

CORMAC MCCARTHY'S *THE ROAD* AS APOCALYPTIC GRAIL NARRATIVE

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I believe that we are arks of the covenant and our true nature is not
rage or deceit or terror or logic or craft or even sorrow. It is longing.

—Cormac McCarthy, *Whales and Men*

The Holy Grail is a standard symbol in the English language for an
object of search far-off, mysterious, out of reach.

—Dhira B. Mahoney, *The Grail: A Casebook*

Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), with its ashen, post-apocalyptic landscape, seems a striking departure from the realism of his earlier novels. Inspired in part by grim images of wanderers in "biohazard" suits or wearing masks and goggles "like ruined aviators" (*The Road* 51, 24), many critics identify the unnamed catastrophe that precipitates the novel as a nuclear holocaust (see e.g., Christman). McCarthy himself imagines the disaster to be a meteor strike, although he claims that "his money is on humans destroying each other before an environmental catastrophe sets in" (Kushner). Yet few critics have explored just how unusual the fantastic and futuristic landscape of *The Road* is. In an interview regarding the Coen brothers' film of his 2005 novel *No Country for Old Men*, McCarthy claims that he prefers literary realism over more "magical" genres. "[I]t's hard enough to get people to believe what you're trying to tell them without making it impossible," he says. "You have to make it vaguely plausible" (Grossman 63). While *The Road* does bear McCarthy's typical attention to accuracy in all the minutiae of his descriptions, the excesses of carnage and apocalyptic horror in its pages may stretch the limits of credulity. In fact, one critic finds the world of the novel so sublimely damaged that it must have a "supernatural cause," and he therefore concludes that *The Road* is

a retelling of the Book of Revelation (Grindley 12). The fantastic elements in the novel, however, are not supernatural allegory, but mythological motif. The novel's title in an early draft was *The Grail*,¹ a title illustrative of the narrative arc in which a dying father embarks on a quest to preserve his son, whom he imagines as a "chalice" (McCarthy, *The Road* 64), the symbolic vessel of divine healing in a realm blighted by some catastrophic disease. The motifs of the Waste Land, the dying Fisher King, and the potentially unattainable healing balm in the cup of Christ provide particularly apt metaphors through which *The Road* examines pervasive apocalyptic fears in order to explore if and how the human project may be preserved.

It may be useful first to establish common grail motifs before investigating their application in *The Road*. The principal early "Grail" texts fall into two general categories: chivalric romances about King Arthur's knights encountering the grail and histories of the grail from the time of Christ to its removal to Britain. The first category has been the most influential in terms of those stories' impact upon subsequent literature. This category includes Chrétien de Troyes' *Conte del Graal*, Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, and the *Queste del Saint Graal* (Loomis 1). (See Loomis 2-4 and Weston 12-15.) The first two of these texts in particular have as the quest hero the Arthurian knight Perceval, as well as the most common and consistent narrative tropes (Weston 15). In this storyline, Perceval is a young boy raised in the wilderness by his mother after his knight-father's death in battle. The wild, untrained boy one day sees some of Arthur's knights riding in the woods. Captivated by the sight, he follows them to Arthur's court, leaving his mother grief-stricken; she later dies of her grief. During his journey, Perceval finds two men fishing in a boat. One of the men is the Fisher King, who offers the boy hospitality for the night. At the Fisher King's castle, Perceval sees an older king dying of a grievous wound. Perceval fails to ask the "right question" (a question relating either to what ails the older man, who is usually the Fisher King's father, or whom the grail serves). After a feast in which the grail is introduced to the company, Perceval falls asleep and when he awakes the castle and its kings are gone. He then goes on a quest to find a way to heal the old king and his kingdom. At the end of the tale, he once again finds the kings and the castle. This time he asks the right question and the king and kingdom are healed (Loomis 29-62; Weston 39-45; Campbell 246-60). The key motifs of this narrative, then, are the wild boyhood of Perceval; the Fisher King's appearance on a boat or in some way associated with water; the physical wounding or illness of the elder Fisher King; the grail's appearance at a feast; and the failure of the first quest to the Fisher King's castle (Weston 46-7; Mahoney 7-8).

The themes of the grail narrative that resonate through modern and postmodern versions of the tale are the dying king and his kingdom, which is infected by the root cause of his wounding. The cause of the wounding in particular becomes paramount, and the cause is almost inevitably linked

to human corruption. The grail, then, becomes a metaphor for that which is capable of healing a world terribly in need of spiritual or moral renewal. In an early example of this trend, Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* diagnoses the kingdom's suffering as a symptom of human sinfulness. In this tale, Percival's sister, a nun, receives a vision of the grail after she expresses her earnest desire for something that will provide an antidote to human vice: "Ah, Christ," she prays, "that it [the grail] would come / And heal the world of all their wickedness!" (lines 93-4, Tennyson 121). Dhira B. Mahoney claims that T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* likewise seizes upon the "symbols of the Waste Land and the Fisher King" as vivid descriptors of the "cultural sterility of a modern world devastated by the Great War" (57). Texts employing grail metaphors in order to express contemporaneous concerns with violence and atrocity have, if anything, proliferated in literature and popular culture since Eliot's *The Waste Land*. John Marino, for example, examines several films from the latter part of the twentieth century, from Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) to Terry Gilliam's *The Fisher King* (1991), as evidence of a "transformation" of the grail into a metaphor for political concerns. The grail and Fisher King motifs, he says, are turned to again and again as symbols that "bring meaning to a human experience often thought to be meaningless" in a world characterized by "destruction on a global scale, widespread social injustice, and loss of faith in the traditional absolutes that explained reality" (115-16). Because the Waste Land motif is the primary impetus for seeking the grail, contemporary evocations of grail myths tend to situate grail symbols within an apocalyptic fear of immanent disaster resulting from a corruption wrought by humanity itself.

The salient theme of these contemporary versions of the grail, in other words, is that of a contest between fertility and sterility, the fertility symbolized by the grail, the object without which the Fisher King will die and the world along with him, and the sterility of a world reaping the consequences of a perceived social evil. It is this last aspect, the association of the Waste Land with relevant social concerns, that illuminates the importance of grail motifs in McCarthy's *The Road*. The blasted landscape at the opening of this novel, with its "wasted country" and its stagnant river choked with "dead reeds," seems haunted by Eliot's "dead land" with its "roots that clutch... / Out of this stony rubbish" (McCarthy, *The Road* 5; Eliot 5, lines 2, 19-20).² Just as Eliot applies the Waste Land and Fisher King motifs to an apocalyptic version of London in order to address social and ethical concerns, so also *The Road's* evocations of those motifs suggest the power of the grail narrative as a metaphor for an extended study on a world seemingly "wounded" and "wasted" beyond recognition, possibly beyond salvation.

The mythological motifs underpinning the narrative in *The Road*, of course, are not ultimately as much of a departure from the more obvious realism of McCarthy's earlier novels as it may initially seem. As many critics

have noted, despite their historically rooted contexts and accuracy of detail, McCarthy's earlier novels are characteristically drenched in mythological motif and allegorical sensibility, often reflecting in particular a debt to traditional European tropes, texts, and narrative modes. Russell M. Hillier, for example, demonstrates how *Child of God* is a "subversive parody" of *Pilgrim's Progress* (58). Jay Ellis traces the heritage of the chivalric romance in *All the Pretty Horses* and *The Crossing*, from the chivalric codes to the hierarchical social ordering of "knights" and "squires," to say nothing of the thematic obsession with concepts such as honor and revenge (213). In fact, John Cant succinctly claims that "[m]uch of what [McCarthy] has written is allegorical in nature" ("Oedipus" 55). The issue, then, is not that grail motifs figure so prominently in *The Road* but rather why McCarthy turns to grail mythology in his (to date) only ahistorical novel.

The apocalypticism of *The Road* seems to be a response to an immediate and visceral fear of cataclysmic doom in the United States after the terrorist attacks on 9/11. Dianne C. Luce claims that the novel "had its genesis in a very specific moment": McCarthy imagined the apocalyptic setting while staying in a hotel in El Paso with his young son, John Francis McCarthy, "perhaps not long after September 11, 2001" (9). Luce's explicit association of the presentiment-laden darkness of the novel with the events of 9/11 is not further explored but deserves exposition. *The Road* has at its core the desire to drive the reader's imagination into contact with an extreme vision of an apocalypse-ravaged future America, there to discover what—if anything—remains.³ The desire to reconstruct the world by deconstructing it seems to reflect the fundamental fear underlying the novel, namely, the fear that human beings may not in fact deserve to survive.

The Road indeed commences with a scene in which the father has a nightmare vision of humankind's participation in its own destruction. In this dream, the father takes his son by the hand and goes into a cave where a slaving monster "pale and naked and translucent" stands by a lake. So translucent is the monster that the father can see its bones, bowels, heart, and brain, which "puls[es] in a dull glass bell" (3). The emphasis upon the monster's possession of a heart and a mind strikes a terrifying note, as the beast turns from the man and boy and lopes "soundlessly into the dark" (4). Contrasted with the father's refrain that the boy must "carry the fire" (234), a metaphor for the practice of civility and ethics, this darkness seems to represent a willful dullness of emotion and intellect. *The Road*, then, is a narrative in which a man and boy battle against an encroaching darkness that, the novel suggests, has been created by the humans it destroys. In *The Spirit of Terrorism*, Jean Baudrillard claims that the West's fear of terror derives from a subconscious recognition that the increasing and increasingly inegalitarian power wielded by the West has created a system that has fostered within itself the very "conditions for...brutal retaliation" (9). It is the recognition of Western society's complicity in its own

destruction that resides at the root of irrational and apocalyptic fear expressed in literature, art, and public rhetoric following the events of 9/11, he says. The “countless disaster movies” of the contemporary era “bear witness” to this dread, representing as they do a collective fascination with images that act out the destructive impulse to “reject any system...[that] approaches perfection or omnipotence” (7). Baudrillard suggests that images of terror in literature after 9/11, worlds burning and turning to ash, are evidence of the American public’s fear that the pursuit of political, global ascendancy is in itself an act of violence whose backlash will be both staggering in its magnitude and inexorable in its execution.

Even more than the father’s dream of the dark-seeking beast, *The Road* conjures up a nightmare world of fire and ash that illustrates Baudrillard’s claim. After all, as the man’s wife points out, their world is not just ruined; it is cinematically destroyed: “We’re the walking dead in a horror film,” she says (McCarthy, *The Road* 47). Her reference to American pulp apocalyptic films suggests a correlation between the futuristic world of the novel and the fears of the current day. Whatever has caused the actual devastation, the novel argues, it is the internal corruption of people who sought too long for their own power, who placed their own needs above those of others, that has brought humanity to its doom. The novel thus participates thematically in the projects of contemporary popular responses to 9/11, exploring as it does attributes of communal guilt, terror, and what, if anything, humanity can find that may provide a way out of the darkness. In particular, these themes are explicated through grail legend motifs—the boy as Perceval and as the grail, the father as the dying Fisher King, and a perilous journey in which finding the right question and proffering the right answer is the key to bringing back the potential for healing.

Because early drafts of this novel were titled *The Grail*, it is clear that McCarthy positioned the novel as a type of grail narrative from the book’s genesis. However, while the boy is the symbolic grail of the early draft’s title, narrative patterns suggest that he is a Perceval figure as well. Born after the catastrophe that ended human civilization, the boy is at least partially feral; he is unfamiliar with such basic trappings of human society as shopping, sitting at a table, even walking up stairs. For example, when the father finds an abandoned, elegant house, the man and boy go in, find remnants of food, and eat at a table, a decorous reenactment of mores and customs long vanished. Yet, while the ritualized dinner reminds the father of his childhood, the boy exhibits deep discomfort. He asks his father several times if they can “wait” before going into the house (172); he balks at going upstairs (173, 177); and the father thinks that the boy, standing under the chandelier in the palatial dining room, looks like a “troll come in from the night” (175). Yet despite his primitive life, the boy is obsessed with being like the heroes of his father’s stories (35, 65, 116, 237), drawn like Perceval toward shining examples of chivalry.

A key difference, of course, is that Perceval abandons his mother, leaving her to die of grief, in order to pursue knighthood. In *The Road*, the boy and his father have been abandoned by the boy's mother, who kills herself in anguish, not because her son has left her but because her son was born at all. She tells her husband that her "heart was ripped out of [her] the night [the boy] was born" (48). The mother's abject lack of pity for or emotional connection to her child suggests that she has been poisoned by the internal and external death of her world. The mother's "coldness" (49), however, contrasts with an earlier metaphoric depiction of the sun as a "grieving mother with a lamp" (28). In this archaically geocentric image, the sun, whose rays are blocked from the earth by the ash cloud that has covered the planet and precipitated the death of its flora and fauna, endlessly "circles" the clouded sphere like a woman searching for a child now lost to her (28). In this metaphoric shift, the sun plays the role of the mother abandoned by her child, while the boy's human mother is an embodiment of the egocentrism and faithlessness that are swiftly killing the planet.

In the novel, the sublunary (in the previous metaphor, more properly the sub-solar) world is infected with a viral plague. That disease, given voice by the mother and, later in the novel, by the wandering anti-prophet, Ely, is a catastrophic loss of faith in the human endeavor (145). That loss of mental and emotional commitment to others results in dissociative behavior ranging from the mother's rejection of her son to people devouring their own infants (167). Although the mother's despair ostensibly derives from the tragedy that has snatched her world away from her, her description of her internal condition epitomizes an attitude that McCarthy attributes to the actual world as well. The mother explains to her husband that her "only hope is for eternal nothingness and [she] hope[s] for it with all [her] heart" (49). The mother's suicidal ideation in *The Road* is phrased almost exactly the same way as is the suicidal commitment espoused by the academic, White, in McCarthy's play *The Sunset Limited*, published the same year as *The Road* and set in contemporary New York City: "Now there is only the hope of nothingness," White says. "I cling to that hope" (141). The boy's mother in *The Road* and White in *The Sunset Limited*, in other words, both express a fatalistic belief that human suffering, senseless violence, and the loss of meaning once found in traditional religions undermine any ability for survival to have meaning beyond a prolonging of pointless agony.

Poised counter to the mother's nihilistic belief in the pointlessness of human survival, of course, is her son. In addition to his depiction as a Perceval-esque wild child enamored of dreams of chivalry, the boy is himself the novel's grail. This symbolic fusing is not as odd as it may seem. Early grail narratives have in common a thematic insistence on the purity of the grail bearer as an essential component of the grail's ability return to humankind (Weston 15). Because the grail cannot appear in substantial form in the human realm without

an appropriate bearer, the bearer ineffably becomes part of the grail. At one point, the father sees his son standing ahead of him and thinks that the boy is “glowing in that waste like a tabernacle” (McCarthy, *The Road* 230). The tabernacle, of course, is the tent that housed the presence of God in ancient Israel. The boy, here pictured as a vessel made translucent by the glory of the essence of divinity within him, is consistently associated with light. Later, he is a “tiny paradise trembling in the orange light from the heater” (126), an image that once again associates the boy with light and makes him an instantiation of the realm of God. While on the one hand these metaphors seem only tangentially linked to grail imagery (they imagine the boy as a *location* in which the deity dwells, as opposed to a *vessel* for a healing substance produced by the deity), the grail is actually explicitly associated with paradise and the immediate presence of God in old grail narratives. According to early legends, sometime after its journey to England, either during or after Arthur’s reign, the chalice is taken to paradise because the “world was not worthy to possess the Vessel” (Waite 485). The grail is now in paradise, in other words, because of the corruption of the world and the absence of any man capable of bearing the chalice to sickened kings and kingdoms. The boy, like the grail, thus becomes the object that brings the essence of divinity back to a corrupted world.

While the boy is described in terms evocative of the grail, as a “house” for divine light, the father underscores the connection, describing the boy as a grail and a house simultaneously. He calls the boy a “[g]olden chalice, good to house a god” (64). The grail makes several other appearances along the novel’s barren road, as well. According to Roger Loomis, physical descriptions of the grail in early legends are oddly mutable due to the challenge of translation and the transmission of grail narratives through different cultures. Even within the same narrative, the grail may variously be described as a “chalice,” a “ciborium” (that is, a “covered goblet surmounted by a cross”), the “Host” (the transubstantiated body of Christ in the form of bread) on a platter, and as a “stone” with magical propensities (Loomis 28). In the scene in which the father calls his son a chalice, the narrative in fact evokes the image of a ciborium. The father has set up camp underneath an old bridge with train tracks. He builds a fire near the boy, who is illuminated by the “glow of the light with the shadow of the bridge’s understructure” over him (63). Specifically, the boy sits illuminated in golden light like a “chalice” while “[o]verhead [is] the ironwork brown with rust, the hammered rivets, the wooden sleepers and crossplanks” (63). The boy-as-chalice, in other words, is overshadowed by the cross-shaped silhouette of the rising buttress and cross-planked bridge over him, a visual evocation of the gold-plated goblet with a domed lid and a cross affixed above the lid. In another scene, the father watches his son standing in falling snow and thinks that the snow is like the “last host of christendom” (13). And when the father murders a cannibal, the boy becomes “mute as stone” (56)—a reaction born in virtuous horror at both the cannibal’s and his father’s violent

acts. Each of these descriptions evoke the grail's various iterations in the *Conte del Graal* and the *Queste del Saint Graal* (Loomis 29), so that *The Road* is shot through with glimpses of the elusive vessel in the same way as are the quests of Perceval and Galahad.

In addition to being described as the grail, the boy is also associated with his role as the grail-bearer. As he lies dying, the father sees his son approach, carrying a cup of water with "light all about him." After he gives the water to his father, the boy leaves and "the light move[s] with him" (233). The halo of firelight surrounding the cup-bearer suggests the complicated image of the boy as the grail. According to legend, the grail is the cup Joseph of Arimathea used to catch drops of Christ's blood as he hung on the cross. The restorative substance in the cup, in short, is blood. Yet while the boy is described as a vessel for divinity many times throughout the novel, those descriptions emphasize the more ephemeral qualities of divinity. In addition to being filled with light, the boy is also the very "word of God" and, elsewhere, the "breath of God" (4, 241). The comparatively incorporeal images of light, word, and breath as evidence of the miraculous restorative powers resting in the boy, in contrast to images of blood, are not necessarily a contradiction. The Bible does, after all, claim that "the life of the flesh is in the blood," thereby associating the mystical concept of the "life force" of a creature with its blood. However, because blood is synonymous with life, the Bible explains that drinking blood is an act of desecration *unless* the drinker imbibes from a ritualized ceremonial cup (in the New Testament, the transubstantiated wine), since "it is the blood [of a ceremonially slaughtered innocent] that maketh an atonement for the soul" (King James Version, Lev. 17:11). In other words, the fact that McCarthy's novel depicts the life force (the "breath of God") in the boy in terms of words and light suggests an intentional movement away from the concept of sanctification through blood, a shift that is perhaps explicated by the literal blood-drinkers populating the wasted landscape. These cannibal hordes, associated as they are with spit-roasted infants and half-eaten human victims (167, 93), undermine any capacity the image of blood has to be redemptive. If the boy is the distilled essence of Christ, this Christ is represented not by blood but by words.

Because *The Road* depicts a viscerally realistic wasteland, the fact that the grail's healing substance is metaphorical rather than physical seems odd. But the very physicality of the wasteland is itself at least partially metaphorical. In *The Sunset Limited*, White claims that "if that pain [of human existence] were actually collective instead of simply reiterative then the sheer weight of it would drag the world from the walls of the universe and send it crashing and burning through whatever night it might yet be capable of engendering until it was not even ash" (137). *The Road* seems to take White's proclamation and transform it into an image of a future in which all the avarice and atrocity of which the human race is capable is being expended in a rage now reaching its inevitable

conclusion. The ash coating the world, then, provides a visual metaphor for the coalesced suffering of the dying species. However, the healing represented by the boy seems to turn White's argument on its head. Looking at his son at one point, the father thinks that "[a]ll things of grace and beauty such that one holds them to one's heart have a common provenance in pain" (46). In his love for his son, the father constructs a worldview in which suffering becomes the source of beauty, rather than its doom. If the ash metaphorically represents human suffering, then the boy's antidote to that grief is also both physical and metaphorical.

As a "grail," the boy bears the antidote to that which the ash symbolizes. In the *Queste del Saint Graal*, the grail hero, Galahad, must save a king who has been wounded by a "Dolorous Stroke," a blow that causes "devastation to the land and a wound that can be healed only by Galahad in the Quest" (Mahoney 5). As many grail narratives do, *The Road* interpolates images of fertility into a world characterized by infertility. In an earlier draft of the manuscript, in fact, McCarthy has a sketch in which the man dreams of his child "covered in powdered gold," laughing and running toward a river.⁴ In this image, the boy seems to be an incarnation of fertility, a scene that explicates the novel's insistence that the boy be read as a life force, both literal and metaphorical. In the literal sense, the boy is his father's life force since the child's existence is inextricably linked to the man's survival. The novel introduces the boy through the father's gaze, and, rather than describing the boy's physical appearance, the novel's narrator observes that "the child was [the man's] warrant" (4). The child is thus introduced in terms of his role as the singular justification for the man's survival and the narrative's action. The father at one point tells the boy outright: "If you died I would want to die too" (9). A relentlessly dark book, the vivaciousness of the boy's speech patterns and the luminous innocence of his moral commitments, in contrast to the father's consistently traumatized and exhausted thought and speech patterns, suggests that the boy is more than just the father's warrant: he is the novel's warrant as well.

If the boy is both grail and grail-bearer, vessel and antidote to the world's toxicity, then the father must play the role of the elder Fisher King, wounded and infected by that which is destroying the land. Because he is dying of some mysterious disease, the father seems an obvious correlation to the old king, but there are two additional aspects of this association that bear examination. The first is the father's association with water, and the second is the theme of inheritance as a key attribute to the ability to find, possess, or reap the healing benefits of the grail. The father's affiliation with water runs throughout the novel. In tracing the Celtic influences in early British grail legends, Loomis points out that the elder and younger Fisher Kings are the same person in the earliest forms of the legend and the name itself likely derives from a conflation of similar Welsh legends about Bran, the sea-god, who turns into a man "floating on the water" (57). While the Fisher King often appears in the story

with another man in a boat on a river, the character is not associated with “fishing” so much as with appearing on the water in general. The father in *The Road*, of course, defines himself in terms of proximity to water. He recalls a memory of what he terms his “perfect day” (12). In this memory, he and his uncle are in a rowboat on a lake (11). While the memory does not specify that they are fishing, it does illuminate the father’s consistent affinity for water. He teaches his son to swim in a pond of stagnant, ash-choked water, despite concerns for the water’s sanitary quality (33), and he brings the boy south with the shore as a destination, a shore near which he finally dies (232).

The theme of inheritance is a trickier thread to unravel, though it is far more significant. In grail narratives, inheritance is linked to ideas about moral purity as an aspect of familial or genetic purity. As Jessie Weston points out, the Perceval stories always depict Perceval as closely related by blood to the Grail King—the Fisher King, or the Fisher King’s father, both of whom are descended from Joseph of Arimathea (45). The young man who brings the grail back to humankind must have a blood inheritance connecting him to the grail as well as that internal purity that is inextricably connected to the potency of the grail. The two qualities cannot be easily parsed. The issue of inheritance crops up again and again throughout *The Road* but is, once again, more metaphorical than in the legends. Barbara Bennett points to the Celtic symbolism underlying the novel’s refrain of “carrying the fire” as a succinct summary of the theme of inheritance. This phrase, “carrying the fire,” she says, evokes the “transplanted hearth fires” of Celtic culture, in which grown children would carry fire from their parents’ hearth with them when they founded their own homes (2). The symbolic lineage of fire-carrying, then, illuminates the theme of inheritance in the novel. The question of inheritance, however, becomes tantamount to the question of survival. After all, the son does succeed the father in metaphorically embodying the goodness the father wants him to embody—he is, in other words, carrying the fire—but to what end?

After all, the father’s quest is to physically keep his son alive and, metaphorically, to preserve in his world a vessel of nobility capable of proving that there is some merit to the continuation of the human race. The physical journey quest in the novel is that of a southwestern trek from cold mountains to a more life-supporting climate. Whether the climate of this broken ecosystem, even in the Gulf Coast region, will be able to support human life remains doubtful. The novel’s final epigraphic paragraph evokes an image of vitality in the “brook trout” whose scales resemble “maps of the world in its becoming,” but these fish are memories and their “maps” are of a world that “could not be put back. Not be made right again” (241). The symbolic application of this novel’s geospatial journey is riven with doubt as well. The father and boy travel south with the boy’s book of heroes and the father’s tales of chivalry, stories meant to instill in the boy a set of values and behaviors that will preserve this one instantiation of humanity among the bestial hominids scavenging through

earth's wreckage (8). In this description of the father's quest, the reader is reminded of Eliot's narrator in *The Waste Land* who "read[s], much of the night, and go[es] south in the winter" (5, line 18). If Eliot's waste land is more purgatory than hell, however, the father's waste land may be closer to a place of absolute damnation.

On the one hand, many critics point out that the love evinced by the father in *The Road* makes a striking contrast to the sociopathic relationships between father figures and sons in McCarthy's earlier works such as *Outer Dark* (in which a father watches his incest-born son be killed by cannibals) and *Blood Meridian* (in which the Judge claims to be a father figure to a "kid" whom he rapes and murders). (See e.g., Cant, *Cormac McCarthy* 277.) The tender, mutually nurturing relationship between the father and son in *The Road* suggests at least a faint faith in the human capacity to be moral and achieve meaningful relationships. This viewpoint seems to be one held, to some extent, by the author. In an interview about his film of *The Road*, director Tony Hillcoat claims that McCarthy "explained to [Hillcoat] that [*Blood Meridian* is] very much about the worst in human nature and this book [*The Road*] for him is very much about the absolute best" (qtd. in Collett-White). However, the very best of human nature may not, in the end, account for much. So brutal is the post-apocalyptic landscape here that critics have difficulty finding a concrete sense of eudaimonia in the ending, despite the tender father-son relationship. Alex Hunt and Martin M. Jacobsen, for example, claim that the cave images framing the novel—the dream of the monster-haunted cave and the father's dream of a cave as he dies—allude to Plato's allegory of the sun but reverse the Classical allegory's movement toward growing light so that the caves in the novel become "anti-Platonic symbolism" that "bespeak an end to civilization, not its rebirth" (157). Tim Edwards further explicates the darkness of the novel as one that reveals itself through the reader's realization that the "seemingly Edenic past...seems to carry in it...the seeds of its own destruction" (58). Because the novel ultimately paints a portrait of the U.S. as nurturing within itself the corruption, selfishness, and violence sufficient to bring forth the terror described in its pages, there can be no genuine sense of hope at the end. *The Road* is, Edwards says, an "American jeremiad more terrifying than even the Puritan imagination could conjure" (60).⁵ According to these interpretations, the worldview of the novel is as apocalyptically dire as its landscape.

Yet such is the inarticulate eloquence of the father's obsessive devotion to his son that these readings seem reductive. After all, the fact that some life remains on the planet—even life as tenuous as cannibalistic humans and the mushrooms for which the man and boy forage (34)—indicates that all vegetation and animal life cannot possibly be "extinct" (101). This planet, after all, has already survived a cataclysmic meteor strike. The father's perception of the natural world as utterly lost therefore seems too dire. Furthermore, his own belief in the degeneracy of humanity undergoes at least a slight amelioration.

Early in the novel, the father thinks that, with the death of so much of civilization, the “sacred idiom [is] shorn of its referents and so of its reality” (75). But he later realizes that he changes his own memories, adapting to the vicious new world around him, and those memories in turn breed symbols that “ha[ve] yet a reality, known or not” (111). To return to the theme of inheritance that runs throughout the novel, what is inherited is not just genetic material but a very real sense of personal responsibility and inclusion in human society. Ely, the degenerate prophet, may be right that there is no longer a human race to speak of, and “[w]here men cant live gods fare no better” (145). But the reverse of his logic holds true as well. Human beings create God, the novel seems to argue, in the sense that they create what there is of meaning and morality. Where humans live, then, God also survives. The father in fact enunciates this very creed. Facing his child, who has come (again) close to death, he holds the boy and thinks, “Where you’ve nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them” (63). His decision here is to behave as if the child is indeed “God”—the embodiment of all value and morality. While the child exists, so too does meaning. So too does humanity.

The pathos of the dying father’s love for his son lies in this very equivocation. Because the physical darkness of the nights in this ash-covered world is “sightless” and “impenetrable” (13), the father stumbles in a literal dark that lends itself to musings on metaphorical darkness of vision. He expresses an agonized desire “to be able to see” as he dies (233). Since he still has the physical capacity for sight, this yearning is clearly metaphorical. Visions—dreams of color and hope—taunt the father with their elusiveness throughout the novel. His desire to “see” therefore becomes a reiterated insistence that there must be something worth “seeing,” worth pursuing. The novel’s foregrounding of a desire for sight in a world of limited visibility evokes the visions in Tennyson’s grail poem, in which the search for the grail does not depend on sight but on a desire for sight. Perceval, after all, is the only knight who does *not* receive a vision of the grail, and it is his consequent desperation to see the grail that drives him beyond his chivalric peers to ultimately find the object of his unseen desire (lines 195-96, Tennyson 124). The question becomes, then, what sort of ending *The Road*’s quest has.

Apocalyptic versions of grail narratives focus on what is ruined in the world, what is diseased—in other words, they attempt to explain why death is transcendent and not fertility. *The Road* examines this question and proffers a tentative answer through the grail motif of the “right question,” in which a question must be reiterated until the answer that contains the moral balm to an evil age is found. According to Loomis, the Fisher King motif in grail narratives accentuates the “right question” motif. Young Perceval fails his first quest when he does not manage to identify and then ask the right question of the dying king in the castle. So important is the question motif, Loomis says, that it explains the seemingly unaccountable presence of the dying king

in addition to the Fisher King, rather than conflating the Fisher King with the dying king. “[A]dding to the Fisher King a second invalid who could serve as the communicant,” he says, provides a source for the name that must “supply the answer to the traditional question, ‘Whom does one serve with the Grail?’” (62). The cryptic questions seem initially to have little to do with the central questions of the grail—questions of inheritance and moral purity—but Joseph Campbell argues that in fact the ritualized questions explicate those very qualities. The fundamental crisis of the grail story, Campbell says, lies in the question, “How is the Waste Land going to be cured?” And the answer is “by the spontaneous act of a noble heart, whose impulse is not of ego but of love—and love in the sense not of sexual love, but of compassion” (254-55). Therefore, Campbell says, Perceval fails his first quest because, although his heart is “filled with compassion” when he sees the wounded king, he maintains his code of chivalric conduct and fails to ask what ails the king, or how to use the grail to provide healing (260). The right question, then, reflects more than just the answer to a riddle. Identifying the right question and asking it of the right person indicates a heart that is pure and noble and suggests a spontaneity of affection only possible where there is genuine compassion.

Campbell’s explanation of the role of the “right question” motif in grail narratives illuminates what many critics have pointed out as one of the driving narrative forces in *The Road*: the novel’s lengthy question-and-answer dialogues between father and son. Of these roughly thirty dialogues, fourteen deal with death—the death of others, their own deaths, their inability to survive each other’s deaths, how quickly they are dying, and so forth (17, 50-51, 70, 72, 74, 85, 87, 95, 108-9, 118, 127, 132-33, 182-83, 205). Another twelve depict the boy’s grappling with ethics—the question of what it means to be a hero, to be good to others, to be *humane* in an ever more inhuman world (69, 107, 122-23, 135, 137-39, 147, 155, 162-63, 216-17, 225-26, 227-28, 234-35). In these pseudo-Socratic discourses, it is the boy, not the father, who poses the quandaries and so plays Socrates’s role. The boy’s questions address complicated issues of responsibility toward others and the practical application of compassion in a morally rancid world. The sheer number of these dialogues (notable especially in light of McCarthy’s characteristically laconic novels) suggests their importance.

And the conclusion the dialogues draw is, perhaps, counter-intuitive. Although the father’s death grows more imminent, for example, the boy’s questions about survival undergo a subtle shift toward hope in continued human existence. The father asserts early in the novel that all flora and fauna have died—“There’s nothing in the lake” (17)—an assertion the boy does not question. Later, the boy suggests that other good people have survived (“What if some good guys came?” [127]), a question the father brushes off as unlikely at best. But this question becomes reiterated with increasing positivity. “Maybe there’s a[nother] father and his little boy” (182) the boy suggests, the

declarative sentence structure telling in contrast to his earlier query. The father once again suggests the idea's unlikelihood. The boy later insists, once again in a declarative mode, "There could be people alive someplace" (205), and this time the father answers affirmatively. "There are people," he says, "and we'll find them" (206). While this statement may merely suggest the father's desperation as he realizes he will not be around to protect his son much longer, it is an assertion that is met with reality. After his father dies, the boy almost instantly meets a group that includes children and a pregnant woman (237), despite the previous conspicuous absence of other ordinarily good folk.

In addition to his growing certainty in the existence of other (good) people, the boy's dialogues demonstrate an increasing awareness of and distress over the problem of morality. When he and his father abandon half-devoured, barely-alive people to their fates, the boy questions rhetorically, "[W]e couldnt help them because then they'd eat us too" (107). The fact that he flattens the question tonally (indicated by the declarative punctuation) suggests that he has already accepted his father's decision as inevitable. Yet the boy increasingly exhibits anxiety at the father's decisions. Even though he does not deny the justice of his father's actions—"I didnt say you were wrong" (147)—he indicates disapproval strongly enough that his father interprets it. The boy then begins to question, and finally to countermand, his father, such as when he insists that they give their food to Ely. When the father limits the amount of food they give him, the boy shifts from questioning to demanding. "Just help him, Papa," he says. "Just help him" (218). The boy's growing agency, demonstrated through his capacity to articulate his own moral inclinations contrary to his father's, culminates in his rejection of the hero stories he has long sought from his father. When his father asks why he no longer wants to hear the stories, the boy indicates his insistent pragmatic interpretation of literary morals: "[I]n the stories we're always helping people and we dont help people" (225), he says. In his rejection of the comforting fictions his father has offered, the boy here seems to posit his own answer to his often-repeated questions earlier in the novel. Previously, the boy has asked if they are "still the good guys," and has demanded affirmation that their actions are indeed the actions of "good guys," when they venture into morally uncertain territory during their arduous trek (56, 65, 116). The boy's ultimate rejection of hero stories suggests that he sees the necessity of a functional correlation between fictional ideals and real-world praxis. If the boy models the grail hero's maturation from instinctive but unexpressed compassion to genuine, transformative healing, then this scene suggests that the right questions are those that lead not to the correct answers but to "correct" actions—to behavior consistent with an internalized ethics.

In his analysis of the role of hospitality in *The Road*, Phillip A. Snyder argues that the ancient virtue of hospitality "may constitute McCarthy's essential notion of goodness and grace" precisely because, when it is practiced in this post-apocalyptic setting, it is committed despite the "inherent risk,

namely harm and death” (70) that face those who practice it. And indeed, Snyder concisely pinpoints the crux of the debate between the father’s version of ethics and his son’s. While the father practices a utilitarian version of morality, his son demonstrates an idealism that seems at times both juvenile and self-destructive; his chivalric ethics require him to act out compassion and generosity regardless of the risk to himself. An examination of the dialogues reveals the boy’s definition of morality, a definition that remains consistent, although it grows in both clarity and extremity. Toward the beginning of the novel, for example, the boy castigates his father for going hungry to give the boy the last of the food. “You promised not to do that” (29) he says. When the father explains that his “lie” in this case is merely a result of his wanting the best for his son, the boy points out, “If you break little promises you’ll break the big ones” (29), holding his father to a strict moral code that seems initially unnecessary. Yet the boy’s claim, that the smallest of choices are revelatory of the internal state of the soul and predictive of choices in larger crises, gains credence as the novel progresses.

The boy’s understanding of what morality means is perhaps nowhere so profoundly expressed as in his creation of an “other” child, a child whose existence haunts the novel with its very absence. When the boy initially imagines that he sees another child like himself, he runs out into the road to call that other boy, risking being seen by cannibals. The imagined boy does not, of course, materialize. The boy is tormented by this absent other, revealing his anguish when he repeats, “I’m afraid for that little boy” (72, 73) and later, apropos of absolutely nothing, says, “I wish that little boy was with us” (111). Toward the end of the novel, after seeing a cannibalized infant, he says, “If we had that little baby it could go with us” (168). It is this final iteration of his desire for the presence of another that reveals his reason for creating an imaginary other. His desire to rescue children is based on a belief that the only way to counteract the solipsism and the (literal) consumerism of his world is by saving others.

Of course, the boy’s desire to save others is philosophical, but practically implemented, too, as when he tries to give his food to Ely (144). Even when a man steals their possessions and leaves them to die, the boy does not advocate retaliation. When his father reclaims their possessions and strips the thief, the boy tries to leave some of their meager supply with the man. The father suggests that the boy is being foolish, but the boy explains his rationale: “He’s so scared” (218). The father responds to the son’s spontaneous demonstration of compassion with the argument that their treatment of the thief is just, if not merciful, and that in any event, the boy is “not the one who has to worry.” The boy replies, “Yes I am....I am the one” (218). And so the boy makes his most compelling argument about ethics: if, indeed, he is his father’s and the world’s grail, the symbol of hope for human survival, then that hope is nothing less than a radical commitment to mercy in a world where an act of mercy just may

be a death sentence. What is at stake is nothing less than the divine in human nature.

Campbell's argument—that the pivotal questions at the heart of the grail narrative represent the idea that healing is found in an act of genuine compassion—thus illuminates the boy's formulation of his moral code through a series of questions that never seem to receive the answers he needs. In one of these conversations, the boy surprises his father with an unusual question: "What are our long term goals?" (135) The father, amused, asks where the boy heard the term "long term goals." The boy says that he heard the father ask himself that question once. "What was the answer?" his father asks, and the boy responds, "I dont know" (135). This fruitless exchange demonstrates the critical flaw in the father's quest—his own failure to answer the right question the right way. In short, the father fails to revivify the ashes of his own pragmatic morality, and in so doing he loses sight of his long-term goals, settling instead for short-term goals. Such behavior may enable survival in the immediate future but builds no framework upon which to construct a future for humankind.

In his series of essays responding to 9/11 and the "War on Terror," Slavoj Žižek claims that rhetoric justifying acts of brutality in defense against terror (the "ticking time bomb" argument) is based upon a fundamentally flawed assumption. "[O]f course one can legitimize torture with regard to short-term profits (saving hundreds of lives)," he says, but the long-term consequences of such behavior will devastate the moral identity of the society making those decisions, because "[a]ny consistent ethical stance *has* to reject thoroughly such pragmatic-utilitarian reasoning" (43-44). In *The Road*, McCarthy paints a picture of a world in which any moral expediency seems justified. The ultimate terror, after all, has already arrived. However, the final dialogue between the man and boy defines precisely why utilitarian ethics cannot be the right response to terror. In this dialogue the boy, frantic at the prospect of his father's death, asks, "Who will find the little boy?" He is asking about his imaginary "other" boy, and, while from a psychological perspective he is almost certainly using the other boy as a stand-in for himself, the very nature of his question suggests the nature of the antidote that he represents: he is other-focused. The boy thereby demonstrates that he is morally pure enough to be the grail bearer, and his father's answer—"Goodness will find the little boy" (236)—suggests that such purity is reciprocal. Acting out ethical impulses, the boy will create a world in which ethical response is possible. Because the boy subsequently finds others, the narrative suggests that he is capable of finding what his father is not: goodness in other people.

The Road's conclusion is by no means triumphal. After all, the last image, a memory of brook trout that are now extinct, suggests that the healing represented by the boy may flicker and fade in a world too damaged to survive (241). Even if this world is too fatally infected to be saved, however, the boy's

generosity in the face of terror suggests that if there is any value to human life, it lies in a categorical rejection of fear-based behavior. The grail symbols in the novel hallow the boy's heroic morality and simultaneously remind readers that these myths have themselves been changed through time. Brutally shorn of referents no longer relevant, their very essence has been revived in order to bring insight to contemporary reality. Furthermore, the father's obsession with identifying the boy as the vessel for divine healing draws attention to the importance of signification. Nameless and with limited access to a memory deeply affected by trauma, the novel's dying father attempts to find the mathematic limit of his universe, that *sine qua non* of humanity without which the human race cannot (and, indeed, does not deserve to) survive. Ultimately, the grail is not an object capable of healing the human race of its wickedness; instead, the grail is pictured as a small child walking down a road. The novel thus expresses a deep pessimism regarding humanity's self-destructiveness, but it concurrently proffers an affirmation of the individual's ability to experience a transcendent, and perhaps ultimately redemptive, empathic connection with others.

In McCarthy's unpublished screenplay *Whales and Men*, John, a wealthy man who initially seems to espouse White's disaffection with human beings, becomes entranced with the ability of whales to empathize with each other, sharing each other's pain and joy through translated emotions. He concludes that human beings are, at root, defined by their longing for such radical empathic connection. "[O]ur true nature," he says, "is not rage or deceit or terror or logic or craft or even sorrow. It is longing" (130).⁶ If John is correct and the defining quality of humanity is a longing for connection, then the ambivalence at the end of *The Road* may be the point. In this grail myth, the end of the quest is not in sight, but the young grail bearer is heading out into the barren waste land with the "breath of God" in him, a breath that is defined in terms of inheritance. His father's ethical instruction is imagined as his father's dying breath now made his, an inheritance that the narrator claims may continue on, so that it may "pass from man to man through all of time" (*The Road* 241). The father's love for his son becomes the boy's longing for his father and for community with others. That longing is depicted as a boy's journey through a physically broken world in a relentless attempt to find that other whose pain and whose joy he can share. In a world poisoned by greed, dissociation, and despair, longing may itself be a form of redemption.

NOTES

¹ All information from McCarthy's papers is attributable to The Cormac McCarthy Papers, part of the Southwestern Writers Collection, The Wittliff Collections, Alkek Library, Texas State University-San Marcos. The earliest sketches for *The Road* appear as loose-leaf sheets with a penciled, underlined heading "The Grail" (91.86.1).

² While the correlations between these two texts are in many ways self-evident, Eliot's influence in fact pervades the whole of McCarthy's corpus. See Cant, "Oedipus" 46.

³ In one scene, the father muses on this very idea. He looks at the fading, dying planet and reflects that the "world [is] shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities" (75). On one page hand-marked "Lang. / History" in a draft of the novel, McCarthy wrote (and then crossed out) a few sentences explicating the father's cryptic remark here. In the expurgated passage, the father thinks that the "pleasing thing about witnessing the utter destruction of every-thing [sic] is that one can see finally how it was made. And how frailly" (Cormac McCarthy Papers, 91.86.1).

⁴ Cormac McCarthy Papers, 91.87.3.

⁵ It should perhaps be noted that *The Road's* pernicious brutality is linked to particularly American crimes, similarly to McCarthy's earlier novel, *Blood Meridian*, and, indeed, most of McCarthy's novels. In *The Road*, the apocalypse functions as a metaphor for inwardly critical analysis of the U.S.'s hegemonic commitment to Nietzschean power, inability or unwillingness to practice an empathic engagement with others, and so forth. However, McCarthy's interest in fictionalizing, or more precisely, mythologizing American culpability in this novel, as in others, does not limit the applicability of the arguments about the survivability of human civilization. After all, McCarthy's fiction may be nationally, even regionally specific, but his other writings express a clearly transatlantic sense of cultural inheritance and, by extrapolation, a transatlantic inheritance of guilt. His screenplay *Whales and Men*, for instance, is populated with landed Anglo-Irish gentry in combination with American scientists who in tandem examine the dangers of a colonializing anthropocentrism. And McCarthy drafted *The Road* while living in Ireland (Luce 9-10). His consistent recognition of his own cultural and ethnic affiliation with Ireland (not insignificantly symbolized by his adoption of the name "Cormac") indicates that his fictional microcosms of American guilt are ultimately illustrative of ethical crises not limited by nation or ethnicity but rather endemic to humanity. In the end, then, the mythological structures in *The Road* underscore the universal aspect of the concerns posed in this "American jeremiad" (Edwards 60).

⁶ Cormac McCarthy Papers, 91.97.5.

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