gleaned from the rubbish he picked.... Urethra, Cerebella, Hernia Sue.” Yet they seem so much alike that he is unable to track their maturing and is never certain which is “the oldest or what age” and which is ready to “go out with boys” (26-27). In their complete lack of distinctiveness or individuality the daughters indiscernibly merge with the all-surrounding rubbish, the “levees of junk and garbage,” the upturned cars, “the trash and carpets,” the “chairs and crates,” and the “assortment of cats taking the weak sun” (26). They are themselves catlike in their slow, lazy movements and “like cats in heat” they attract “surrounding swains to their midden” (26). “Old lanky country boys with long cocks and big feet” continuously come and go “in all manner of degenerate cars, a dissolute carrousel of rotting sedans and niggerized convertibles... all patched up out of parts and lowslung and bumping over the ruts” (27), also perfectly commingling with the undifferentiated landscape of the dump.

The undefined daughters imitate their father in their unrestrained sexual activity, falling “pregnant one by one” and filling the dump keeper’s dilapidated shack with equally indeterminate babies. Yet the unruly imitation goes in both directions: one time Reubel encounters “two figures humping away” in the woods and upon closer observation recognizes one of his daughters. After the girl’s boyfriend hurriedly escapes “hauling up his breeches,” the father begins beating his promiscuous daughter with a stick, but soon has his own trousers “about his knees” and finishes the interrupted coitus (27-28). Reubel’s incestuous rape is a manifestation of his basic failure to discriminate between parent and child – a negligence that will inevitably lead to a total collapse of his family life. Again basing his argument on Girard’s anthropology, Gary Ciuba concludes that “such lack of differentiation between parent and child violates one of the fundamental taboos designed to keep the outbreak of primal violence from ever being repeated.... In committing this primal transgression the dump keeper... assaults difference itself” (185-186).

The sons (and daughters<sup>3</sup>) without fathers or those whose fathers are unable to define and clearly circumscribe their own fatherly roles are irrefutably unfit to take up the responsibilities of adulthood and incapable of parenting the child that resides in them.

<sup>3</sup> Obviously, there are far less father-daughter (or mother-daughter and mother-son) relations depicted in McCarthy’s novels, and the father-son bond is openly treated as the most primal and emblematic one. Yet the gender issue in McCarthy’s output (which is a whole broad and undoubtedly neglected area requiring separate investigation) falls outside the thematic scope of my thesis. The most prominent scholar who deals with the problem of gender in McCarthy’s prose, employing a moderate feminist perspective, is undoubtedly Nell Sullivan.

Undeniably, the typical pattern of the father-son relationship as it is depicted in McCarthy's novels is far removed from the biblical paradigm in which unity perfectly coincides with autonomy and obedience with liberty, and in which the process of role-exchange is a well-ordered and smooth development from sonship to fatherhood. In the reality populated by McCarthian characters, these binary oppositions blend into a disfigured and indeterminate dump, where none of the attributes defining the biblical bond find distinct expression. What remains is elemental obscurity and inconclusiveness, a destructive confusion of roles as a result of which the sons inevitably follow their vanquished fathers and themselves die untimely deaths.

Nevertheless, both *Blood Meridian* and *Child of God* can be read as narratives of the constant search for the lost father. Such deep longing for closeness and intimacy with a father figure could serve as an explanation for the kid's strong and, to some extent, unwilling propensity to observe, listen to, and in the end follow Judge Holden's satanic doctrines. It may also be taken up as a key in interpreting McCarthy's depiction of one of the rare moments in which Lester Ballard experiences some profound human emotions. He is lying awake in his cave in the dark when he fancies hearing "a whistling as he used to when he was a boy in his bed in the dark and he'd hear his father on the road coming home whistling, a lonely piper" (170). Lester is apparently deeply moved by this recollection, and that same night he has a dream in which he seems to finally acknowledge and reconcile himself to the prospect of his own approaching death: "He had resolved himself to ride on for he could not turn back and the world that day was as lovely as any say that ever was and he was riding to his death" (171).

### ***The Road: Father and Son Reconciled***

When all is extinct, all plants burnt down and covered with grey ash, all animals poisoned or killed for meat, all colors faded and forgotten, and most human beings turned into "mummied dead," "the flesh cloven along the bones, the ligaments dried to tug and taut as wires," "shriveled and drawn like latterday bogfolk, their faces of boiled sheeting, the yellowed palings of their teeth" (20), what remains is the most rudimentary division into good and evil and the most elemental relationship between father and son. As most critics note, the focus in *The Road* (2006) differs from what is underscored in McCarthy's earlier novels.<sup>4</sup> This time, paradoxically, it is rather a yearning to survive

<sup>4</sup> See for instance William Kennedy's review of *The Road* in *The New York Times*. Kennedy writes: "The overarching theme in McCarthy's work has been the face-off of good and evil with evil invariably triumphant through the bloodiest possible slaughter. Had this novel continued his pattern, that band of marching



and not the impulse to destroy, the wish to help and share and not the drive to acquire and seize, steadfast and loving devotion rather than blind and mindless hatred, and a devoutness to “grace and beauty” and “goodness” despite their “common provenance in pain” (46, 109) rather than a penchant for the grotesque, the grim, and the ugly that permeates the whole narrative.

In the novel’s presentation of apocalypse in its becoming, of “the world’s destruction” in which “perhaps... it would be possible at last to see how it was made” (230-32), we witness existence stripped down to its most primary forms. One of these is the relationship between father and son, which in McCarthy’s most recent novel may be said to come as close to the biblical paradigm as a human bond possibly can.

This time it is the mother who abandons the family – a few years after the enigmatic global catastrophe, she decides to commit suicide with “a flake of obsidian” (49). Unable to passively wait for the scenario that she foresees as irrevocable: “Sooner or later they will catch us and they will kill us. They will rape me. They’ll rape him. They are going to rape and kill us and eat us,” she decides to choose death – to take “a new lover” (48) who can give her what her husband is unable to provide: final peace in “eternal nothingness” (49). The father and son are therefore left to themselves, and it is clear that they survive only thanks to one another, sustaining each other in hope, when hopelessness prevails, and in the determination to go on, when there is clearly nothing to go on towards.

The father looks upon his son as the “word of God,” as the sole “warrant” that God ever spoke (4), and as “all that [stands] between him and death” (25). It is only by maintaining a sense of mission that they are able to preserve the awareness of some kind of higher purpose to their thoroughly purposeless and altogether hopeless struggles. The errand that the father and son undertake is “carrying the fire” (70),<sup>5</sup> and it is a mission in which they must “keep trying” because, as the father explains, that is what the “good guys” do – “they don’t give up” (116). Yet the man intuits that in this dead and dark world his son is unique in an absolute and nearly transcendental sense – he is “the best guy” (235), “God’s own fire-drake” (26), “glowing in that waste like a tabernacle” (230).

In the deeply poignant scene of the father’s death, he comes to clearly see that “there [is] light all about” the boy, and “when he move[s] the light move[s] with him” (233). That is what he tells his son when they talk for the very last time: The fire is “inside you.

things would have been the focus — as it was with the apocalyptic horsemen of death in his second novel, *Outer Dark*, or the blood-mad scalp-hunters in his masterpiece, *Blood Meridian*, or the psychopathic killer in his recent novel, *No Country for Old Men*. But evil victorious is not this book’s theme” (“Left Behind”).

<sup>5</sup> The fire in this case may, I suppose, be read as a commonly accepted symbol of the divine, a spark of spirituality in the material world.

It was always there. I can see it” (234). In fact, the basic purpose of the sparse dialogues that the father and son exchange is precisely a mutual confirmation of this necessary sense of mission. The errand requires that they both constantly nourish a physical and spiritual closeness and steadfastly reassure one another of their devoted presence. Exchanges similar to the following appear time and again throughout the whole novel:

I cant see.  
I know. We’ll just take it one step at a time.  
Okay.  
Don’t let go.  
Okay.  
No matter what.  
No matter what. (197)

Don’t go away, the boy said.  
Of course I wont go away.  
Even for just a little while.  
No. I’m right here.  
Okay. Okay, Papa. (208)

Despite these continuous, often deeply dramatic, attempts to provide one another with a modicum of confidence and comfort, both the man and the boy have their moments of great doubt and profound despair – instances of weakness that they usually try to conceal from one another. When the boy is asleep, the man walks off to bitterly curse God (“Are you there? he whispered. Will I see you at the last? Have you a neck by which to throttle you? Have you a heart? Damn you eternally have you a soul? Oh, God, he whispered. Oh God”; 10) or to cry in helpless anger (“He walked out on the beach to the edge of the light and stood with his clenched fists on top of his skull and fell to his knees sobbing in rage”; 211).

The son, in turn, from time to time hesitantly asks questions which testify to his deep-seated doubts about the authenticity of the purpose of what they are doing – questions which he knows his father is ultimately unable to answer. When he asks about their “long term goals” (135), the man is impressed by the overdone sagacity of the formulation, yet he can offer no sensible, convincing reply. Once one of their “short term” goals – reaching the south coast – is achieved and it turns out to be a grievous disappointment (the sea appears to be equally dead, gray, and cold as the mountains and plains they laboriously crossed to reach it), the boy unwillingly owns up to his grave skepticism, telling his father that in truth he did not know “what they were doing.” “The man started

to answer. But he didnt” (206). The father refuses to provide facile answers not only because he is unwilling to dissemble something that is not true but also because he senses that his son knows more than he is told: “The frailty of everything revealed at last. Old and troubling issues resolved into nothingness and night. The last instance of a thing takes the class with it. Turns out the light and is gone. Look around you. Ever is a long time. But the boy knew what he knew. That ever is no time at all” (24).

The boy’s degree of self-awareness and sense of responsibility clearly exceed the man’s suppositions. When the father fixes the last portion of cocoa for his son and pours only hot water for himself, it is an unfairness that the boy does not fail to notice.

You promised not to do that, the boy said.

What?

You know what, Papa.

He poured the hot water back into the pan and took the boy’s cup and poured some of the cocoa into his own and then handed it back.

I have to watch you all the time, the boy said.

I know.

If you break little promises you’ll break big ones. That’s what you said.

I know. But I wont. (29)

In one of the most dramatic moments in the novel, when they catch the man who stole the cart in which they stored all their miserably scant yet life-sustaining supplies and leave him outstripped of his own clothes and shoes – a “nude and slatlike creature standing there in the road shivering and hugging himself” (217), the boy’s trust in their goodness and in the credibility of their mission is severely undermined. The father offers to tell him a consoling story, but the son openly rejects this kind of false comfort.

Those stories are not true.

They dont have to be true. They’re stories.

Yes. But in the stories we’re always helping people and we dont help people. (225)

The boy, conversely, does not have “any stories to tell” – at least not “happy” ones. His own stories are “more like real life” (226) – closer to the harsh and bitter truth. He also does not have good dreams – “They’re always about something bad happening” – about his father dying or about a horrifying toy penguin that “came around the corner” waddling and flapping its flippers although “nobody had wound it up” (31) – an image which probably signifies the feeling of an alarming loss of control and an unsettling lack of influence on the surrounding reality. Near the ending of the novel he explicitly tells

his father that there is no use in hiding the truth from him, that he is by now mature enough to face it on his own.

When you wake up coughing you walk out along the road or somewhere but I can still hear you coughing.  
I'm sorry.  
One time I heard you crying.  
I know. (227)

Deeply distressed by his father's ruthless handling of the "thief" who took away all their belongings, the boy seems to sense that it is time for himself to take over.

He was just hungry, Papa. He's going to die.  
He's going to die anyway.  
He's so scared, Papa.  
The man squatted and looked at him. I'm scared, he said. Do you understand? I'm scared.  
The boy didn't answer. He just sat there with his head bowed, sobbing.  
You're not the one who has to worry about everything.  
The boy said something but he couldn't understand him. What? he said.  
He looked up, his wet and grimy face. Yes I am, he said. I am the one. (218)

With time, the man becomes increasingly conscious of his son's premature coming-of-age: "Always so deliberate, hardly surprised by the most outlandish advents. A creation perfectly evolved to meet its own end" (50). He is also aware that his own temporary role is merely to facilitate the genuine carrier of the fire, to assist the only authentic missionary: "My job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God" (65).

It therefore seems that what McCarthy has exposed as lost and inconceivable in a more ordinary setting, turns out to be tenable in the most outrageous and unnatural circumstances. The son, in a close and truly loving bond with the father, gradually develops his own sense of purpose, preserving a full awareness of his parent's weaknesses and failures throughout the whole process. He is conscious of his obligations as a son and always, despite his own fears and misgivings, compliantly does what he is told. He nevertheless maintains his own independence and after the father's death (which is an unbearably painful experience he is hardly able to endure), he takes over their mutual mission to "carry the fire" further on by himself. The father stays in his mind and heart as an authentic God-figure: "He 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" (241). This is in-

deed as akin to the biblical ideal of the bond between father and son as any human relationship can be.

McCarthy's prose is indeed rich in hints and allusions of a strictly biblical as well as a generally religious origin, and the Bible is a major source to be acknowledged in its analysis – one which has been unquestionably neglected and underestimated by his critics. This in itself naturally does not make McCarthy a “Christian” or “religious” writer, but it does invite the reader to, as one of his critics phrases it, “be attentive to, if not preoccupied with, the metaphysical presences in his seemingly anti-metaphysical universe” (Metress 150). Yet McCarthy refrains from constructing or employing any grand narratives or total, closed, and plainly defined systems of thought. The existential and moral inconclusiveness of his characters, the constant obscurity and indefiniteness of the narrative voice, as well as the open-ended and non-progressive character of the plot are not meant to invite us to search for wholeness, clarity, and finality, but rather beg to be valued as worthy qualities in themselves. What truly carries weight is not so much the ultimate destination but the road towards it, not the endmost goal but the quest for it in itself.

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