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**BEYOND REDEMPTION?: READING CORMAC MCCARTHY'S
THE ROAD AFTER THE END OF THE WORLD**

In *The Road*, Cormac McCarthy's post-apocalyptic tale of a father and son traveling in the aftermath of the world's collapse, we are thrust into a land of remains. The land is barren and covered in ashes. The sky is dark, and everything is dry. For those unfamiliar with the book, there is no intricate plot in *The Road*. The plot is sparse, as is the dialogue. The man and boy walk, hunt for scraps of food, speak in short sentences, and navigate around any signs of human life. Moving south in hopes of escaping the onset of winter, they make their way around a road, a place of passage but also a place of danger. Each encounter invokes dread and suspicion. All those who remain are potential competitors for the meager supplies—gas, blankets, and jars of preserves. McCarthy maps the landscape of survival, describing it in desolate terms such as “cauterized terrain,” “dull sun,” and “ashen scabland” (12, 13).

McCarthy tells us very little about what brought about the end of the world. “The clocks stopped at 1:17 pm. A long shear of light and a series of low concussions” (45). He offers us glimpses of the previous world through the father's memories. We know that the mother committed suicide, choosing not to go on in a world that no longer exists. The son, born before the collapse, knows no other world than this one. Throughout the novel, man and boy, both unnamed, move through the remains, of houses, of streets, of dried-out streams and barren farmlands. Two bullets remain in the father's gun over the course of their journey. Death is inevitable, if not welcomed. As they find their way to the warmer climate, it becomes increasingly clear that the father, whose health is declining throughout, will be unable to continue.

The last several pages narrate the farewell between father and son. The boy encounters a family who, the reader infers, takes in the boy now that his father has died. In the penultimate paragraph, the woman embraces the boy. McCarthy writes:

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. (241)

Without reading the book, the reader might sense the possibility of hope, of divine presence, even of redemption. Although the father has died, the son will live on and carry on the father's memory. We can, perhaps, heave a sigh of relief—breathe again. But those who have made it through the 240 pages of *The Road* may have a more complicated reaction to these final paragraphs. In McCarthy's post-apocalyptic world, people have resorted to cannibalism in order to survive. The images of a child on a spit and burnt flesh cannot easily be erased as we think of the future of the boy without his father.

Reviews of the book diverge greatly in their reading of the final two paragraphs. Does McCarthy provide, in the end, a picture of redemption? Does the boy's survival—a survival beyond the death of the father—constitute a redemptive ending? Some find the notion of a redemptive ending sentimental, unrealistic, and inconsistent with the rest of the book and its unrelenting picture of doom. For them, McCarthy resorts to a picture of redemption, redeeming a world that can no longer be redeemed. Others interpret the boy's survival as a testimony to the persistence of hope and regeneration, a necessary ending to the tender father-son relationship that McCarthy presents. For them, McCarthy is depicting the substance of hope and the triumph of parental love in the face of terror.

The debate about redemption is not new in McCarthy interpretation. In assessing *Blood Meridian*, Dana Phillips points to two camps of interpretation: the "southern" and the "western." Reading McCarthy as a southern writer, the images and language of redemption are central; he is interpreted along the trajectory of William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor, who draw on Christian themes—in many cases, to launch strong critiques of them. Reading him as a western writer, nihilistic images prevail. His landscapes and characters are Nietzschean, and violence obliterates any redemptive framework. The shift from the early southern setting of Tennessee to the southwestern states (from *Orchard Keeper* to *The Crossing*, for example) prompts philosophical—and theological—questions.

In *The Road*, McCarthy returns to the South. From what we can discern, this is post-apocalyptic Tennessee. This return "home" for McCarthy enters him back into the familiar frameworks of religious vocabulary; probing the question of a redemptive ending is, in this sense, warranted. Yet he does so after passing through the western territories, in which he interrogates

American identity and its redemptive mythology. Robert Brinkmeyer describes the landscape in McCarthy's western novels as the "geography of terror" (38).¹ Speaking about *Blood Meridian*, Charles McGrath says that McCarthy's novels "describe a world that is, for all intents and purposes, either prehistoric or post-apocalyptic: a barren, hostile place in which civilization—and any recognizable notion of morality—is scarcely discernible" (qtd. in Brinkmeyer 39–40). McGrath's statement predates *The Road*, yet it is clear with this novel that the post-apocalyptic has arrived in McCarthy's writing. Here, there are only traces of a past civilization.²

The quest that McCarthy sends us on in *The Road* is one in which temporal markers of past, present, and future no longer hold. At the beginning of the novel, the man wakes up in the night, and we are immediately told that there is no distinction between night and day. All, it seems, is an eternal middle; there is nothing to anticipate, and the past is what haunts the father, reminding him of a world he can never get back. McCarthy catches the reader in a schizophrenic, and distinctively American, post-apocalyptic crisis of meaning: between the craving for a happy ending (for resolution, for redemption) and the recognition of its impossibility (there is, in Christian terms, no resurrection ahead).

In this article, I claim that this haunted, post-world territory cannot simply be interpreted within a redemptive framework. By this I mean that the question of a redemptive ending is not *the* question that McCarthy presents to us in *The Road*. Instead, he confronts us with the question of the aftermath: what does it mean to witness to what remains? Key components of the redemptive paradigm are employed by the father, but the reader is pressed to think, *towards what end?* The biblical imagery and religious allusions cannot be simply placed or interpreted within a traditional framework of redemption. The language of redemption is exposed, not in order to reveal its violence or to claim its fulfillment, but as a remnant of an irrecoverable world.³

I draw on three sources to examine what lies beyond redemption. First, Dan McAdams, a narrative psychologist, examines life stories of generative Americans and suggests that they narrate their lives using a redemptive framework. Does an American redemption narrative become the operative framework for reading this work of American fiction? Second, I draw on the insights of trauma theory to interpret McCarthy's post-apocalyptic territory. The questions of survival—of "living on"—exceed a redemption narrative, placing us in underexplored theological territory—*beyond* redemption. Third, in the face of McCarthy's statement—"Not to be made right again"—I turn to the classic Christian redemption narrative of the

“harrowing of hell” to examine the end of *The Road*. This account of a “hell” between death and life disrupts a redemption narrative, offering, in its place, a vision of remaining and witnessing.

AMERICAN REDEMPTION

The term “redemption” is rooted in the concept of repairing or restoring what is damaged. Something or someone is freed from a situation of harm and changed for the better. Although redemption is described differently across religious traditions, it revolves around a series of images that speak of the process by which humanity and the natural world are taken from a situation of disrepair and restored to an original, if not perfected, state. The concept of redemption entails: 1) an original innocence or goodness; 2) a subsequent fall, struggle, or separation; and 3) a rescue, recovery, or transformation.

Daniel McAdams, a human development and social policy professor, examines how Americans tell the stories of their lives. In his book *The Redemptive Self: Stories Americans Live By*, he claims that the motif of redemption runs through the stories of “generative” adults: those midlife adults who are especially concerned and committed to “promoting the welfare and development of future generations” (4, 49).⁴ Interviewing hundreds of American adults over a period of ten years, he detected a distinctive pattern in their self-narration, in which beginning, middle, and end conveyed the basic belief that human beings confront struggle, rise above it, and come to a better place as a result. They narrate their lives redemptively.⁵ McAdams begins his text by pointing to William Langewiesche’s observations of rescue workers at Ground Zero. In his nine months of interviewing service workers, Langewiesche witnessed an infusion of the redemptive narrative. He writes: “Within hours of the collapse [of the towers], as rescuers rushed in and resources were marshaled, the disaster was smothered in an exuberant and *distinctively American* embrace” (Langewiesche qtd. in McAdams 3). An almost child-like optimism was displayed in the face of disaster. The workers exhibited a spirit that refused to see the attack as an ending; instead, they “simply understood” that something good would come of it (3). Their accounts are patterned as follows: there is a progression from original innocence (including a sense of chosenness) to an encounter with suffering and hardship, and the eventual transformation of that hardship into something

better—something new. Good eventually triumphs over evil; life triumphs over death.

The individual stories mirror a collective story.⁶ This belief in a happy ending achieved through struggle is a national story.⁷ The concepts of manifest destiny, freedom, and chosenness are central to the development of this nation's story; these concepts fueled westward expansion, providing a nation with a distinctive sense of identity and mission. Often theological concepts of divine sovereignty and providence undergird this; God oversees, cares for, and blesses God's chosen. McAdams notes that although redemption stories are often understood to be religious—and he says that they are “legion in the Judeo-Christian tradition” (18)—there are secular versions as well, such as “every cloud has a silver lining,” and “pulling one up by one's bootstraps.” Thus, generative American adults draw on the redemptive narrative for a sense of meaning, purpose, and self-worth that motivates them to contribute positively to society. The future will always be brighter, and they can be part of bringing that about.

While a redemption narrative does many good things, McAdams says it has a dark side. He suggests, in his epilogue, that this redemption narrative also reveals the worst of America. He calls attention, for example, to political responses to the September 11, 2001 attacks. The conviction of innocence and goodness, interpreted on a national scale, can drive and justify violence internationally.⁸ The belief in an identity of “being chosen” can translate into American exceptionalism and the belief that we are good and that others are bad. The redemptive narrative may, at its best, give us meaning and urge us to contribute meaningfully to the lives of those around us; at its worst, it can justify violence and mask self-interest. McAdams calls us to question, both individually and collectively, the cost of our driving need for a happy ending and the means by which we achieve it. According to him, we need to find other ways of narrating our lives that attend to, rather than smooth over, the complex realities of our world.

The story of America is not an innocent one. In his novels, McCarthy narrates this repeatedly. Naming violence for “what it is” is a central message of the western novels. Florence Stricker describes *Blood Meridian* as follows: “All that remains is America, just as it is (Baudrillard), with no sacred mission, no manifest destiny, no chosen people, no promised land: a scene without any sign” (159). McCarthy has explicitly exposed the dark side of the American redemption narrative in his novels. Dana Phillips writes: “Salvation history, which understands the natural world and man's travails in it as symbols of the spirit, has long since been played

out, as the ruined, eroded, and vulture-draped mission churches in *Blood Meridian* suggest" (34).

Yet, in *The Road*, the question of redemption returns, with allusions to biblical prophets and to the boy as a messianic figure. Three paragraphs into the book, McCarthy conveys the father's thoughts: "Then he just sat there holding his 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" (4). The question, however, is: how are we to interpret this language within the context of a world that has collapsed? The context is critical here. How do we read images such as the breath of God and the messianic references to the boy *after the end of the world*? This is a persisting and unavoidable dilemma for readers of *The Road*—the moment you think redemption, you encounter its impossibility—the ending has already happened.

Reading McCarthy through the lens of McAdams's redemptive self, we can see the template of American redemption in the interactions between the father and son. Throughout the novel, the father attempts to construct a meaningful world for the son. He draws on two aspects of the redemptive framework: identity and mission. The elements of identity and mission are conveyed through the statements, repeated throughout: "Are we the good guys?" and "We're carrying the fire." In the first, the son frequently asks his father for assurance of their identity as "good guys." This is often coupled with the opposite: the identification of others that they encounter as the "bad guys." The father has designated the world in this way in order for the boy to assess their actions and encounters accordingly. Their identification as "good" explains, and even justifies, actions that may otherwise be questionable. The pathos lies in the fact that this moral structure no longer makes sense in this post-apocalyptic world. The boy first asks: "Are we still the good guys?" following an incident in which the father kills a man. At several pivotal points, the boy returns to this question with, we might interpret, growing awareness that good and bad can no longer be distinguished.

The second, "We're carrying the fire," is a statement of mission. Through this statement, the father has given their journey purpose. The implication is that someone is waiting to receive the fire that they bear. Traveling over the dull and ashen ground, the father counters the monotony of the landscape by ascribing a higher meaning to their travels. Michael Chabon writes: "As they travel the father feeds his son a story, the nearest that he can come to a creed or a reason to keep on going: that he and his son are

‘carrying the fire’” (24–25). It makes their existence necessary in a world in which necessity takes on its rawest form.

There is a terrifying scene in which they encounter a group of survivors huddled in a cellar. From the half burned body of one man, it is clear that they are staying alive by eating human flesh. The father and son do not talk about this encounter immediately, but after a short time, the son asks his father about it. “We won’t ever eat anybody, will we?” The father assures him that they will not:

No. We wouldn’t.
No matter what?
No. No matter what.
Because we’re the good guys.
Yes.
And we’re carrying the fire.
And we’re carrying the fire. Yes.
Okay. (108–09)

In face of the ultimate terror—cannibalism—the father preserves a vision of the world as good and meaningful in the absence of both. Note that the term “okay” is constantly repeated in the novel. It is clear that things are not okay, but it is a word that holds together the world that the father has constructed for the boy.

These statements comprise the boy’s vocabulary for making sense of the world, and he continues to use them, even apart from his father’s verbal reassurance. They appear in the closing pages. When he encounters the family in the moments after his father’s death, he asks the man: “Are you carrying the fire?” The man replies: “Am I what?” “Carrying the fire,” says the boy. “You’re kind of weirded out, aren’t you?” But the boy persists. “So are you?” The man answers: “Yeah. We are” (238–39). While these words are significant in creating a world for the boy, they do not, in the end, translate more broadly. Like the repetition of the word okay, they are, in Chabon’s words, “like a sore place or a missing tooth” (25).

If we read this according to the template of American redemption, the boy’s spirit will rise above the devastation, representing the promise of resurrection in the aftermath of death’s finality. We grasp onto any sliver of hope. If anything, goodness will prevail. When the son asks about the fate of a little boy that they had met in their earlier travels, the father says: “Goodness will find the little boy. It always has. It will again” (236). Readers, thus, may take these statements and interpret them in line with

a redemptive reading. The father provides a way of viewing the world that will sustain the boy as he outlives his father. The memory of the father will live on in the boy; he will transcend his suffering and move ahead into a more promising future.

Yet McCarthy does not offer this so cleanly. His final paragraph suggests that this world, whose "becoming" was once mapped on the backs of brook trout, cannot be repaired. He writes: "Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again" (241). The destruction is full and unrelenting in the book, and it is difficult, if not impossible, to conceive of restoration. These two sentences—"We're the good guys," "We're carrying the fire"—can support a redemptive reading. But they can also unsettle redemption in the dissonance between their meaning and the reality into which they are spoken. Highlighting this dissonance seems to be consistent with the broader works of McCarthy, where, for example, in *Blood Meridian*, he raises basic questions about human nature and morality within the context of scalp-hunting. One of the things he is most effective at doing is denying his readers comfort, which he does by staging moral conversations in the most immoral places.

"Not be made right again." Does McCarthy waver on this statement? Is it retracted in his final line about the hum of mystery?⁹ In review after review, the question is whether McCarthy delivers us from this devastating world. Either there is redemption or there is not. Into which camp does he ultimately place us—in the southern or in the western? I want to claim that this either/or is not the right framework for the world in which McCarthy places us. The line between good and bad and life and death dissolves in the territory of survival. A dissonance emerges when we map an either/or framework onto it.

In an early essay, "Living On," Jacques Derrida highlights the blurred categories of life and death by exploring the term survival, *survivre*, translated, literally, over-living or living on.¹⁰ Derrida captures two important things in his etymological meditation. First, life is defined in terms of an excess, or remainder—it is if something has exceeded life or has extended beyond it. Second, death is implicit in the definition, as if to cast a shadow over life. It is as if a prohibition is contained within it, as if the survivor was not intended to live on. In his re-reading of the definition, Derrida conveys the sense that surviving is not a state in which one "gets beyond" death; instead, death remains in the experience of survival, and life is reshaped in light of death—not in light of its finality but its persistence. McCarthy's post-apocalyptic territory presents something quite similar, in which the status of living and dying can no longer be separated. Redemption assumes

the eventual triumph of life over death; yet surviving is a constant confrontation with the statement: "Not be made right again."

Readers, then, and perhaps American readers in particular, as McAdams suggests, find themselves in unfamiliar territory, impossible to navigate by means of a redemptive compass. In this context, we are pressed to think theologically *beyond* the redemption narrative, to envision the moments after the collapse of redemption. Yet McCarthy does not provide us with an alternative theological compass. This, reviewer James Wood argues, is precisely the weakness of *The Road*. While McCarthy drains the world of all signs of life, he ends up preserving a theology of the previous world, immunizing it from the shattering. Wood, a literary critic, identifies the novel's central question: "What would this world without people look like, feel like?" Everything else, Wood claims, flows from this: "What would be the depth of one's loneliness? What kind of tattered theology would remain? What would hour-to-hour, day-to-day experience be like? How would one eat, or find shoes?" (46). McCarthy addresses these questions with one exception: the question of theology (Wood 46). According to Wood, McCarthy envisions the after-world in all respects, but he fails to imagine the theological remains. This question would be unnecessary if McCarthy had not invoked biblical and eschatological images throughout the novel. But he has. And yet, Wood says, he offers little more than a redemptive gloss.

Wood's review in *New Republic* is rather unique in calling McCarthy on insufficient theology.¹¹ He writes: "What this magnificent novel gains in human interest it loses by being personal at the moment when it should be theological. In this way it evades the demands, the obligations, of its subject" (48).¹² What are these theological demands? According to Wood, McCarthy must move beyond the emotionally compelling relationship between the father and son to say something larger, more in line with traditional apocalyptic concerns: "The theological question stirred by apocalypse is, how will all this end? What will result?" (48). According to Wood, the "religious consolation" that McCarthy provides at the end of the novel falls short of this larger question.

While I agree with Wood's charge, I do so on other grounds. The theological demands are different from what he names. To pick up the question of "tattered theology" does not mean that McCarthy must provide a theodicy or answer traditional eschatological questions; instead, it means that theology must be re-thought *on the other side of disaster*. If the devastation of the world is totalizing, even the concept of redemption must be subjected to this devastation. The redemptive narrative shatters. And, in

fact, McCarthy suggests in the novel that it was religious fanaticism that brought about this shattering: "On this road there are no godspoke men. They are gone and I am left and they have taken with them the world" (27). In its traditional framing, redemption implies a forward trajectory with a promise of deliverance. What does theology look like without this promise, when there is no rescue, no deliverance, and no future ahead? He offers a harrowing picture of the world's collapse. But the redemptive narrative remains puzzlingly intact. What would theology look like, instead, in the aftermath?

TRAUMA

McAdams implies that, in the face of horrific suffering, the redemptive narrative is not only insufficient, but dangerous. He proposes a tragic framework as an alternative to a redemptive one. But it is not tragedy that we encounter in *The Road*. It is, instead, trauma.¹³ Novelist John Burnham Schwartz comments: "[In *The Road*], the threat is not just dying; it's surviving."¹⁴ I want to examine McCarthy's ending through the lens of trauma, or trauma theory. This interpretive lens unearths a different question than a redemptive one: What does it mean to be one who remains? Between the two McCarthy "camps," a third arises. In a post-world, can we think beyond redemption?

Trauma refers to a violent event—singular or ongoing—that overwhelms and overrides all response systems in the human person.¹⁵ It is differentiated from other experiences of suffering in that it is *not* experienced and, subsequently, integrated in such a way as to allow persons to effectively function in the world. Temporal categories of past, present, and future shatter in experiences of trauma. The past does not remain in the past; a future is not imaginable. The past is relived in an invasive and uncontrollable way in the present, leaving persons and communities unable to move forward. Studies in trauma question the "after" in aftermath, by revealing the fact that the effects of an event are not contained or completed in the past; instead, they intrude into the present. Life is configured differently in light of the "death"—the radical ending—that one has experienced.

The study of trauma is an interdisciplinary venture, spanning the fields of psychology, history, and neuroscience, to name a few. Trauma theory, as I refer to it here, comes from the field of literary criticism. Emerging at the intersection of post-structuralism, psychoanalysis, and Holocaust studies in the 1990s, trauma theory identifies a way of reading texts that calls into question the relationship between reality and representation.¹⁶ Literary

theorists identified within this arena of trauma studies highlight, in their readings, the challenge of literary interpretation in the face of experiences that defy representation.¹⁷ They insist that the gaps and fissures in texts must be taken into account for their testimony to what often remains unexpressed in literary readings. Attending to these textual disruptions, rather than reading over them, can provide, they suggest, a textual witness to human experiences that fall outside the realm of representation. Cathy Caruth calls attention, in her readings, to the slippage between reference and representation; this slippage speaks to the central reality of trauma as an experience that cannot be fully assimilated or integrated.

Theories of trauma envision a different formulation of life in the wake of a radical ending, and in so doing provide a helpful lens through which to read *The Road*. The experience of *living on* in the aftermath of trauma, as in *The Road*, is often described as a tenuous middle, in which both what is behind and what is ahead are unsettled and threatening and unknown. The dissolution of dualistic frameworks of good and evil, light and dark, and life and death is acknowledged in discourses of trauma; they no longer hold.¹⁸ Robert Brinkmeyer writes: "In McCarthy's wasteland, all questions of right and wrong, of the ethical and spiritual are subsumed in the everyday struggle to survive" (41). When Saul Bellow announced that McCarthy had been awarded the McCarthur Foundation Fellowship in 1981, he highlighted McCarthy's "absolutely overpowering use of language, his life-giving and death-dealing sentences" (qtd. in Woodward). McCarthy echoes this in his description of whom he considers to be great writers; it precludes those who "do not deal with issues of life and death" (Woodward). Yet, in grappling with these life and death issues, McCarthy's return to the themes of death and life may be precisely to query the mystery of their inseparability—the ways that they, using one of his most pervasive images, "bleed" into each other.

Interpretive frameworks indebted to binary oppositions (death/life, absence/presence) fail to account for the epistemological ruptures in certain dimensions of human experience and, more importantly, to the experience of *living on* in the aftermath of these ruptures. The question arising out of trauma theory, then, is how to witness to these ruptures. If there is no straightforward reference, given the radical rupture, then the question of witness emerges. In describing the new wave of interdisciplinary studies on trauma, Caruth notes that the challenge is one of "listening through the radical disruption and gaps of traumatic experience" (*Trauma* 4). The process of interpreting texts becomes, in light of trauma, an attempt to witness, in and through language, to what is unlanguageable. The emphasis

on witness in trauma theory describes a way of orienting oneself, as readers, to what is not straightforward and direct.

The "cauterized terrain" of *The Road* is one in which those living cannot find safety in anything around them and memories serve to haunt rather than to comfort. Concepts of progress and the future dangle as cruel impossibilities. The man and the boy journey in a traumatic landscape, living on in a world in which sense, meaning, and trust have been destroyed. The only thing that remains is their connection. According to a redemptive framework, this father-son connection is what is redemptive—a father's love triumphs.¹⁹ This is not a theistic concept of redemption, but rather a picture of human redemption (i.e., "We save each other"). But, again, this triumph and hope shudders in the face of the statement: "Not be made right again."

A traumatic reading takes this statement—this "not be made right again"—as a starting point for interpretation. To think about the ending through a traumatic lens does not deny the tenderness between the father and the son and the power of human connection in the face of peril; but it does take away, in Wood's words, the redemptive gloss. How can we read these final pages *without* retracting the radical and irreparable end that McCarthy has presented throughout? This question is not a defeatist one; neither is it one that calls for the mere opposite of a triumphant redemptive narrative. Instead, it addresses the dissonance between the context and interpretive framework. In this tension, a different orientation to life in the aftermath of death arises.

HARROWING OF HELL

The Christian narrative of death and life—crucifixion and resurrection—is one of the key sources for the American redemption narrative. The death-life narrative of Jesus, McAdams notes, is foundational to many American stories that he witnesses.²⁰ In this Christian narrative, Jesus's death on the cross is a radical ending and his resurrection marks a miraculous new beginning. The triumph of life over death, hope over hardship, can be witnessed in this central story, one that is not only professed by individual believers but enacted within communities of faith. As we see in the American redemption narrative, a reading of Jesus's death and resurrection becomes the basis by which persons interpret the "deaths" that they encounter and also interpret a way of moving forward in relationship to those deaths. Christian believers use this story as a template for understanding their own lives, as a source of guidance and empowerment for

facing and making sense of their life experiences. In this story, they see triumph through struggle, victory through hardship; in essence, this story feeds, if not generates, concepts of American redemption.

However, there is a part of this death-life narrative that is often unrecognized, or under-recognized, in its telling. At the center of this story is the account of Jesus's descent into hell. Situated between the event of death (the crucifixion) and the event of life (the resurrection) is an account of Jesus descending into hell and traveling through the underworld. The earliest creed of Christianity, the Apostles' Creed, professes that Christ not only died and rose again but, between those two events, was buried and descended into hell.²¹ There is no mention of the descent in the later Nicene Creed, nor is there much textual support in the canon of biblical literature to the events of the underworld. Nonetheless, an account of Christ's descent into hell developed in the literary and theological imagination, largely during the medieval period.

In the most familiar interpretation of the account, referred to as the "harrowing of hell," Christ descends into hell and rescues the lost souls of unbelievers and sinners. Artistic images of Christ in hell (freeing the captives and loosing the chains of prisoners and ascending into heaven victorious over death and hell) reflect the dominant interpretation of what occurs between death and life, crucifixion and resurrection. The term "harrowing" suggests that there is a victory in hell, a claim of life in the furthest reaches of hell. Death (crucifixion) gives way to new life (resurrection); the harrowing of hell forecasts the new life, revealing a God who is powerful over the forces of death. It is a triumphant narrative of life over death.

However, this interpretation of the descent into hell as harrowing is not the sole interpretation of the events between crucifixion and resurrection. Several scholars have resisted the notion of harrowing, claiming that, in this picture, the descent is too easily collapsed into the resurrection narrative, overlooking the finality of death represented in the descent. These scholars argue that the account of the descent, and its liturgical expression in Holy Saturday, are often subsumed under the death-life events that bookmark them.²² As we see in the account of the harrowing of hell, there is a foretaste of the resurrection in hell. Holy Saturday may serve, then, merely as a precursor to Easter Sunday. These critics suggest that much is lost when the move to Easter Sunday is made too quickly.

Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar directly counters the harrowing narrative by claiming that there is no activity and no life in hell. The image of Christ is not the image of a living victor over the abyss of

hell but, instead, the image of a dead man amidst the dead in hell. He identifies Christ on Holy Saturday as enduring a "second death," in which he does not take on the sins of the world (as narrated on the cross) but, instead, experiences the forsakenness of hell with those most forsaken by God.²³ I cannot provide a sufficient account of Balthasar's interpretation of the descent here, but it is important to note that he resists the collapse of Holy Saturday into Easter Sunday and pulls it back, instead, to a focus on death. His critique, like others, questions the sufficiency of the harrowing account and claims that the account of the descent attests to a more difficult passage from death to life. Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann claims that Holy Saturday is a necessary "pause" before Easter Sunday, and, in this sense, it provides a moment in which to acknowledge the shattering realities of death.²⁴ This, alongside other critiques of harrowing, calls into question the tendency to eclipse death in service of a victorious proclamation of new life.

Yet, reading through the lens of trauma theory, the account of the descent does not just represent a pause in the narrative of death and life. Rather, the descent into hell represents a *rupture* in that narrative. This distinction is important for two reasons. First, reading the descent as a rupture calls into question the linear progression from one event to the other. The temporality in trauma reveals that death is not behind and life forward; instead, the traumatic event means that something of that past event returns in the present. The past is not simply behind; fragments of the past remain and persist in the present. Second, reading the descent as a rupture resists a binary reading of death and life, in which life stands in opposition to death, and vice-versa. A traumatic reading exposes the ways in which oppositional understandings of death and life do not account for the experience of *living on*, in which death and life are present in a more mixed and complex relationship.

If the death-life narrative of Christianity is read in light of this rupture, then the descent can be transposed onto a post-traumatic territory of survival, in which life is not triumphing over death but, rather, persisting amidst the continual threat of death. This "anti-harrowing" narration of the descent resonates with McCarthy's post-apocalyptic vocabulary. In Balthasar's text, the Christ figure is depicted in survivor-like terms; he walks in godforsakenness, barrenness, and desolation in hell. A traumatic reading reveals a vocabulary that exceeds a redemptive framework. It is a vocabulary of survival and witness, as opposed to a vocabulary of triumph through struggle. In this reading, the account of a journey through hell can be likened to a journey of the living dead, of living beyond a death

when life cannot yet be glimpsed. It is neither a journey into the future nor a mere repetition of the past death. It is this mixed reality of survival that is potentially eclipsed in a redemptive reading. Instead of reinforcing either an account of death or of life, the descent could provide theological testimony to what persists, or remains, between them.

I am suggesting that a “non-harrowing” account of hell calls into question the passage from death to life at the heart of the American redemption narrative. Instead of seeing the events “between” as merely a step forward in the passage from death to life, the descent into hell could narrate the impossibility of this forward movement. It could place its readers in the aftermath of death *without* the promise of new life ahead. In resisting the familiar framing of redemption as a movement from death to life, this reading queries redemption in the face of the totality of death and narrates, instead, a rupture between death and life that does not give way to a happy ending but testifies to the “unmaking of the world.”²⁵ This approach offers a call to witness suffering and death rather than the assurance of victory over suffering and death.

Viewing the Christian account of the descent through the lens of trauma theory recasts this theological “middle” territory in terms of testimony and witness. Caruth suggests that Freud’s theory of trauma moves us beyond trauma’s pathology to the “truth” that it speaks (*Trauma* vii–viii).²⁶ The “truth” emerging in this tenuous intersection between death and life is described in terms of the dynamics of testimony—or bearing witness—to an event that was not fully known or experienced in the past. The concept of witness becomes central to trauma because it describes a new relationship constituted around the epistemological rupture of trauma. Dori Laub suggests that a witness relationship places both the survivor and the one(s) who attempts to listen through the gaps and silences of the survivor’s testimony in a tenuous death-life space in which something “new” is birthed.²⁷ Caruth expands on this: “And by carrying the impossibility of knowing out of the empirical event itself, trauma opens up and challenges us to a new kind of listening, the witnessing, precisely, *of impossibility*” (*Trauma* 10). The rupture of the “middle” may, in its refusal of a progression from death to resurrection, provide a way of theologically speaking to what cannot be made right again.

Chabon suggests, in his review of *The Road*, that McCarthy takes his readers on a “harrowing” journey through the underworld. He likens the novel to other epic adventures in which heroes pass through hell. The father, like Odysseus and Aeneas, is haunted by the ghosts of his past and he and the son are “daily obliged to harrow” the gray sunless hell (26).²⁸

Chabon's reference to the "harrowing of hell" clearly invokes redemption; it, he claims, "is the father's greatest preoccupation." Chabon reminds us again of the dissonance between the father's mission and the landscape of remains: "... in the face of the bleakness and brutality of their lives his mission is difficult to sustain" (25). Pursuing an alternative account of the descent may address this dissonance, invoking not a vocabulary of redemption but, instead, a vocabulary of survival and witness.

The arrival of the man and woman at the end of the novel does not provide relief. How do we know, even in the end, that the boy will be safe? McCarthy has led us to mistrust all encounters throughout *The Road*. This arrival does not ensure redemption; instead, it throws the reader again into the tenuous territory of remaining: When trust and meaning are shattered, what remains? When there is no promise of life ahead, what remains? These are the questions that the American redemptive template overlooks, or, in Wood's words, glosses. When Chabon describes the journey between father and son as a "harrowing of hell"—an underground account brought above ground—I suggest that we counter it with another reading. It is not a harrowing journey but, instead, one that places readers between death and life as witnesses to the impossibility of things "being made right again." Recovering this middle moment in the redemption narrative provides a testimony to what cannot be made right, what cannot be recovered.

To think theologically after the collapse is not to garner the redemptive narrative in the face of terror. Instead, it means receiving the statement "Not be made right again," not as the nihilistic foil to the redemption narrative, but as an imperative to witness to what remains when all constructs for making meaning have been shattered. Reading *The Road* within a redemptive framework eclipses this imperative to witness, closing the text that should, instead, be "handed over" to its readers with the perilous question: What does it mean to witness to what remains?

CONCLUSION

Though McCarthy presents us with a stunning picture of what it means to be one who remains, his reviewers lead us, in the end, to a simpler question than his context demands: is there redemption or not? McCarthy's post-apocalyptic setting, however, pushes us onto different soil. And the redemptive compass proves ineffective. Reading his context in light of trauma theory, the redemptive identity and mission provided by the father is forced, highlighting the dissonance between reality and interpretation. Drawing on the insights of Wood, I interpret this dissonance as a weakness

in McCarthy's theology. His context demands a different theological framework than the one he provides. I have suggested, if only briefly, that a re-reading of the Christian narrative of the descent into hell could disrupt the American narrative of redemption, providing, instead, a rich vocabulary for thinking about a more mixed relationship between death and life.

It is not a triumph over death that one faces in *The Road* but, instead, a testament to the ways in which life and death can no longer be distinguished. This "crisis of survival" reveals not only the insufficiency of many traditional theological explanations but also unearths a different genre of writing that is organic to theology, that of testimony and witness. In the aftermath of the collapse of the world, there is no end in sight, no destination, and no promise of life ahead. But in the face of these impossibilities, the impulse to impose redemption is replaced, instead, by an imperative to witness to what remains. Could we discover, in these texts, a witnessing breath, not a triumphant one?²⁹ Instead of leading to a redemptive ending, it may provide a necessary disruption of that familiar framework and a reorientation to life as a *living on*. As readers, we are handed over the perilous question: "What does it mean to witness to what remains?" The question is not who will save the world but, instead, who will witness its shattering?

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NOTES

¹ Brinkmeyer writes: "McCarthy explores the violent origins of westward expansion that have been expunged from the national mythology that celebrates the victory of civilization over savagery and the march of progress driving, and justifying, America's manifest destiny" (38).

² Throughout *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy demonstrates that human nature, from its very origins, is violent. Brinkmeyer points us to an epigraph in *Blood Meridian* from the *Yuma Daily Sun* in which "a 300,000-year-old fossil . . . shows evidence of being scalped." Brinkmeyer comments that the significance of this epigraph for the novel is clear: "violence lies at the heart of humankind; it always has, it always will" (39). This presents a stunning contrast to the father's words at the end of *The Road*: "Goodness will find the little boy. It always has. It will again" (236). McCarthy's characters in the West, Brinkmeyer says, are often "described as creatures from primitive, if not prehistoric, times; they are manifestations of our forebears, humanity in its original state" (29). Is McCarthy changing what he understands to be elemental about human nature? Has violence (West) turned into goodness (return to the South)?

³ Brinkmeyer, in writing about *Blood Meridian*, also warns against the danger in interpreting the biblical references too simplistically. "There appears, moreover, little hope for religious salvation amidst all the destruction, despite the numerous biblical references that

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dot the novel. But these dots never connect, never coalesce into a pattern either for understanding the bleak and incomprehensible void or for transcending it" (43).

⁴ McAdams writes: "Generativity, therefore, is a broad category that includes many things we adults do and feel as we strive, consciously and unconsciously, to pass on to posterity some aspect of our selves" (49).

⁵ McAdams writes: "Generative adults see their lives in redemptive terms. They tell *stories* that express how atonement, emancipation, upward mobility, recovery, enlightenment, and development often follow the pain and suffering that human life inevitably brings" (72).

⁶ Tim Parrish comments on Harold Bloom's analysis of American fiction: "American individualism pushed to its logical extreme, Bloom's formulation underscores the traditional argument that the American is a kind of innocent untainted by time or history, unrestrained by space, utterly free" (28). Traditional understandings of providence have the believer trusting in the sovereignty of God—trusting that she or he is carried, throughout history, by God's goodness and care. This reliance on an outside being transforms, in the American narrative, to an assurance of the divine within and a narrative of self-reliance, as witnessed in the writings of Emerson and other Transcendentalists.

⁷ When McAdams presented his research on life stories at a conference in the Netherlands, he says that he became aware of the fact that his research could not be generalized across cultures. He writes: "The main point of my talk was that highly generative adults tend to tell a certain kind of story about their lives, a story that emphasizes the themes of suffering, redemption, and personal destiny. The comment I received went something like this: 'Professor McAdams, this is very interesting, but these life stories you describe, they seem so, well, *American*'" (5).

⁸ McAdams writes:

But the same stories can sometimes seem naïve, arrogant, and dismissive of the real gifts and legitimate concerns of others—be those others the people outside the orbit of our generative efforts or, on a national level, those living in very different kinds of societies with different values, beliefs, and goals. These kinds of stories can unwittingly (and sometimes quite consciously) suggest that I am good and you are evil, that I was chosen and you were overlooked. Throughout history, those who have considered themselves the chosen people have often made more enemies than friends. (254)

⁹ The last four sentences of the book read: "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" (241).

¹⁰ "Living On: Border Lines" is an early essay of Derrida's. Yet this question of survival is present in his final works as well. In his study of the poems of Paul Celan, *Sovereignties in Question*, Derrida queries a line of Celan's poem: "The world is gone. I must carry you." The question of a final ending and what survives in its wake is central to this collection of essays. Derrida writes: "And why is the question of *testimonium* no different from that of the *testamentum*, of all the testaments, in other words, of surviving in dying, of *sur-viving* before and beyond the opposition between living and dying" (66).

¹¹ Other reviewers comment on whether or not McCarthy's ending is redemptive, but they do not address the discourse of theology. William Kennedy also suggests a theological weakness, although Kennedy references the mystical language in the penultimate paragraph ("were older than man and they hummed of mystery"). He writes: "The rhythmic poetry of McCarthy's formidable talent has made us see the blasted world as clearly as Conrad wanted us to see. But the scarcity of thought in the novel's mystical infrastructure leaves the boy a designated but unsubstantiated messiah. It makes us wish that old humming mystery had a lyric" (11).

¹² You can hear in Wood's assessment a judgment upon the personal redemption narrative as theological. In the end, the triumph of the human spirit is our capacity to be connected. I would not exclude this from the theological, although, as is evident from the essay, I want to expand the framework of theology beyond the redemptive.

¹³ McAdams claims that in tragic narratives, suffering is not necessarily redeemed but, rather, endured. "The tragic hero learns that suffering is an essential part of life, even when the suffering has no ultimate meaning, benefit, or human cause." He writes: "Tragedy gives fuller expression to the ambivalence and the complexity of human lives than do many other narrative forms. It looks with skepticism upon the kind of ideological certitude celebrated in the redemptive self" (266). Trauma, however, reveals a different relationship to suffering. In tragedy, there is a moral purpose at work, a process of education. The assumption of a certain moral ordering is still in place. This cannot be assumed in trauma. It's not just enduring something but, rather, waking us to its shattering. It is a radical rupture of a moral ordering of the world. See Sands 41-61.

¹⁴ Likewise, in *Unclaimed Experience*, Caruth queries: "Is trauma the encounter with death, or the ongoing experience of having survived it?" (7). At the core of these stories, I could suggest, is thus a kind of double telling, the oscillation between a crisis of death and a correlative crisis of life: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival.

¹⁵ The following are helpful working definitions of trauma. "What I do know is that we become traumatized when our ability to respond to a *perceived* threat is in some way overwhelmed" (Levine 9). "Traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning" (Herman 33); "The trauma is when your biology gets assaulted in such a way that you might not be able to reset yourself" (van der Kolk qtd. in Korn).

¹⁶ In a book co-edited with Deborah Esch titled *Critical Encounters: Reference and Responsibility in Deconstructive Writing*, Caruth addresses the charges against deconstruction by revealing the ways that deconstruction's querying of the relationship between text and reality has been misinterpreted. Deconstructive thinkers do not deny reference, Caruth says; instead, they rethink reference apart from "laws of perception and understanding" (2). She writes:

The analyses by which deconstruction comes to distinguish reference from perceptual or cognitive models thus do not eliminate reference, but rather examine how to recognize it where it does not occur as *knowledge*. It is indeed in this surprising realignment of reference with what is *not fully masterable* by cognition that the impact of deconstructive writing can be said precisely to take place. (3, emphasis added)

This text is a forerunner to her engagement with trauma, in that she will later identify trauma as defying "simple comprehension" (*Trauma* 153).

¹⁷ Examples of this are Felman and Laub, as well as Caruth in *Unclaimed Experience*.

¹⁸ This is brilliantly illustrated in Brison, 9.

¹⁹ The father, early on in the novel, claimed that the son is the only sign of God that he can recognize. At the end, the son implies that the father operates as a 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" (241). The divine status attributed to each, at either end of this novel, could be read as an allusion to the Father-Son relationship in the gospel accounts and, most strikingly, to the Johannine gospel narrative. In that gospel, the concepts of mission, memory, and sacrifice are central to the divine narrative of Father and Son, and they are often interpreted in terms of redemptive love.

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²⁰ McAdams uses the example of Elliot Washington, a good citizen and religious man, who finds inspiration for his redemption in a number of faith traditions, one of which is Christianity. He writes: "As a young boy, he loved the Catholic rituals surrounding Lent and Easter" (19). Redemption is often tied to concepts of sin and repentance that emerge from the account of Jesus's death and resurrection.

²¹ The Apostles' Creed begins: "I believe in God, the Father Almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord: Who was conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell. The third day He arose again from the dead."

²² Holy Saturday is part of the celebration of the death and resurrection of Christ that takes place each Holy Week in the Christian tradition. It is one of the three days often referred to as the Paschal Triduum, which begins on Maundy Thursday and ends on Easter Sunday.

²³ He draws on Nicholas of Cusa's conception of the "second death."

²⁴ He develops Holy Saturday as a Christian response to the horrors of the Shoah.

²⁵ This is an intentional allusion to Elaine Scarry's pivotal work, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Published in 1985, this text is a forerunner to the field of trauma studies; it exposes the unlinguistic nature of human pain and the ways in which the inaccessibility of language can be used as a political instrument in cases of torture.

²⁶ In *Unclaimed Experience*, Caruth identifies this witness aspect of survival as that which exceeds traumatic repetition, giving way to a relational structure of trauma that is enacted in practices of reading and writing texts. This "ethical turn" in literary interpretation, suggested by literary theorists of trauma, speaks to, in Caruth's words, "the new mode of reading and of listening that both the language of trauma, and the silence of its mute repetition of suffering, profoundly and imperatively demand" (9). See Caruth's analysis of Freud in the chapter "Traumatic Departures: Survival and History in Freud" (57-72). See also her article "Parting Words." For a description of this "turn to ethics" in literary theory, see de Graef, Liska, and Vloeberghs.

²⁷ Caruth asks: "Is trauma the encounter with death, or the ongoing experience of having survived it? At the core of these stories, I would suggest, is thus a kind of double telling, the oscillation between a *crisis of death* and a correlative *crisis of life*: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival" (*Unclaimed Experience* 7).

²⁸ Chabon writes: "The world post-apocalypse is not Waterworld; it's the Underworld. In his stories, his memories, and above all in his dreams, the father in *The Road* is visited as poignantly and dreadfully as Odysseus or Aeneas by ghosts, by the gibbering shades of the former world that populate the gray sunless hell which he and his son are daily obliged to harrow" (26).

²⁹ I return to the end of McCarthy's *The Road* in order to rethink the "breath of God," which he refers to in the final paragraphs of the book.

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