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Christina Bieber Lake



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Christ-Haunted: Theology on *The Road*¹

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Where's the road to the place where light dwells;
 darkness, where's it located?
 Can you take it to its territory;
 do you know the paths to its house?
 Job, *Common English Bible* (38: 19–20)

- 1 *The Road* is a novel that seems to dwell entirely in darkness. It begins after some planet-level devastation has long ago reduced the world to ash. The protagonists, a man and his son, are in a struggle for their lives. They encounter cannibalism, slavery, cold-blooded acts of violence. Cormac McCarthy's narrative is as stark and cold as is his plot; this is fiction that cuts to the bone. Engaged so elementally with matters of life and death, *The Road* makes a case for itself as a classically naturalistic novel. The environment thwarts the characters. Chance dictates almost every encounter. Characters beg for God with no expectation that he will show up.
- 2 The bleakness of this novel, keeping step as it does with other recent American novels, is in part what prompted Paul Elie to argue that fiction has "lost its faith." For a country where millions of people profess faith in Jesus Christ, he argues, our literary fiction is strikingly and incongruently post-Christian. In our fiction, Christian belief figures "somewhere between a dead language and a hangover." There's language that echoes the transcendent, but has no confidence in it. McCarthy and Don DeLillo feel like prophets, "but Christianity in their work is a country for old men" (Elie).
- 3 Elie is not alone. Amy Hungerford, in her book *Postmodern Belief* (2010), reads McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* (1985) as a prime example of a larger trend in American fiction of drawing on biblical language to give the book the feeling of scripture's moral authority, when the book's actual authority is merely aesthetic. "We are left," says Hungerford, "with the presumptuous creation of a prose that sounds like scripture, tempts one to read (for metaphysical structures) as if one were reading scripture, and yet withholds all but the aesthetic and sentimental effects of scripture. In this sense, McCarthy has written, in *Blood Meridian*, a sentimental novel of the highest order" (95). *The Road* fares no better.

Through its beautiful language, McCarthy transforms “[b]iblical authority into literary authority reconceived as supernatural authorship or rhetorical power” (136-137).

- 4 When it comes to most contemporary American literature, Elie and Hungerford hit the mark. Allen Ginsberg wanted his openly irreligious poetry to be chanted like a mantra. Don DeLillo’s novels self-consciously offer fully immanent, rhetorical substitutes for religious transcendence even while many of his characters seem to suspect that such substitutes are not enough.² But Cormac McCarthy’s work cannot be so easily assimilated into the category “post-Christian.” I will argue that his interaction with the Bible and its role in American religious consciousness is of an entirely different order than that of either Ginsberg or DeLillo. Regardless of McCarthy’s personal beliefs, his engagement with metaphysics and theology is foundational, not peripheral, to his fiction. As such, his work takes Christianity as seriously as Flannery O’Connor famously said every Southerner does: “while the South is hardly Christ-centered, it is most certainly Christ-haunted. The Southerner, who isn’t convinced of it, is very much afraid that he may have been formed in the image and likeness of God. Ghosts can be very fierce and instructive. They cast strange shadows, particularly in our literature” (44-45). *The Road* is a story that is afraid that man has been formed in the image and likeness of God. Its landscapes and its language are Christ-haunted. And it is that haunting, not some ersatz biblical authority, that accounts for the novel’s beauty and power.
- 5 My argument has two parts. First, I show that, far from the Bible being a borrowed and merely aesthetic authority for McCarthy, his work evokes it in a way that begs the astute reader to return to it. In *The Road*, it is the book of Job, with all its metaphysical questions regarding personhood and suffering, that is foregrounded. Second, this novel’s beauty is not best explained by an effort on McCarthy’s part to replace God’s authority with beautiful prose. Instead, like the book of Job itself, the novel must be beautiful to the extent that it is answerable to the goodness of human persons as made in the image of God. *The Road* exists under what Hans Urs von Balthasar has called the “demand of the beautiful,” and it pulls its readers—however unwittingly—to respond to that demand.

1. Echoes of Job

- 6 Hungerford’s argument that McCarthy’s texts borrow the authority of the Bible without engaging its content relies on her positioning him in a long line of writers who conceive of the writer as playing God in assigning fates. But in the case of *The Road*, to compare the author (or even the narrator) to God is a confusion. McCarthy himself is better likened to the narrator (the storyteller) of the book of Job, and the narrator of *The Road*, particularly when he is taking on the man’s perspective, is less like God than he is like Job himself. The novel’s situation and subsequent soul-searching thus evoke the biblical book most known for asking why the world is full of suffering and evil.
- 7 The book of Job is initially narrated like any conventional story. It begins “there was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job, and that man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil” (1:1). Outside of the prologue and epilogue, the narrator of Job (similar to McCarthy as author of *The Road*) does not intervene to tell us how to interpret the story. The rest of the book of Job is composed, almost completely, of dialogue between Job and his counselors, and later, between Job and God. While *The Road* is also written in the third person, it features a stronger and more active narrator who is separate from McCarthy (all of the time, since this is a work of fiction) and from

the man (some of the time). The narrator of *The Road* sometimes renders judgment on the man and boy's situation, judgment that appears to be largely separate from the man or boy's point of view. That this is the case is undeniable at the end of the novel, where narration continues after the man's death. In spite of this separation, it is more frequently the case that the narrator delivers the man's perspective through free indirect discourse and similar means.

- 8 This matters because when the narrator's perspective aligns closely with the man's perspective, it mirrors Job's point of view and echoes the biblical language. We are being asked to compare their situations and their attitudes and to see their words in the mode of lament. Recall that Job has no idea why his world has suddenly fallen apart. He receives messengers, one after the other, who inform him that his livestock, servants, and entire family have been struck down and destroyed. He rips his clothes, shaves his head, and drops to his knees in despair. He has boils on his skin. He declares that he loathes his own life (Job 7:16). He says he speaks with bitterness in his soul (Job 10:1). Although he does not curse God with his lips or charge him with wrongdoing, he laments his birth with intensity and poetic beauty.

Let the day perish in which I was born,
and the night that said,
'A man-child is conceived.'
Let that day be darkness!
May God above not seek it,
or light shine on it.
Let gloom and deep darkness claim it.
Let clouds settle upon it;
let the blackness of the day terrify it.
That night—let thick darkness seize it!
let it not rejoice among the days of the year;
let it not come into the number of the months.
Yes, let that night be barren;
let no joyful cry be heard in it.
Let those curse it who curse the Sea,
those who are skilled to rouse up Leviathan.
Let the stars of its dawn be dark;
let it hope for light, but have none;
may it not see the eyelids of the morning—
because it did not shut the doors of my mother's womb,
and hide trouble from my eyes. (Job 3: 3-10)

- 9 The emphasis on darkness reveals the metaphysical weight of the passage. George Steiner argues that Job's lament of his own birth echoes Jeremiah 20:14-18, but "in *Job* it is no individual, it is the cosmos which is cursed. The day is to be made darkness, 'Let the stars of the twilight thereof be dark,' let light go out undoing, un-creating God's primordial *fiat*" (45). When Job asks why he was born, calling blessed the "infants which never saw the light," he is not lamenting his individual situation as much as declaring the "suffocating blackness" of extinction, the anxiety over why anyone should be born only to face suffering and death.
- 10 Similarly, the man's situation in *The Road* is as dire—and as weirdly severe—as Job's. His lament also takes on cosmic proportions. At 1:17 on the day his wife would give birth to his only son, the clocks stop and the world as they had known it came to an end, leaving them in a barren landscape growing increasingly cold and dark. Ash is everywhere. There is a blackness that is so impenetrable the narrator insists it would "hurt your ears with

listening” (15). They walk in a “cold autistic dark” where the only voices with any human feeling are their own voices, the limited conversation between father and son. The narrator’s tone, especially when clearly aligned with the man’s, is as metaphysical as that of Job: “On this road there are no godspoke men. They are gone and I am left and they have taken with them the world. Query: How does the never to be differ from what never was?” (32). Another passage, ambiguous as to whether it is the narrator or the man’s perspective, reads “perhaps in the world’s destruction it would be possible at last to see how it was made. Oceans, mountains. The ponderous counterspectacle of things ceasing to be. The sweeping waste, hydroptic and coldly secular. The silence” (274). The man and his son have long been abandoned by the suicide of their wife and mother, a woman whose only answer, like that of Job’s wife, had been to curse God and die. Their isolation is near total. To read their story is to follow a small, flickering flame moving slowly in a field of utter darkness.

- 11 The silence surrounding the man and the boy as we follow their story is of pivotal importance. Are we to read it as the silence of God? If so, then the narrative’s parallel with the book of Job is even more striking. For although the main part of Job consists entirely of dialogue, it is the dialogue of the false counselors who are trying to tell Job that his situation is his fault. Eliphaz is Job’s first false counselor, and he talks a lot. He tries to tell Job that he is blessed because God has disciplined him. He counsels Job to trust that God is taking care of him, to know that all of this is for his own good. But Job is not persuaded. After Eliphaz stops talking, Job continues his own speech for two chapters more, saying among other things that “the arrows of the Almighty are in me; my spirit drinks their poison; the terrors of God are arrayed against me” (Job 6:4). When he addresses God, he questions him, very much like the man does in *The Road*: “Why have you made me your target? Why have I become a burden to you?” (Job 7:20).
- 12 In a scenario without sense, the false counselors try to explain God’s actions. Job maintains his innocence throughout his lament, and the tension builds. Will God ever show up? Indeed, the best explanation for the fact that Job is composed as a dialogue is because its primary issue is whether an absent God will appear and put Job’s questions to rest. Job’s cries and complaints “are best viewed as calls on the seemingly absent God to become present,” and Job longs to be in a relationship “in which God would call and Job would answer” (Vanhoozer et al. 386). Job wants to hear from God, but he wants speech with the full authority of God’s presence, not the rationalizing of the counselors. This helps us understand his famous monologue:
- Oh that my words were written!
 Oh that they were inscribed in a book!
 Oh that with an iron pen and lead
 they were engraved in the rock forever!
 For I know that my Redeemer lives,
 and at the last he will stand upon the earth.
 And after my skin has been thus destroyed,
 yet in my flesh I shall see God,
 whom I shall see for myself,
 and my eyes shall behold, and not another.
 My heart faints within me! (19:23-27)
- 13 Job’s desire to have his life recorded in a book corresponds with his desire to see God, to know that God is there and is not silent. In short, Job wants to know that God sees him. Job’s “friends” can never explain God’s actions, and their presence cannot take God’s place.

- 14 The dialogue scenario is evoked and inverted in *The Road*, but the silence serves the same end. It centers around the same question: we are here, we are suffering, and where is God in all of this? When the man addresses God, he also shakes his fist and pleads with God to show himself:
- He descended into a gryke in the stone and there he crouched coughing and he coughed for a long time. Then he just knelt in the ashes. He raised his face to the paling day. Are you there? he whispered. Will I see you at the last? Have you a neck by which to throttle you? Have you a heart? Damn you eternally have you a soul? Oh God, he whispered. Oh God. (11-12)
- 15 The man's thoughts here are very different in tone from that of the four men in the naturalistic story "The Open Boat" (1897) by Stephen Crane. In that story, the men are in peril, and once it occurs to each that the universe has no regard for him, "he at first wishes to throw bricks at the temple, and he hates deeply the fact that there are no bricks and no temples" (139). In *The Road*, the man audibly asks God if he exists, and then, like Job, shakes his fist at him in anger.
- 16 The longest conversation in the book is between the man and an old man they meet on the road who calls himself Ely. Like Job's Eliphaz, he talks incessantly, but his message is more like that of Job's wife—to curse God and die. Although he says that words are useless, he uses a lot of them: "I think in times like these the less said the better. If something had happened and we were survivors and we met on the road then we'd have something to talk about. But we're not. So we dont" (171-172). But he does keep talking, telling them that he has known for a long time that there are no gods, and that it will be better when all the people are gone as well because "we'll all breathe easier." The man replies with a sarcastic edge, "that's good to know." Ely returns earnestly: "Yes it is. When we're all gone at last then there'll be nobody here but death and his days will be numbered too. He'll be out in the road there with nothing to do and nobody to do it to. He'll say: Where did everybody go? And that's how it will be. What's wrong with that?" (173).
- 17 These evocations of Job's situation make it impossible to side with James Wood when he argues that McCarthy's text is only theological at the end, not throughout (64). Instead, the best explanation of McCarthy's choice to put the man and the boy in a stripped down, postapocalyptic scenario is to exaggerate the greatest metaphysical and theological questions that face us all. We are all confronted with the brutal facts of our imperfect existence. We are all confronted with the fact that things fall apart. We are all confronted with the fact that we have the power to kill others and to destroy the earth. We are also all confronted by the seeming silence of God in the face of it all. Why are things this way? Both Job and the man in *The Road* see themselves as cursed by God. But it is also true that the main thing they have in common is that neither one of them chooses to curse God in return, either by behaving like an animal or by taking his own life.

2. The Demand of the Beautiful

- 18 If I am correct that McCarthy is evoking the book of Job in order to draw readers into a metaphysical dialogue with the biblical book and not, as Hungerford would have it, to draw an ersatz authority from it, then there are several implications. The first, as I have already suggested, is that metaphysical questions regarding suffering, violence, and evil are engaged. But it also means that the question of whether God will show up in the end is

more than just a matter of flipping a coin. It is a question written into the structure of the narrative itself, a point I will develop later.

- 19 A second implication, perhaps not as readily apparent, involves the beauty of the language of the novel. Job is one of the most poetic books of the Bible, and most scholars would agree that its beauty serves a greater purpose than mere ornament. But beauty has a contested status: does beauty reside in the thing itself, or is it merely a matter of subjective taste? Is it universal, or is it a culturally constructed, fungible category? While I do not have the space to enter into those debates here, my argument depends on an understanding of beauty that contains both objective and subjective aspects. My belief is that when a narrative contains beautiful language, the most likely (but not necessary) explanation is that at least part of what we recognize as beautiful reflects an intersection with what we recognize as goodness and truth, categories that necessarily have theological resonances. I believe that the beauty of *The Road* is of this type.
- 20 This definition of beauty is derived from Hans Urs von Balthasar's theological aesthetics. In the first volume of *The Glory of the Lord* (1961), von Balthasar argues that beauty should not be considered apart from the other two non-Platonic transcendentals (truth and goodness).³ For von Balthasar, art for art's sake is thus a meaningless and destructive concept. When humanity no longer believes in truth and goodness, we sever beauty away from them and make it into a mere mask, a surface thing with no capabilities greater than giving a few sensual delights. Thus "we no longer dare to believe in beauty and we make of it a mere appearance in order the more easily to dispose of it" (18). Since beauty is an inherent part of the truth and goodness of the world God has created, disposing of it in this manner is a human effort to reject the mystery of being. In so doing, we reject the creator of that mystery.
- 21 To make matters worse, when beauty is treated as mere appearance, the good of creation and in creation begins to lose its attractiveness to humanity. "Man stands before the good and asks himself why it must be done and not rather its alternative, evil" (Balthasar 19). Being gets translated into a mere "lump of existence," and humanity is no longer able to read its language, which is beauty. Beauty, when it is severed from goodness and truth, points only to itself and not to another being. Von Balthasar calls this aestheticism.
- 22 For von Balthasar, it is possible (albeit disastrous) to separate beauty from goodness and truth. When we make beauty into a mask that we can manipulate to our own interests, we go against our best God-given instincts. Primary among these instincts is the desire to go outside of ourselves in order to connect with an other, including the ultimate other, God. Art mirrors the choice to be in the world and act in the world as a choice made in freedom, a choice that has the additional effect of deepening self-understanding, deepening the self as a person in communication with others. At this point von Balthasar writes:

Through his body, man is in the world. As he expresses himself, he acts and intervenes responsibly in the general situation. *He inscribes his deeds indelibly upon the book of history, which, whether he likes it or not, henceforth bears his imprint permanently.* Here, at the very latest, man must realize that he is not lord over himself. Neither does he rule his own being in freedom so as to confer form upon himself, nor is he free in his communication. *As body, man is a being whose condition it is always to be communicated;* indeed, he regains himself only on account of having been communicated. For this reason, man as a whole is not an archetype of Being and of Spirit, rather their image; he is not the primal word, but a response; he is not a speaker, *but an expression governed by the laws of beauty, laws which man cannot*

impose on himself. As a totality of spirit and body, man must make himself into God's mirror and seek to attain to that *transcendence and radiance that must be found in the world's substance if it is indeed God's image and likeness—his word and gesture, action and drama.* (21–22; my italics)

- 23 Thus, human being in its origin (being created in the image of God) is already “form”—a picture, an image, in some way, of God—and it cannot cease to be so.
- 24 My point is that McCarthy's prose is not beautiful because he wants it to take the place of scripture. Instead, it is beautiful because it is Christ-haunted, afraid that man may have been made in the image of God after all. Von Balthasar's passage, especially the portions I have emphasized above, best explains how that beauty operates. Note that the man's actions in the world of the novel do indeed make marks upon it: some good, some bad. And McCarthy, of course, is the one who records all of these actions in a book. As Job had lamented, “Oh that my deeds were written down,” McCarthy attends to the man and the son by telling their tale in a dignified way, a way that values their experience and calls it beautiful. As a storyteller he is a witness, and as readers so are we.
- 25 McCarthy has explored this view of storytelling as witness elsewhere, most notably in the novel *The Crossing* (1995). In it, a lapsed priest tells the protagonist the story of an embittered old man he once ministered to. The old man had been through a Job-like experience, catastrophically losing his entire family while he was away. In deep grief, he went on a mad rant against God. What the priest claims he learned from this man boils down to the fact that the story itself is the most important thing. When that story is told to another—and now retold to the protagonist of *The Crossing* and to us—it reveals its value. Storytelling, however unwittingly, provides and performs a witness to that value. The interchange in *The Crossing* is complicated, but it ends with the priest affirming not the goodness of God (the priest had behaved toward the old man the way Job's counselors behaved toward him, trying to convince him of God's goodness) but the fact of God. God sees everything without needing to be seen himself. Nothing escapes his reach. Here the priest, referring to himself in the third person, concludes:
- What the priest saw at last was that the lesson of a life can never be its own. Only the witness has power to take its measure. It is lived for the other only. The priest therefore saw what the anchorite could not. That God needs no witness. Neither to Himself nor against. The truth is rather that if there were no God then there could be no witness for there could be no identity to the world but only each man's opinion of it.... Bear closely with me now. There is another who will hear what you never spoke. Stones themselves are made of air. What they have power to crush never lived. In the end we shall all of us be only what we have made of God. For nothing is real save his grace. (158)
- 26 Whether or not the priest's point of view is McCarthy's own, his storytelling performs this move of grace-granting recognition. Storytelling bears witness to people (its characters) as a way of echoing the ultimate Other's witness to a creation that would not have meaning without it. Indeed, God's existence as ultimate witness enables every other act of witness, for “if there were no God then there could be no witness for there could be no identity to the world.”
- 27 Again, I am not trying to argue that storytelling proves the existence of God, or that McCarthy himself believes in God. Instead I'm arguing that *The Road* tacitly assents to von Balthasar's argument that a human being cannot “confer form upon himself.” Von Balthasar's argument is very similar to that made by Mikhail Bakhtin, who compares the author's consciousness to God's only in that it reveals that aesthetic vision is something

that by definition a person cannot have of one's self (Bakhtin et al. 12). No matter how he may try to deflect us by never naming the man or the boy in *The Road*, McCarthy has set us up to see this particular man and his son's lives as significant. McCarthy has drawn us to the beauty of this man's life and his struggle—and to the importance of his moral choices, his witness to the readers who will “hear what you never spoke.”

- 28 In the next part of his argument, von Balthasar insists that a person is not free in communication. A person is instead a being “whose condition it always is to be communicated,” and the self is regained by this communication. The man and his story are communicated here; they participate in a kind of being, a fictional being that nonetheless relates analogically to the larger idea that all persons' lives are communicated to someone, somewhere, all the time. We are seen by God, and have been so from the beginning. By writing the story of this man and this boy, McCarthy participates in this idea—indeed, witnesses to it—intentionally or not.
- 29 In *The Road*, there are several places of open assent to this idea. In the first two pages of the book, we are introduced to the man, who awakens from a bad dream and reaches out for the boy to make sure he is there. From the very first, this novel is about human connection. Before the boy wakes up, the man surveys the area, and we read that he “sat there holding the binoculars and watching the ashen daylight congeal over the land. He knew only that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke” (5). The man, who speaks very little throughout the novel, says these words aloud. McCarthy emphasizes this with the words “he said,” which are more often than not excised from the trimmed-down dialogue of the book. Thus, the man literally communicates the boy while also indicating that the boy is a communication of God. The man is not drawing a parallel between the boy and Jesus as the word of God, but the boy is a word spoken by God into existence. Aesthetic vision is, in this case, like divine speech-act theory; it requires one person looking at another, speaking the other into existence or acknowledging the other by speech. The boy turns and opens his eyes, and we read the first dialogue:
- Hi, Papa, he said.
I'm right here.
I know. (5)
- 30 The fact that we are spoken into existence, as the word of God in creation, is for von Balthasar the reason humankind is not an archetype of Being and Spirit, as if competing with God. We are instead made in the image of God. Humankind “is not a primal word” he argues, “but a response; he is not a speaker, but an expression governed by the laws of beauty, laws which man cannot impose on himself.”
- 31 It is because of this that Jens Zimmermann argues, along with von Balthasar, that theology “establishes aesthetics as integral to self-knowledge” (515). Zimmermann provides his own translation of von Balthasar, “All our acts of self-expression are embedded in history and leave traces we cannot alter. We are ‘not original in being and spirit but copy, not original word but answering word, not freely speaking but expressed meaning, and therefore completely under the demand of the beautiful which we ourselves cannot control’” (515). Following von Balthasar, Zimmermann argues that recognition of the beautiful in the mystery of being has the inherent power to draw viewers into contemplation of something deeper. Humanity, made in the image of God, is beautiful and shows the beauty of all being. Jacques Maritain similarly argues that when

something is beautiful, as such it “belongs to the kingdom of the spirit and plunges deep into the transcendence and the infinity of being” (C.S.B and Seiling 25).

- 32 When aesthetics are properly bound up with the true and the good centered on the mystery of being, it is no longer possible to dismiss the ugliness of the postapocalyptic world McCarthy presents as theologically irrelevant or as hostile to theism. Nor is it possible to argue that McCarthy’s theological passages are just tacked on in a last-ditch attempt to make a materialistic and naturalistic novel appear metaphysical. Instead, the entire novel reveals that when humankind walks away from God and turns the world into an ash heap, we make it harder, but not impossible, to recognize the beauty and goodness of creation. This partly explains why the novel is concerned so parabolically, archetypally, metaphysically, and theologically with darkness and light. The man and the boy face a world growing increasingly dim, indeed, the apocalyptic blight, whatever it was, is described as a “cold glaucoma dimming away the world” (3) and leaving them bereft of warmth and direction.
- 33 Seen this way, the expression “carrying the fire” has core significance. The man made up this expression to encourage the boy. It stands for, among other things, the fact that the man and the boy are trying to be the “good guys”—to not give up, to not eat people, to not kill anyone except when their immediate lives are in danger. In short, “carrying the fire” is retaining their humanity. In these actions they become a beacon of light in utter blackness, evocative of John 1; “the light shines in darkness but the darkness has not overcome it.” Indeed, every time the man looks at the boy, he sees him as beautiful light, one so beautiful he cannot bring himself to take the boy’s life in order to prevent others from hurting him: “There were times when he sat watching the boy sleep that he would begin to sob uncontrollably but it wasn’t about death. He wasn’t sure what it was about but he thought it was about beauty or about goodness. Things that he’d no longer any way to think about at all” (129–130). Of course, we see here that the man is thinking about beauty and goodness, though the passage emphasizes that the structures that make these thoughts possible are quickly dissipating. This is due in large part to the man and boy’s increasing isolation in the landscape of this story world. But the structures for these thoughts certainly exist for us as readers, and they are right here in this novel, which touches beauty and goodness in multiple ways and invites us to do the same.
- 34 To put it simply, *The Road* is not an ugly novel. It appreciates and depends on our recognition of the difference between light and dark, between goodness and evil.⁴ Furthermore, the drama of the novel, like the book of Job, surrounds the question of whether the man will curse God and die precisely because he and his son are losing any way of thinking about beauty or goodness—anything, in other words, that makes life worth living. This loss, not death, is what the man is sobbing about, and it is a powerfully theological moment.
- 35 Finally, von Balthasar’s insight that the human being is a communicated word helps us to understand the significance of the isolation the man and the boy experience in *The Road*. Though they are able to live on their own for quite some time, the novel begins with them being forced out of their isolation and onto the road. The man is rightly suspicious of most people they meet—people who have turned to evil ways to survive, who have abandoned loving cooperation for slavery and cannibalism. By the time we are introduced to the father and son, they have already become “each the other’s world entire” (6) which is not, of course, a sustainable long-term situation. The boy instinctively knows this and is always trying to find others.

- 36 The power and logic of a plot forcing a man out of isolation to save his family becomes clear when we consider ongoing theological reflection on the doctrine of the *imago Dei*. Following the lead of Karl Barth, many theologians insist that loving dialogical relationships with others is the place where the image of God is primarily seen. For example, Alistair McFadyen writes, “humanity is fully in the image of God only where it is a lived dialogical encounter” (32). Emmanuel Mounier makes a similar point, noting that the person as a created being exists only in relation to others, and this is especially revealed in communication (23). Whether or not the image of God depends on personal relationship, the man and boy’s isolation is a problem because it increasingly removes them from seeing the created goodness of others. They have each become the other’s only means of seeing the image of God in the human world. This explains why the man and the boy are so desperate to continue speaking to one another, though their dialogue becomes quite clipped and dangerously self-imitative because of their isolation.
- 37 That isolation in *The Road* also helps to explain why the narrator and the man lament that language itself is dissolving along with the general de-creation of the world. As they camped,
- He [the man] tried to think of something to say but he could not. He’d had this feeling before, beyond the numbness and the dull despair. The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true. More fragile than he would have thought. How much was gone already? The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality. Drawing down like something trying to preserve heat. In time to wink out forever. (88–89)
- 38 The worry is that the world of things is shrinking, and with it, the names of those things. Because the world is de-creating all around the man and the boy, eventually language itself is going to disappear, leaving a gray world with no distinctions whatsoever.
- 39 So how are we to read beautiful language in a book that is simultaneously describing the decay of things and of language? We have three options. First, as Hungerford might argue, the novel’s beautiful language could be an effort to shore up against these ruins, with the artist taking God’s place in creating the world through language. Second, the novel itself and its beautiful language could be simply a nostalgic remembering of a former beauty that is disintegrating. Or, third, the beautiful language could be insisting that as long as there are persons carrying the fire of goodness and truth, beauty is never really lost.
- 40 While I do not believe the first thesis for reasons I have described, the second remains compelling. The narrator provides numerous descriptions of the dissolving world that suggest in time the “sacred idiom” will “wink out forever.” But if we read these laments over the dissolving world in light of their echo of the book of Job, the second thesis is harder to sustain. And the clearest bit of evidence against this thesis is the novel’s ending: the discovery of the boy, after his father’s death, by what is unquestionably a trustworthy community—with children. The father’s sacrifice and refusal to curse God and die has not been in vain. As if that fact were not enough, McCarthy provides this penultimate paragraph:
- The woman when she saw him put her arms around him and held him. Oh, she said, I am so glad to see you. She would talk to him sometimes about God. 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. The woman said that was all right. She said that the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all of time. (286)

- 41 Against the silent waste of suicide and abdication, and specifically in the name of God, the boy talks to and does not forget his father. Of course, this particular conception of God is not necessarily Christian, and it is not my purpose to argue as such. But it is certainly possible to read this passage as an example of God showing up in the primary way he does today: in people who name him as God and who love others in his name. This idea is consistent with von Balthasar's insistence that the human is an image of God and a response, not an archetype and a primal speaker. Simply put, the passage is overtly theological in a way that McCarthy could have easily avoided. Consider the similarity of this passage to a quote from Theophilus of Antioch: "God has given to the earth the breath which feeds it. It is his breath that gives life to all things. And if he were to withhold his breath, everything would be annihilated. His breath vibrates in yours, in your voice. It is the breath of God that you breathe—and you are unaware of it" (Laird 37). God answers Job's queries not with explanations but with himself—his voice, his breath. Here, God answers the man's queries through this family that continues to talk about God and to God. What the boy finds in the end is not luck. It is goodness in the form of other persons who are also "carrying the fire." Luck is as impersonal as the flip of the coin; goodness, in our world, requires a human face. With this passage, and whether he intended to or not, McCarthy reveals his great love for the father and the son, love that is too deep to either leave them in despair or to leave their story untold. He is their witness to us, and "if there were no God then there could be no witness for there could be no identity to the world but only each man's opinion of it" (*Crossing* 158).
- 42 If McCarthy's landscape is as Christ-haunted as I have argued that it is, we are left with the third explanation for the beauty of the novel. If the good, the beautiful, and the true are the imprint of God in the world, then these things will reveal him. If human persons are made in the image of God and are under the "demand of the beautiful," in the way that von Balthasar describes, if persons are beautiful according to laws of being that they neither make nor control, then McCarthy participates in this logic by making the language of *The Road* sing and hum. This is what Jacques Maritain suggests when he argues that "the artist, whether he knows it or not, consults God in looking at things" (C.S.B and Seiling 30). This is also why Roger Scruton argues that beauty cannot be considered a property that can be ascribed to some things to the exclusion of others. Beauty is more like a posture towards the things seen. Beauty "demands an act of attention. And it may be expressed in many different ways. Less important than the final verdict is the attempt to show what is right, fitting, worthwhile, attractive or expressive in the object: in other words, to identify the aspect of the thing that claims our attention" (13).
- 43 This leads us to consider the immense, lamenting beauty of the last paragraph of the novel, clearly now from the narrator's point of view:
- Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery. (286–287)

- 44 Amy Hungerford argues that it is the words, not the carrying of the fire, “that hold out hope—that put the speckled trout back into the river and the river back into the valley and make things right again even as the words say these things cannot be done” (135–136).
- 45 Hungerford reads the passage as McCarthy reveling in his God-like power. But to believe this requires readers to forget that, before this passage appears, we have spent 250 pages attentively following a man who loves his son and refuses to give in to evil. We have cheered on the father and son as they carry the fire, believing against their circumstances, as Job did, that a light still shines in the world and the darkness has not overcome it. What has greater power than a well-told story to draw our attention to the essential beauty of being that humanity is always and everywhere in danger of ignoring or desecrating? For we, like Job and like the man, have the choice of life or death before us all the time. If we choose to let it, the light of goodness and love in the world can indeed flicker and grow dim. Maybe McCarthy is more of a prophet of the end times than he knows. When the Son of Man returns, bringing justice, will he find faith on the earth? (Luke 18:8).
- 46 Perhaps McCarthy’s final paragraph, emerging after the appearance of God in the loving faces and voices of the good family, prophetically warns us of our peril. It warns us that when we destroy our world or blur it beyond recognition, we lose. What we lose is a map to the world in its creation and its becoming—the whole story of why we are here at all. Words cannot replace the map of creation. They also cannot replace living human beings if we decide to erase the image of God in this world by annihilating each other. The created world is old, and everything in it still hums of mystery. The question is—as it always has been—whether we can hear it.

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NOTES

1. A version of this paper first appeared as "Carrying the Fire, Bearing the Image: Theological Reflections on Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*," in *The Image of God in an Image Driven Age: Explorations in Theological Anthropology*, ed. Beth Felker Jones and Jeffrey W. Barbeau (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2016). Reprinted with permission.
2. DeLillo offers transcendence only within what Charles Taylor calls a "closed immanent frame" that assumes God does not exist and humans make their own meaning (539–593).
3. (Balthasar, Fessio, and Riches). All quotations are taken from volume one of the *Theological Aesthetics*. The non-Platonic part is important because the Incarnation of Christ moves the issue from the abstract and universal to the concrete and particular. Beauty is not a Platonic universal for von Balthasar.
4. Whatever delight he may find in depicting corruption, McCarthy's conception of evil in this novel is primarily Augustinian. Evil is the absence of good. There is no point in *The Road* where the reader is led to celebrate or glory in evil, though we are led to contemplate the possible dissolving of good, the uncreation of creation as humankind descends into the worst version of itself. For an excellent discussion of McCarthy's vision as essentially Gnostic, see Luce's *Reading the World*.

ABSTRACTS

In this paper I argue that it is Cormac McCarthy's grappling with theological concepts that best explains *The Road's* (2006) haunting power and beauty. Far from being a borrowed and merely aesthetic authority, McCarthy's work evokes the Bible in a way that forces the astute reader to return to it. In its brutal plot and metaphysical tone, *The Road* most closely parallels the book of Job, and thereby foregrounds all of its theological questions regarding personhood, suffering, the existence of God, and the purpose of creation. As a result of this parallel, the novel's beauty is best explained not by an effort on McCarthy's part to replace God's authority with beautiful prose. Instead, like the book of Job itself, the novel must be beautiful to the extent that it is answerable to the essential goodness of man being made in the image of God. *The Road* is under what Hans Urs von Balthasar has called the "demand of the beautiful," and it pulls its readers—however unwittingly—into answerability to that demand.

INDEX

Keywords: Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*, Job, aesthetics, theology, beauty, Balthasar

AUTHOR

CHRISTINA BIEBER LAKE

Christina Bieber Lake is the Clyde S. Kilby professor of English at Wheaton College where she teaches classes in contemporary American literature and literary theory. Lake has authored several essays on Flannery O'Connor as well as a monograph entitled *The Incarnational Art of Flannery O'Connor* (Mercer UP, 2005). Her most recent book, *Prophets of the Posthuman: American Fiction, Biotechnology, and the Ethics of Personhood* (University of Notre Dame press, 2013), was awarded Indiana Wesleyan University's Aldersgate prize for integrative scholarship. She is at work on a project that examines the theological moorings of contemporary American literature.