

“Salvaged out of the Sea of the Incomputable”

Gnostic Metaphysics in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris*

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Master's Thesis

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November 2023

Abstract in Norwegian

Denne masteroppgaven tar for seg Cormac McCarthys to seneste romaner, *The Passenger* og *Stella Maris*. Den undersøker forekomsten av Gnostiske elementer i McCarthys metafysikk, det vil si, virkeligheten og virkelighetsforståelsen i hans bokunivers. Gnostisisme kan forstås som et samlebegrep for ulike sekter som fantes i tidlig kristen tid. Et fellestrekk iblant disse sektene var troen på at mennesket ikke hørte til på jorden, men snarere hos den Gnostiske Guden i det spirituelle riket. For å returnere til han ble det trodd at mennesket måtte oppnå *gnosis*, som vil si kunnskap. Denne kunnskapen innebar en forståelse om at menneskets tilværelse i virkeligheten kunne sammenlignes med et fengsel, hvor den bibelske skaperguden holdt mennesket fanget for evig tid. Gnostikerne kalte den bibelske skaperguden for Ialdabaoth, og mente at han, sammen med hans tjenere, gjorde alt de kunne for å forhindre menneskets gjenforening med den Gnostiske Guden. For å motvirke Ialdabaoth ble det trodd at den Gnostiske Guden ved flere anledninger sendte en utsending av seg selv til mennesket, en figur som i enkelte sammenhenger kan forstås som Jesus.

Det overordnede målet for denne oppgaven er å vise, gjennom analyse av diverse karakterers livssyn i McCarthys bøker, samt analyse av bøkens motiver og symbolikk, at McCarthys metafysikk kan sies å være av gnostisk natur. Forekomsten av Gnostisisme i McCarthys bøker har blitt påpekt og diskutert tidligere, men det er i skrivende stund ingen som har sett på dette i McCarthys to seneste bøker. Som sådan forsøker denne oppgaven å tette et hull i forskningen på denne fronten.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Astrid Haas, my supervisor, for all your feedback and support.

Thanks to everyone at the University who have helped me make this possible.

And finally, and most importantly, thanks to my family and friends, for your belief in me.

INTRODUCTION

If you had to say something definitive about the world in a single sentence what would that sentence be?

It would be this: The world has created no living thing that it does not intend to destroy.

I suppose that's true. What then? Is that all that the world has in mind?

If the world has a mind then it's all worse than we thought (McCarthy, 2022b, p. 24).

People have been trying to decipher what one might call the 'hidden meaning' behind the late American writer Cormac McCarthy's novels for close to six decades. McCarthy's novels are notoriously confusing, not only because of his characteristic, sometimes disorienting, writing style, but also for the vast number of metaphors found in all his novels. In many of McCarthy's novels there are, spread out between depictions of brutal violence and crushingly bleak imagery, grand questions about life, the universe and humankind's place in it. Literary critics have argued back and forth about the true nature of McCarthy's metaphysics, which the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) explains as the branch of philosophy that deals with the first principles of things or reality ("Metaphysics", 2023). Some critics have claimed that his metaphysics resemble nihilism, while others have claimed that there spiritual and/or religious tendencies.

As an example, the few lines above, which are from *Stella Maris*, McCarthy's final novel prior to his death, is an exchange between a psychiatrist and a patient, and could certainly be interpreted as nihilistic. Vereen M. Bell, one of the critics of McCarthy's work and the first person to suggest that McCarthy's writing is nihilistic in nature does so in an article he wrote in 1983. In this article, Bell states that "this is McCarthy's metaphysic: none, in effect; no first principles, no foundational truth; Heraclitus without logos" (Bell, 1983, p. 32). According to Petra Mundik, who has written a number of articles, essays and a book about McCarthy, critical opinion concerning McCarthy's writing tend to divide into two camps: nihilists, who agree with Bell's interpretation, and moralists, who argue that McCarthy's novels contain moral parables (Mundik, 2009, p. 72). Mundik asks whether McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* is a nihilistic portrayal of the human condition, or if there is

redemption to be found among all the violence and desolation. She suggests that perhaps the answer might lie somewhere in between.

Another proponent of the nihilistic interpretation of McCarthy's novels, Leo Daugherty, further argues that "gnostic thought is central to Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*" (Daugherty, 1992, p. 122). The idea that McCarthy's novels contain various elements of gnostic influence has been suggested by several critics, among them Vereen M. Bell, who changed his mind regarding his early interpretation of McCarthy's metaphysics as nihilistic, as well as Sven Birkerts who notes: "McCarthy has been, from the start, a writer with strong spiritual leanings. His orientation is Gnostic" (1994, p. 39). Similarly, literary critic Harold Bloom suggests that Herman Melville and William Faulkner were "a kind of unknowing Gnostic", while McCarthy, who Bloom describes as a worthy disciple of both, is "very knowing indeed (2000, p. 237). According to Mundik there is a critical consensus that Gnosticism informs McCarthy's writing (2016, p. 5).

As a student of religion this fascinated me, and I quickly became very interested in learning more about what Gnosticism is and finding out for myself if McCarthy's metaphysics, that is the reality and ultimate truths of the universe(s) of his novels, truly can be described as Gnostic in nature. Several scholars have pointed out that McCarthy's metaphysics lends thoughts, ideas, symbolisms and beliefs from Gnosticism. This is something that McCarthy never confirmed nor denied. As such, his two last novels, *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris*, may contain the author's last remaining hints to his readers regarding his metaphysics, which is why I have decided to write about these novels. At the time of writing this thesis, no such hints or evidence pertaining to the nature of McCarthy's metaphysics have been discovered in *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris*, as no scholarly work on these novels has yet been published. As such, this thesis fills a current research gap and seeks to further the discussion on McCarthy's metaphysics, a discussion which hopefully will continue for many years to come as I believe that McCarthy's novels have much to offer. Through examining how certain characters in *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris* relate themselves to metaphysical questions, such as what it means to exist, as well as analyzing the novels' symbolism and motifs, I argue that it becomes clear that these two novels present a culmination of McCarthy's metaphysics; a metaphysics that at its core can be understood as intrinsically Gnostic.

GNOSTICISM

Gaining an understanding of what Gnosticism is and what it entails is a crucial requirement in order to understand interpretations of Cormac McCarthy's novels as having Gnostic thought central to them. Through my own research I have found that Gnosticism cannot be adequately summarized in a few sentences. Many different scholars have many differing opinions regarding what Gnosticism is, or as some argue; what it was. I have elected to condense a few of these opinions and explain only what I feel to be the most necessary regarding what Gnosticism is, and what key beliefs and viewpoints are commonly found therein. One key element of Gnostic thought is, as Mundik explains, that it carries a "deeply pessimistic world-view" (Mundik, 2009, p. 73). Although similar, this must be distinguished from nihilism. Nihilism, according to the Encyclopedia Britannica, stems from the Latin word *nihil*, meaning nothing, and was originally a philosophy of moral and epistemological skepticism that arose in 19th century Russia (Brittanica, 2022). In the 20th century, nihilism came to encompass numerous philosophical and aesthetical stances that in some way or other denied the existence of genuine moral truths and values, rejected the possibility of knowledge or communication, and asserted the ultimate meaninglessness or purposelessness of life or of the universe. While there are some similarities between nihilism and Gnosticism, "Gnostics" would certainly take issue with some parts of this description of the nature of the cosmos, in particular, the notion of rejecting the possibility of knowledge. For the purposes of this thesis, references to "Gnostics" refer to the sects of people who most likely practiced Gnosticism as a religion during the Early Christian Era. These Gnostics might have simply called themselves Christians in many cases, however, they were seen as "false" Christians by other Early Christian groups and collectively labeled Gnostics. Gnosticism is not a religion that is practiced today. It is widely believed among scholars that Gnosticism emerged alongside Christianity between the first and third century CE, borrowing and lending from Christianity and other religions of the time (Mundik, 2016, p. 3). The 'ism' in Gnosticism suggests that it is a distinctive practice, ideology or set of beliefs, however, it shares similarities with many common Christian ideas, as well as other ideas from the same time period. We can know for sure that there existed Gnostic religious texts because remnants of these have been recovered, most recently in Egypt, in 1945, near a town called Nag Hammadi (Pagels, 1979, p. xiii). A larger collection of Early Christian and Gnostic texts were discovered there, which have been collectively named the Nag Hammadi Library, also known as the "Gnostic Gospels". These texts range from "secret gospels, poems and quasi-philosophic descriptions of the origin of

the universe to myths, magic, and instructions for mystical practice” (Pagels, 1979, p. xvii). However, despite such evidence of its existence, Gnosticism is not so easily categorized as one single practice, ideology or set of beliefs.

In his book, *The Gnostics: Myths, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity*, David Brakke explains that the term ‘gnostic’ stems from the Greek adjective *gnostikos*, meaning an activity that leads to or supplies *gnosis*, meaning knowledge (Brakke, 2010, p. 30). Before Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyons in Gaul, wrote his famous *Detection and Overthrow of Gnosis Falsely So-Called*, also known as *Against the Heresies*, around the year 180 CE, *gnostikos* was not attributed to people, but to “capacities, intellectual activities, or mental operations” (Brakke, 2010, p. 30). Brakke argues that the term “gnostic” was a positive term in antiquity that must have already been circulating as a term of self-praise before *Against the Heresies*, and that it remained as such even after Irenaeus and other heresiologists disparaged Gnostics as heretics. Elaine Pagels explains that those who claim to know nothing about ultimate reality are called agnostics, which literally translates to “not-knowing”, while those that do claim to know something are called Gnostics (1979, p. xix). Brakke argues that the Gnostic’ that Irenaeus and others after him condemned as heretics were not a single group of people with one common belief, but rather an amalgamation of groups that held beliefs or practices that differed with what Irenaeus believed to be the one “authentic” way of being Christian (Brakke, 2010, pp. 1,2). Irenaeus called these groups “false” Christians, and despite the many differences between these groups, upheld that they all stemmed from a single demonic teacher, namely, Simon Magus, a magician who appears in the Acts of the Apostles. Brakke furthermore explains that Irenaeus argued that all these “false” Christian groups and teachers manifested what he deemed false *gnosis*, i.e., false knowledge, which St. Paul had warned against in one of his letters to Timothy (1 Timothy 6:20). These groups went by many names: Gnostics, Sethians, Valentinians, Marcionites, Carpocratians, to name some (Brakke, 2010, p. 4). It is evident through Irenaeus’ writing that they were considered a serious threat to Irenaeus’ (and others who shared his opinion) “true” Christianity.

Modern scholars have tried to identify Gnosticism as a “substantive religion or worldview in its own right” (Brakke, 2010, p. 4), and not as a Christian heresy, as Irenaeus saw it. Brakke explains that when these scholars try to categorize many different ancient groups as belonging to the same religion, namely “Gnosticism”, they unwittingly replicate Irenaeus’ notion of false knowledge, but neglect his delineation of its diversity. Brakke furthermore explains that some historians today go as far as asserting that Gnosticism was an

independent religion that pre-existed Christianity. Irenaeus set the precedent for thinking of Gnosticism as a vast phenomenon, made up of numerous sects, whose teachings were extremely diverse, and yet also, according to Irenaeus, somehow all the same (Brakke, 2010, p. 29). This line of thinking has according to Brakke left modern scholars with two options: either Gnosticism was just that, a vast ancient religion, or a religion with a variety of representatives, or the second option: it did not exist at all. This is a heavily debated subject, with some scholars advocating for a complete dismantling of Gnosticism altogether (Brakke, 2010, p. 23).

Defenders of Gnosticism often take a typological approach in which a set of characteristics gathers together similar people and texts. Brakke further explains that one such defender is Christoph Marksches who argues that as the basis for a model of “Gnosis”, a religious system with an emphasis on attaining gnosis, several characteristics may be used, which will be further discussed. For Marksches, the teachings of early forerunners such as Valentinus, paved the way for true systems of Gnosis, such as Valentinianism and Sethianism, which culminated in Manichaeism, a former major religion that falls under the category of Gnosticism. In Manichaeism, Brakke explains, Gnosis does indeed take the form of its own religion. Daugherty suggests that Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* exemplifies Gnostic thought similar to that of Manichaeism (Daugherty, 1992, p. 122). A key belief in Manichaeism was that of a dualistic cosmology and with it an eternal battle between good and evil. Good is represented by a spiritual world of light, while evil is represented by a material world of darkness.

This is a belief that many Gnostic groups upheld and is one part of a set of characteristics that can be used with a typological approach to identify what was and what was not a form of Gnosticism. The idea of good and evil and the distinction between a spiritual, heavenly-like realm and a material realm, Earth, is by no means a unique belief to Gnosticism. In fact, it is possible that most religions that have existed have shared some kind of belief similar to this. An Early Christian such as Irenaeus would not have any issues with a belief such as this, nor, in fact, issues with a significant number of Gnostic beliefs. This seems unlikely, seeing as Irenaeus actively spoke out against the Gnostics and called them heretics, but the truth is that Gnostic beliefs share many similarities with beliefs of the Early Christians, such as the belief that God created the world and every living being on it. However, Gnostics questioned the well-meaning behind God’s actions. In one Gnostic text, attributed to John the Apostle, known as *The Apocryphon of John*, also called the *Secret Book*

of *John* (Ap. John), several questions are raised as to the nature of the biblical God. Why, for instance, would he deny humankind knowledge, and cast them out of the Garden of Eden when they defied him? And why would he give humanity life in the first place, only to take it away at an anger impulse later, with great floods and fire and brimstone raining down on cities? And if it is true, as he says, that he is a jealous God and that there exists no other God than him, “of whom would he be jealous?” (Ap. John II 13:5-13).

GNOSTIC BELIEFS

For Gnostics, the answers to the questions posed above culminated in two key beliefs about the truth about the god of the Old Testament, Yahweh. Firstly, they believed that there were other, higher gods, even though this god claimed that there were not. Secondly, whoever this entity really is, it is very hostile towards humans and does not have humankind's best interests at heart. The notion that there probably were other, higher gods than the creator god, was, according to Brakke, something that Early Christians could agree with. This is quite surprising, considering how monotheistic Christianity later became. While Early Christians believed that this ‘creator god’ worked through an even higher god and was his will and his word manifested, Gnostic groups denied this and believed that the creator god was an ignorant, blind and cruel entity that was not divine. This entity, they believed, had somehow stolen a bit of power from the Gnostic God and created Earth and everything on it in imitation of the spirit realm, from whence the entity had been expelled, and quite poorly so. The belief that the creator god was in fact evil did not sit well with the Early Christians and makes it obvious why someone like Irenaeus would call the Gnostics heretics and what they were preaching false knowledge (Brakke, 2010, p. 64). Gnostics called the creator god Ialdabaoth, or the *demiurge*, which translates to the craftsman, and believed that he had all of humanity trapped here in the material realm, in an unnatural material form, separated from our true home and form. Gnostics believed that not only was this world a prison, our bodies themselves are also prisons, keeping a small part of the true God trapped within us. The ruthless warden to this prison, who keeps us uninformed and oblivious to the truth, is Ialdabaoth, and he leads a set of demonic powers, which Brakke explains are called rulers, authorities, and the like (Brakke, 2010, p. 64). These beings are also known as *archons*, evil angels, whose purpose it is to keep humankind ignorant. True salvation can only be found by gaining knowledge that there is another, higher god, and that with him is where we are truly

meant to be. Gnostic myth is therefore a story of return. This is what attaining *gnosis* truly meant for Gnostics, but it is a difficult process that humans cannot hope to achieve by themselves. Instead, they need help from another figure that Early Christians and many Gnostic groups share common belief in, namely Christ, whom the Gnostic God sent to help save humanity.

While Early Christians believed that Christ was the actual son of God, flesh and blood, Gnostics were appalled by this idea. The reason for this was because Gnostics believed that the highest god, the Gnostic God, whom they called the “Father of the entirety” or “the Invisible Spirit”, was immeasurable, unlimited and unknowable (Brakke, 2010, p. 54). The Invisible Spirit should not even be called divine, because “it is superior to deity” (Ap. John II 2:35-36). To think that this unimaginable being had fathered a living, breathing son of flesh and blood was simply unthinkable to the Gnostics. Rather, Gnostics had what is called a “docetic” understanding of Christ, meaning that they believed that he did not have “material, human body; he only seemed to have flesh and blood” (Brakke, 2010, p. 68). Despite the belief that the Gnostic God was unknowable, since the Gnostics believed him to be the source of everything, one could define the Gnostic God in some ways: “It is life, as bestowing life. It is blessed, as bestowing blessedness. It is acquaintance, as bestowing acquaintance” (Ap. John II 4:3-8). However, Brakke explains that the Invisible Spirit does not have any of these characteristics itself, it only bestows them on all existing things.

Who then, if not the son of God, was Jesus to the Gnostics? To explain this, understanding more about the Gnostic God is necessary. In fairness, this is quite the rabbit-hole, but important, nonetheless. Gnostics believed that the true God existed far, far away, wholly detached from our world. The Gnostic God is not only the father of the entirety, but it *is* also the entirety, which naturally is made up of different parts. The larger parts are called “aeons”. According to Brakke, the aeons are simultaneously actors, places, extents of time and modes of thought. They have names, mostly of ideal qualities, abstractions or mental operations, such as for instance Wisdom, Truth, Afterthought and Intelligence. They are the result of the Invisible Spirit’s knowledge or thought of itself and are individual deities at the same time as they are parts that make up the entirety. The aeons themselves can also be comprised of other, smaller parts, which are called luminaries. The closest aeon to the Invisible Spirit, and therefore the foremost is the second principle, called Forethought. It is also called “the perfect Invisible Virgin Spirit” (Ap. John II 4:34-35) or *Barbēlō*. The Father of the entirety is too far away for humanity to communicate with him or have direct

knowledge of him through him. It therefore falls on Forethought, the most immediate emanation from the Gnostic God, to help humans to attain knowledge of the first principle, i.e., the entirety. Forethought is sometimes called the perfect Invisible Virgin Spirit because it is believed to have conceived Christ in some Gnostic myths. Generally, a triad of father, mother and son is featured at a very high level of the godhead in nearly all Gnostic religious teachings, although the myths vary (Brakke, 2010, p. 55). In some variations of Gnosticism, the father is the entirety, the mother is the Virgin Spirit, and the son is Christ. This is not too different from Christian teachings. Christ is also referred to as the “Self-Originate”, because he sprung into existence by himself in many variations of the myths, and he acts as an intermediary between the entirety and the Virgin Spirit and the rest of the aeons. He is sometimes described as a great angel, or a god of light, and with him follow four luminaries. These luminaries are quite important, because they are, or, more specifically, contain within them, four divine archetypes of ideal humanity. Firstly, there is Adamas, the heavenly archetype of Adam, of whom Gnostics believe Adam from the Bible was created in the image of. Then there is his son Seth, of whom the name of the aforementioned Gnostic group, the Sethians, can be traced back to. Brakke explains that the two other archetypes are somewhat diffuse but can be identified as the primeval descendants of Seth, from Genesis, and finally the contemporary Gnostics, the present-day offspring of Seth (Brakke, 2010, p. 57).

The Gnostic Christ-figure appear to humans in many Gnostic myths; however, it is not always believed that this is the Christ who is the son of entirety and the Virgin Spirit. Neither is it always believed to be Jesus, but rather a luminary called Afterthought, a manifestation of Wisdom, whose task it was believed to be to instruct and enlighten humans to the existence of the Gnostic God. When Afterthought appear to humans it is sometimes in the form of Christ. Other times, Afterthought enter other human beings, such as Adam and Eve, to help them and teach them about the reality of the universe. Gnostics believed that this for instance happened during Adam and Eve’s creation. According to some myths, Ialdabaoth was tricked into blowing some of the power he had stolen from the Gnostic God, a small spark called the *pneuma*, meaning breath, into Adam in order to bring him to life (Jonas, 1958, p. 41; Brakke, 2010, p. 65). The power enabled Adam to stand upright, indicating an attraction towards higher, spiritual realities. This caused Adam to come into conflict with Ialdabaoth and the other demonic rulers, who desperately attempted to prevent him from gaining acquaintance with the divine. Ialdabaoth and the rulers successfully manage to cast humanity into a state of ignorance. The rulers’ natures are often linked with heavenly authorities, planets and stars,

and they are able to thwart human potential virtue and knowledge of entirety by controlling our choices astrologically. To counteract this, Adam received a divine revelation from higher beings which he shared with his son Seth, explaining to him how Ialdabaoth and the rulers will attempt to destroy ‘the other race’, Seth’s descendants, who are born with the possibility of acquaintance with the entirety (Brakke, 2010, p. 66). These attempts included the flood and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Adam was told that one day, a savior will arrive, who will bring destruction to the rulers and salvation to all humans who have acquaintance with the Gnostic God. In some myths this savior is Jesus, who is also sometimes believed to be an incarnation of Seth (Brakke, 2010, p. 69). Regardless of who, or what, Gnostics believe Christ to be, he is a very important figure in Gnostic belief systems along with Ialdabaoth and the rulers. They are central figures in Gnosticism, and looking for references to them in Cormac McCarthy’s novels is therefore an important aspect of arguing for Gnostic influence in his novels. Daugherty, Mundik and others have tried to identify some of these Gnostic figures as actual characters in McCarthy’s novels, and such identifications are often at the base of their arguments.

GNOSTIC INFLUENCE IN CORMAC MCCARTHY’S NOVELS

The first McCarthy novel that was interpreted as being influenced by Gnostic thought was *Blood Meridian: or the Evening Redness in the West*. This interpretation was first detailed in depth by Leo Daugherty in his 1992 essay “Gravers False and True: Blood Meridian as Gnostic Tragedy”. The main argument Daugherty proposes for why *Blood Meridian* has been influenced by gnostic thought revolves around a character in the novel called Judge Holden, or simply ‘the judge’, who is the principal antagonist of the story. An early passage in the novel states: “The survivors... slept with their alien hearts beating in the sand like pilgrims exhausted upon the face of the planet Anareta, clutched to a namelessness wheeling in the night” (McCarthy, 1985, p. 46). According to Daugherty, the implication is that the Earth is “Anareta”, which he explains was believed in the Renaissance to be the planet that destroys life (1992, p. 126). Daugherty, surprisingly, does not touch on the other implication in this passage, namely the fact that the survivors have “alien hearts”, which seems like an obvious nod to the Gnostic belief that all humans have a fragment within them of the true, alien God,

and that this planet is not humanity's true home. Daugherty explains that the Earth belongs to the judge, and he notes that the judge bears striking resemblance to that of an archon, one of the evil angels found in various Gnostic belief systems.

The judge seeks to control every living thing in the world, from the birds in the sky down to the smallest of flowers and he is as jealous and vengeful as the creator god, Ialdabaoth, the god whom Gnostics believed to be a false god. Planet Earth, evil as it may be, is not under the judge's full control yet. He has this to say when he is questioned why he collects specimens of plants and insects during the travels of the Glanton Gang, which readers follow throughout most of the novel: "Whatever exists, he said. Whatever in creation exists without my knowledge exists without my consent." (McCarthy, 1985, p. 209). Daugherty explains that the judge is working "to become a full suzerain – one who rules even where there are other rules and whose authority countermands local judgments" (1992, p. 125). The judge furthermore has this to say:

The judge placed his hands on the ground. He looked at his inquisitor. This is my claim, he said. And yet everywhere upon it are pockets of autonomous life. Autonomous. In order for it to be mine nothing must be permitted to occur upon it save by my dispensation. (McCarthy, 1985, p. 209)

From our first introduction to him early in the novel and to the last pages, the judge is presented as an instrument of evil; lying, mutilating, killing and raping everywhere he goes. He is an advocate of war, believing that "War is god" and that it is his work to achieve dominion and to be the realized territorial archon of this "anaretic planet" (Daugherty, 1992, p. 125). And yet, despite all these horrible characteristics, his way of speaking is eloquent and charming, and he is highly intelligent, attributes that Mundik explain are commonly associated with Judeo-Christian representations of the devil (2009, p. 79). The Judge's demeanor is gentle, unless one would deny that his way is the right way or otherwise oppose him, which the novel's protagonist, known only as "the kid", unfortunately experiences firsthand: "The judge was seated upon the closet. He was naked and he rose up smiling and gathered him in his arms against his immense and terrible flesh and shot the wooden barlatch home behind him" (McCarthy, 1985, p. 351). He has a sway over other people, corrupting them from within their midst, leading them down a dark path that ultimately, without exception, leads to their deaths. The judge is a supernatural creature who in some ways resembles Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. He is a vast, albino, hair-less creature that Bloom suspects may be immortal (2000, p. 257). The judge is approximately 40-45 years old and

does not age, nor sleep, during the span of *Blood Meridian*, which takes place over some 30 years, while the kid ages from 15 or so, to 45. At the end of the novel the judge proclaims, while dancing naked, that he never sleeps and that he will never die.

Daugherty's other core argument that supports a Gnostic reading of *Blood Meridian* is the interpretation of the man in the epilogue as a divine messenger of the alien god, something he states is what made him first see the connection to Gnosticism (1992, p. 129). Mundik agrees and explains that the epilogue is absolutely central to a Gnostic understanding of the novel (2009, p. 88). The epilogue describes a man progressing over the plain by means of holes which he is making in the ground:

He uses an implement with two handles and he chucks it into the hole and he enkindles the stone in the hole with his steel hole by hole striking the fire out of the rock which God has put there. (McCarthy, 1985, p. 355)

Daugherty identifies this man as the revealer or revelator of the divine and explains that he is working to free spirit from matter. In many different religions, Christianity included, there are creation myths that explain that the first humans were made from clay. The "fire" that the man on the plains is "striking out" can be understood as the spark of the divine, the pneuma, that Ialdabaoth entrapped in humanity during its creation. "The rock" can be read as humans, and the argument is therefore that the man of the epilogue is the Gnostic Christ-figure, either the actual Christ himself or a luminary such as Afterthought taking the shape of Christ to help humanity attain *gnosis* and thereby rid themselves of the shackles of the "Anaretic" planet.

According to Mundik, the Earth is frequently depicted as evil in McCarthy's novels, and she explains that this concept is fully extrapolated in the novel *The Road* (2016, p. 297). In this novel, the two unnamed protagonists, the father and the son, travel the apocalyptic hellscape that was once Earth. Mundik explains that this is fully in line with the Gnostic belief that this world in reality is hell. Father and son struggle to stay alive in this nightmarish world, filled with remnants of humans that have given in to the darkness and are carrying out the devil's work (Mundik, 2016, p. 298). The other humans in the novel are frequently depicted as doing unspeakable things to each other, such as brutally murdering each other and eating each other. It is never explained in detail how or why Earth became the way it is, and readers are left to wonder whether it was due to nuclear war, or simply a catastrophic astronomical event. Mundik explains that the very fact that this remains unspecified leaves open the very likely possibility that the apocalyptic event happened due to natural evil, i.e., a

meteor, rather than moral evil, i.e., nuclear war. She further explains that this suggests that the evil depicted in the novel possesses Gnostic overtones, precisely because it emerges out of the arrangements of the cosmos rather than stemming from human error (Mundik, 2016, p. 299).

In the novel *The Road*, Mundik explains that the child is often referred to in terms that suggests a divine nature (2016, p. 305). For example, the father at one point likens the child's head to a "golden chalice, good to house a god" (McCarthy, 2006, p. 75). Mundik explains that the chalice refers to the cup of wine that Christians drink from in celebration of the eucharist. The wine in said cup symbolically represents the blood of Christ. Mundik furthermore explains that "chalice" may also refer to "grail", as in the Holy Grail. According to Mundik, the working-title of the novel was originally *The Grail*, which is highly significant (2016, p. 305). The implication is that the child is a revealer of the divine, a Gnostic savior-figure, similar, or perhaps spiritually identical, to the man traversing the plains in the epilogue of *Blood Meridian*. According to Mundik, the child seems to embrace this role during an exchange between the father and his son (2016, p. 306). He tells his son that "You're not the one who has to worry about everything", and the child replies, almost saintlike: "I am the one" (McCarthy, 2006, p. 259) According to Allen Josephs, the child offers to "take responsibility... in unmistakably religious language" (2013, p. 138). Mundik indicates that the child in *The Road* is associated with all the traditional markers of divinity, most frequently and memorably a hidden, spiritual fire that is referred to throughout the novel (2016, p. 310). Close to the end of the novel, as the father is slowly dying, he and his son share this exchange:

Is it real? The fire?

Yes it is.

Where is it? I don't know where it is.

Yes you do. It's inside you . It was always there. I can see it. (McCarthy, 2006, p. 279)

This hidden, spiritual fire bears resemblance to both the pneuma, the spark of the divine that Gnostics believed lay dormant inside every human being, and the "fire" that the man of the epilogue of *Blood Meridian* is freeing from its material prison. Both Daugherty and Mundik agree that these two things are the same thing, namely fragments of the divine. The identification of Gnostic thought in *Blood Meridian* and *The Road*, as well as other novels by McCarthy, suggest that a similar reading of *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris* is possible.

SUMMARY

In the introduction to the thesis, I have explained some things related to the origin of Gnosticism, such as what it was or is believed to have been and touched on some core beliefs commonly found in Gnostic systems of faith. Among these core beliefs there is the belief that the world is evil, and that humanity remains trapped here by an evil entity who can be identified as the god of the Old Testament, whom Gnostics referred to as Ialdabaoth. There is also the belief that humanity can free itself through attaining *gnosis*, meaning hidden, esoteric knowledge of the existence of the true, alien God, known as the Father of entirety or the Invisible Spirit, as well as knowledge that humanity truly belongs with him and not on Earth. I have explained some preexisting arguments regarding why McCarthy's novels *Blood Meridian* and *The Road* can be interpreted as having Gnostic ideas and belief central to them. These arguments revolve around identifying certain characters in the novels as either *archons*, evil angels or demonic rulers in service of Ialdabaoth, or revelators of the divine, which can be understood as Gnostic Christ-like figures whose purpose it is to help humans attain gnosis. I find Daugherty's and Mundik's arguments compelling and believe that their interpretation is likely the interpretation that McCarthy himself had in mind when he wrote these novels. There are many subtle, and not so subtle, references to Gnosticism throughout many of his novels, and I do not believe this to be by chance, but rather by design. I share Daugherty's and Mundik's view that Gnostic ideas, myths and belief are central to McCarthy's novels. In the following chapters, through examining how certain characters in *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris* relate themselves to metaphysical questions, such as what it means to exist, as well as analyzing the novels' symbolisms and motifs, I argue that it becomes clear that these two novels present a culmination of McCarthy's metaphysics; a metaphysics that at its core can be understood as intrinsically Gnostic.

CHAPTER 1

Life, Death and the Nature of God

“What a piece of work is man!” (Shakespeare, 2.2.269)

In the autumn of 2022, Cormac McCarthy’s last two novels were released, six weeks apart, 16 years after McCarthy’s 2006 novel, *The Road*, which many people believed would be his last. *The Passenger*, the first of these two novels, had been in the making for nearly 60 years, as McCarthy began working on it in the mid-1980s (Brooks, 2022). Together with the second novel, *Stella Maris*, the novels tell the stories of the lives of two highly intelligent sibling protagonists, Bobby and Alicia Western, whose father was involved with the Manhattan Project. While *The Passenger* focuses mostly on telling Bobby’s story, with short flashbacks from Alicia’s point of view in every other chapter, *Stella Maris* focuses solely on Alicia and conversations between her and her psychiatrist. *Stella Maris* has been called a sort of coda, meaning a separate concluding passage, to *The Passenger* by reviewers (Doyle, 2022). Whereas McCarthy’s previous novels have dealt largely with issues such as the nature of violence and moral choice, *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris* both mark a shift in topic, focusing more on themes such as loss and grief. Of course, the novel also deals with other questions that readers are used to McCarthy asking them to consider, such as the meaning of life. While this can be argued is one of the main themes of *The Road* in particular, it has perhaps never been discussed in such a sometimes straight-forward and at other times convoluted manner as in *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris*.

The first chapters in *The Passenger* might suggest to readers that it is a thriller mystery novel. Bobby is working as a salvage diver and takes part in a dive at sea, in the middle of the night, to search for survivors of a plane crash that is not mentioned on any news broadcasts. Inside the plane, all seven passengers, as well as the captain and co-pilot, are dead. Supposedly, there should have been an eighth passenger on the plane, but this person is nowhere to be found, nor are there any signs of them or the plane’s black box or navigation

device. A day later, men with unknown affiliations show up at Bobby's apartment and interrogate him, seemingly suspecting that he knows something about the incident. Bobby's apartment is later repeatedly broken into and ransacked, and all his assets are eventually seized, and his passport revoked. One of his diver colleagues turns up dead, and Bobby is forced to flee, believing that the same people that are harassing him are responsible for his colleague's death. What follows are numerous interactions between Bobby and his friends and family while he is in hiding. All the while, Bobby is struggling with a terrible loss that has haunted him for eight years. The characters in the novel discuss the Kennedy assassination, the atomic bomb, string theory, as well as religion and personal beliefs. It is through these interactions, as well as flashbacks from the point of view of Bobby's younger, deceased sister, Alicia, that the reader learns that what may have started out as a mysterious thriller in fact has more in common with a philosophical, scientific-romantic tragedy, if there exists such a thing. *The Passenger* is a story of an impossible, forbidden love between brother and sister and the repercussions on Bobby's psyche following Alicia's untimely death. *Stella Maris* on the other hand does not tell a story, as there is no plot, only dialogue between Alicia Western and her psychiatrist, Dr Cohen. *Stella Maris* provides insight into some ideas presented in *The Passenger* and functions as a sort of compass, or index, helping the reader to navigate the disorienting language and strange occurrences of *The Passenger*.

In this chapter I explore the discussion of metaphysical questions, such as the existence of God, the meaning of life and the possibility of an afterlife, in *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris*. I discuss the views and beliefs of the protagonists in the two novels, as well as, to a lesser extent, the convictions of secondary characters. I have found that certain characters' views and beliefs coincide with Gnostic ideas and thoughts described in the introduction of my thesis. These findings suggest that *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris* builds and expands upon the Gnostic metaphysics that critics have found to be central to McCarthy's oeuvre. Like with his previous novel, *The Road*, McCarthy gives voice to all-encompassing future-oriented fears in *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris*, as well as individual fears that can be argued have been prevalent since the dawn of time. In a rare interview with Oprah Winfrey, McCarthy explained that the idea to write *The Road* came to him during a trip with his son to El Paso (Oprah, 2008, 3:40). McCarthy explained that he looked out of the hotel window one night and imagined what the town might look like in 50 or 100-years: "I just had this image of these fires up on the hills and everything being laid waste, and I thought a lot about my little boy" (Oprah, 2008, 4:00). In *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris*, McCarthy anthropomorphizes

certain fears as well as worries about the future, for instance in the form of a Gnostic deity known as Ialdabaoth, which in effect, concretizes these fears, allowing them to more easily be discussed. In *The Passenger*, McCarthy, through the words of a character in the novel, explains the usefulness of such anthropomorphisms: “If there’s no one to blame how can you have justice?” (McCarthy, 2022a, p. 354).

EXISTENTIAL ANGST AND GOD

During Bobby Western’s travels across America and his numerous interactions with other characters *The Passenger*, it seems that Bobby is struggling with his faith, or rather, lack thereof. He is presented as desperately searching for an answer, a reason, as to why the love of his life decided to take her own life and leave him. In many of the interactions he has in the novel, the question of belief in God comes up, and the novel’s characters have varying opinions regarding this matter. One of the novel’s first discussions regarding this subject takes place at a restaurant where Bobby shares lunch with one of his long-time friends, Debussy Fields, who is a transgender woman. This section discusses prophetic, or messianic language, theophany as well as various responses to the possibility of God’s non-existence, as exemplified in the secondary character Debussy.

Over the course of Debussy’s life, her belief in God changes drastically, from believing that there is no God, to believing there is one, although flawed, and finally to believing that there must be *someone* or *something* somewhere out there. Debussy’s character is a reflection of the many people in the world who ask themselves if there is a God or not and exemplifies various responses to this question. In *The Passenger*, Debbie tells Bobby the story of her life; how she was beaten daily by her classmates as well as her father from a very young age and until the day he died, just for being different. She explains that when she woke up the morning after her father’s death, an extraordinary peace had come over her, “It was transcendent” (McCarthy, 2022a, p. 68). A year later she had begun hormone treatment and finally started feeling free, however, she also started drinking. She explains that she was a born alcoholic and was lucky to get the necessary help from a friend to join Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). She furthermore explains that she had trouble with the whole “God thing”, which was an important aspect of these meetings. One night, she explains, she woke up and

had an epiphany: “If there is no higher power then I’m it. And that just scared the shit out of me. There is no God and I am she” (McCarthy, 2022a, p. 69). She tells Bobby that she has been working on this ever since, and that she has managed to make some progress. She tells him that she used to be mad at God for “screwing her up” the way he did but explains that she has started thinking that, maybe, God is not as perfect as people like to think. During their conversation, Bobby asks her if she believes in God now, and she answers the following:

I don’t know who God is or what he is. But I don’t believe all this stuff got here by itself. Including me. Maybe everything evolves just like they say it does. But if you sound it to its source you have to come ultimately to an intention. (McCarthy, 2022a, p. 70)

Certain tendencies in Debbie’s views and beliefs imply underlying Gnostic elements. However, there is not enough evidence to say for sure what her faith really is, and therefore calling her a person with a Gnostic mindset would not be entirely true. Nonetheless, like a few other characters in *The Passenger*, Debbie is presented as indeed possessing the potential for *gnosis*, knowledge of the truth about the universe. She has experienced through her childhood that Earth can be an evil place and questions whether there is a God or not, and concludes that if there is one, he might be flawed, something the Gnostics would agree with, although call an understatement. She has differing opinions regarding the nature of God at different points in her life. When she starts attending AA meetings, she starts thinking that perhaps there is no God, and this thought terrifies her. While Gnostics did not deny the existence of God, but rather upheld that the true God remained far away from us, they did deny that the Biblical God, the god of creation whom they called Ialdabaoth, was anything more than an imposter. Her epiphany that there is no God does not necessarily mean that interpreting her beliefs as gnostic becomes wholly unviable but may rather imply that she has not had the whole truth revealed to her yet, which after all, was believed to be impossible without the indirect help of the distant, Gnostic God. One might therefore argue that disbelief in Ialdabaoth is a sort of first step down the Gnostic path rather than a step off the road altogether.

Debbie’s statement, “There is no God and I am she”, could be interpreted as messianic. The phrase bears striking resemblance to what the characters in *The Road* have to say on this matter. For instance, a character named Ely, tells the father and his child that “There is no God and we are his prophets” (McCarthy, 2006, p. 170). Josephs understands this statement as a “Nietzschean-Islamic oxymoron” and calls it a brilliantly succinct expression of atheistic existential angst (2013, p. 136). In the same vein, Debbie’s statement

could also be interpreted as an expression of existential anxiety, in this case, specifically a fear of an absent God. This is likely to be the case, as she further states that the realization “scared the shit out of [her]” (McCarthy, 2022a, p. 69). However, the child in *The Road* also at one point says, “I am the one”, thereby refuting Ely’s assertion that God does not exist (McCarthy, 2006, p. 269). Josephs explains that the proclamation “I am” is among the strongest religious phrases found commonly in the Bible (2013, p. 138). The proclamation is spoken several times in both the Old and the New Testament, for instance by God to Moses: “I AM THAT I AM” (Exodus 3:14), by Jesus: “I am the way, the truth and the light” (John 14:6), and again in Revelation 1:8: “I am the Alpha and the Omega”. There are several other characteristics of divinity that critics have pointed out that indicate the child in *The Road*’s messianic identity, as explained in the thesis’ introduction. The child’s statement could be interpreted as an assertion of divinity, and critics have made convincing arguments for why this is the case. This may be true in the case of the child, however, I am hesitant to argue that Debbie’s statement in *The Passenger*, “I am she”, should be interpreted in a similar fashion. Rather, I think the statement should be read as the character’s realization of the lonely reality she finds herself in. She has felt like she did not belong all her life, born in the wrong body and alienated by her peers. These feelings may very well be similar to the feelings the Gnostics had and resolved, by positing that humankind did not truly belong on Earth.

At one point, Debbie hears a voice in her sleep that could be interpreted as belonging to either a benevolent or malevolent being. The voice tells her, “If something did not love you you would not be here” (McCarthy, 2022a, p. 70). Debbie says that it might not sound like much, but that to her it was enough to calm her existential anxiety. The voice can be interpreted in different ways. In many religious myths, God(s) appear to humans. This could either be in actual person or through divine speech, and is known as theophany (Gowan, 2014). Gowan further explains that theophany could also occur in dreams, such as in Genesis 20:3: “But God came to Abimelech in a dream one night”. The theophany that Debbie experiences could be interpreted as a manifestation of any number of gods, or messengers of such gods, that are not necessarily related to Gnosticism in any way. However, the created world in McCarthy’s novels is, more often than not, portrayed as hostile to humanity (Mundik, 2016, p. 3). Consequently, this implicates the created world’s creator. In *Cities of the Plain*, God is depicted not only as “a bloody and barbarous god but also as unforgiving and implacable” (Mundik, 2016, p. 219). Of course, this is only one of several possible interpretations. While I admit that there are multiple possible explanations for the voice that

Debbie hears, the necessarily limited scope of this thesis does not allow for further exploration of these interpretations.

As such, the question remains whether the voice Debbie hears belongs to a benevolent or malevolent being, and furthermore why McCarthy chooses to leave this ambiguous. The voice could be interpreted as belonging to Ialdabaoth, or one of his archons, because the phrasing of the sentence suggests that “here” is someplace one should want to be. Gnostics believed that the world was a prison and would therefore not find the words reassuring, but rather menacing. Debbie, on the other hand, explains that these words are enough for her, implying that she is content with not knowing the true nature of God; simply knowing there is *something* is reassuring to her in and of itself. Therefore, if the voice belongs to the forces that are trying to keep humanity ignorant of the truth, this could be interpreted as an attempt by them to regain control over an increasingly autonomous woman, and a successful one at that. One other alternative is that this is the voice of an entity that does not mean Debbie harm in any way, but rather seeks to ease her mind by enlightening her to the existence of God. In this case, the voice most likely belongs to a messenger of said God, perhaps an aeon, and not God himself, because it says that *something* loves her. Presumably, if this was God himself, a more natural phrasing would be *I love you*. According to the Gnostics, this would have to be an aeon or other such divine revelator, because they believed that God existed on an entirely different plane and could only communicate with humanity through his messengers. Through belief in God, or belief in something rather than nothing, Debbie finds a way to live with her existential anxiety. As such, the voice that Debbie hears could be interpreted either way.

By leaving the true nature of the character’s experiences ambiguous, McCarthy asks the reader to consider what they themselves believe in. He exemplifies different responses to existential anxiety through the character of Debbie and her religious journey from atheist to believer, and what I interpret as agnosticism. Religious people believe that God exists, in various ways, shapes or forms, atheists believe that there is no God, and agnostics believe something akin to what Debbie says: That there must be an “intent” to be found, if one sources everything to its core, that “all this stuff” could not have gotten here by itself. By interjecting Gnostic elements in his novels, McCarthy posits another alternative, that perhaps all of the above is true: The universe and our existence in it did not occur out of nowhere but rather somewhere, God does exist, but he does not exist here in this universe except in small fragments within ourselves. Bobby and Debbie’s conversation ends with him thinking to himself, in reference to her, “God’s goodness appeared in strange places. Don’t close your

eyes” (McCarthy, 2022a, p. 71). In a sense, this is McCarthy telling the reader that while the world that his characters exist in at times may seem dangerous, hostile and cruel, there is goodness in it yet, in the characters and in human connection. Similarly, even though the Gnostics saw the world as a dreadfully oppressive prison, they maintained that the Gnostic God’s beauty was there, if one but looks inwards.

THE HORROR OF REALITY

The character Alicia Western can be understood as a contrast to Debbie’s agnostic hopefulness. Where the character Debbie finds comfort, Alicia finds nothing but hopelessness, futility and dread. At an early age, perhaps as a defense mechanism to protect herself from her own existential horror, she begins hallucinating a group of impish creatures that visit her to entertain her and have conversations with her. However, as I discuss in this section, there is an argument to be made that the entities that Alicia interact with are not entirely imaginary. Furthermore, the depressingly bleak worldview that the character possesses can be argued to contain subtle, and perhaps not so subtle, hints to the true nature of the metaphysics of her reality. McCarthy expresses a fear of loneliness and a fear of an absence of God through the character Debbie. As I discuss in this section, similarly, but not the same; Alicia can be understood as exhibiting fear of meaninglessness or fear of insignificance of the self. McCarthy draws from Gnostic myths and beliefs to discuss these fears concretely by anthropomorphizing these fears as supernatural entities.

Alicia Western is Bobby Western’s younger sister. She is highly intelligent and an expert mathematician as well as violinist. She is a doctoral candidate in mathematics at the University of Chicago. She is an avid reader, sometimes reading as many as two books a day, on numerous subjects. She is especially fond of books about religion and philosophy as well as mathematical theories. At an early age she starts seeing, hearing, and even having conversations with hallucinations, chimeras, that she refers to as “the horts... as in cohorts” (McCarthy, 2022b, p. 18), which are “supposedly nonexistent personages” (McCarthy, 2022b, p. 8). Her parents are worried about her and have her examined by numerous doctors, all of whom agree that she is mentally ill. She is committed to the ecumenical nursing home and hospice for psychiatric patients, Stella Maris, at three different occasions: The last one being voluntary, a short time before her death. Her psychiatrists believe that she is suffering from

the mental illness paranoid schizophrenia and that she is experiencing auditory as well as visual hallucinations. Readers are prompted to consider two linked questions regarding Alicia: Are the supposedly nonexistent personages that she has conversations with real or not, and is the character truly losing her mind or is there perhaps something else going on?

Despite the fact that the simplest explanation oftentimes turns out to be correct, there is an argument to be made that McCarthy wrote Alicia's character to be an unknowing Gnostic on the path to enlightenment, and not just a character that suffers from paranoid schizophrenia. The psychiatrists in the novel that treat Alicia all seem to believe that she is mentally ill. However, from the Gnostics' point of view, a person with a similar outlook on life to that of Alicia would not necessarily be deemed mentally ill. Neither would they necessarily be considered mentally ill for interacting with beings that not everyone is able to see. In *Stella Maris*, Alicia is asked several questions related to her convictions during her sessions with her psychiatrist, Dr Cohen. From these the reader learns that, oftentimes, Alicia's answers are exceedingly negative and pessimistic. For instance, when asked what she would change if she could change *anything*, she answers: "I'd elect not to be here [on this planet]" (McCarthy, 2022b, p.29). This could be taken to mean that she is suicidal, which Dr Cohen seems to believe. However, it could also be taken to mean that she has realized that something is wrong with the world she exists in. In fact, Alicia later expands on her beliefs, or rather, the metaphysical questions she has about the cosmos:

Is the world in fact aware of us... Do we deserve to exist? Who said that it was a privilege? The alternative to being here is not being here. But again, that really means not being here anymore. You cant never have been here. There would be no you to not have been. (McCarthy, 2022, p. 27)

The Gnostics also questioned as to who said that it was a privilege to exist and concluded that these were the lies of Ialdabaoth, seeking to keep humanity blind and ignorant. Alicia explains that she came to realize that the universe had been evolving for countless billions of years, in total darkness and silence, and that the way that humans imagine it is not the way that it was. There was only vast nothingness, until "the first living creature possessed of vision imprinted upon the universe its primitive and trembling sensorium and then touched it with color, movement and memory" (McCarthy, 2022, p. 40). This mirrors what the character Debbie says, that maybe, everything evolves like they say. However, while Debbie finds solace in believing that there must be an intent behind the world's-, as well as humanity's existence, Alicia finds no meaning at all. She only sees what the Gnostics saw,

that the world, even the whole universe, is an imitation of something or somewhere other. She explains that she finds it hard to avoid the sense that the visual world is the creation of beings with the eyes to do so; “not created out of nothing but out of something whose actual reality is forever unknowable” (McCarthy, 2022b, p. 39). Here, McCarthy draws from Gnostic cosmogonic myth, the creation of the material universe, to express through the words of Alicia that the world that she exists in was created in imitation of a world that is forever unknowable to her.

At another point in *Stella Maris*, McCarthy writes what I believe to be another reference to Gnostic cosmogonic myth, in this case, an interesting allegory involving Alicia’s struggles with mathematics. Alicia talks about why she gave up mathematics and never finished her doctoral thesis. She explains to Dr Cohen that she is skeptical about the discipline. Dr Cohen asks how one could be skeptical about mathematics, and furthermore asks her if she means that she feels disappointed in the discipline in some way. Alicia answers that that would be one way to put it:

In this case it was led by a group of evil and aberrant and wholly malicious partial differential equations who had conspired to usurp their own reality from the questionable circuitry of its creator’s brain not unlike the rebellion which Milton describes and to fly their colors as an independent nation unaccountable to God or man alike. (McCarthy, 2022b, p. 10)

Her language is unmistakably religious, which seems like a strange choice when describing struggles with mathematics. Considering the fact that the character at this point is a grown woman who is described as being a brilliant mathematician, she would most likely not call her equations “evil”, “aberrant” or “malicious” without a larger reason than implying that they are simply difficult. McCarthy uses anthropomorphism to give the partial differential equations life and describe them as evil beings that are conspiring to “usurp their own reality”. Interestingly, the place which they are trying to break free from, “the questionable circuitry of its creator’s brain”, seems to refer to Alicia’s mind, which she in this case also admits is “questionable”, in reference to the hallucinations she is seeing. Alicia then makes a comparison to Lucifer’s rebellious plans against God, which John Milton describes in the epic poem *Paradise Lost*. Further, she states that the equations plan to “fly their colors”, in other words raise their flags, “as an independent nation”, a nation outside of God’s reach, that neither answer to said God nor its human inhabitants.

Alicia's explanation can be read as the absurd ramblings of a mad scientist, or a humorous hyperbole, however there is far too much in common with Gnostic creation myth in her description for either of these explanations to be the case. Case in point, the malicious partial differential equations seem very similar to the archons and their leader, Ialdabaoth, the usurpers whom the Gnostics believed stole power from the Gnostic God and created their own reality. This reality is the material universe, a universe that does not answer to the Gnostic God or humankind. I argue that McCarthy here once again seems to describe the universe the two novels take place in. An interesting observation is that, in effect, just as Alicia's malicious partial differential equations are her creations; so too are the characters in the novels McCarthy's creations. Furthermore, as the reader reads and imagines these characters and the world they live in, they come to life in the reader's mind and as such become the reader's creation as well. What McCarthy is describing here, through the character Alicia, is technophobia or a societal anxiety about the power that science may gain over its creators, that is humanity, in the near future.

During a session with Dr Cohen, Alicia shares with him a vision that she had when she was younger; a vision that I argue can be interpreted as showing the true reality of her world. This vision, or as she describes it, this waking dream, causes Alicia to consider suicide. She explains to Dr Cohen that she realized that the dream was neither truly waking nor a dream, but rather something else. During this vision, she saw through "something like a judas hole" and saw into a world where there were sentinels standing at a gate. An OED entry on "judas hole" suggests that it is a spyhole, or similar opening in a cell door ("Judas", 2023). Furthermore, the hole that Alicia sees through becomes connotated with betrayal, seeing as Judas Iscariot is known as the betrayer of Jesus. This is fitting considering the fact that the vision causes Alicia extreme distress, to the point that she considers killing herself. As such, to the reader, Alicia becomes reminiscent of Icarus, who flew too close to the sun and plunged into the sea and subsequently drowned. In addition, the reader is also reminded of the likes of Victor Frankenstein and Johann Faust, in the sense that in the search of knowledge, Alicia ultimately pays a terrible price.

Alicia senses a presence that terrifies her in her vision, a being that McCarthy unmistakably has lent from Gnostic myth. Alicia explains to Dr Cohen that beyond the gate there was "something terrible and that it had power over me" (McCarthy, 2022b, p. 105). She furthermore tells Dr Cohen that she believes that the search for shelter and covenant among people are simply means to elude this terrible presence. Alicia gave the being a name;

originally the Emperor, explaining that she was fond of language at the time, and later the Archatron. The second of these two names, Archatron, does not show up in any dictionary. It seems to be related to the word archon, the evil angels in Gnostic myth, and might mean arch-archon, or the archetypical archon. The suffix “-tron” is found in numerous words in different sciences, for instance in particle science, in words such as neutrons and electrons, which are two of the three particles, along with protons, that all atoms are made up of (Earle, 2019). It is also found in the names of certain devices and machines, for instance particle accelerators, known as cyclotrons (“-Tron”, 2023). Archatron could therefore also be interpreted as either an archetypical particle, or an archetypical machine. Archatron is a word that McCarthy has coined, and it has appeared in only one of his novels previously, in *Cities of the Plain*: “She leaned and kissed him and stepped away and then the archatron came forward with his sword and raised it in his two hands above him and clove the traveler’s head from his body” (McCarthy, 1998, p. 282). This also occurs during a waking dream, similar to what Alicia experienced, in which a character known as the traveler is met by a group of eight people, seven of whom are wearing robes and transporting an eighth female captive. The leader of this group is the Archatron. This passage is significant not only because it mentions the Archatron, thereby solidifying him as a recurring being in McCarthy’s mythos, but also because of the events that take place, as well as the number.

The number eight was very important to many Gnostic groups. This is because it signifies the Ogdoad, the supercelestial eighth heaven that Gnostics believed in, in which the Gnostic God resides, as opposed to the seven heavens that Early Christians such as Irenaeus believed in (Brakke, 2010, p. 10). According to Irenaeus, in his account of Gnostic belief in *Against the Heresies*, Gnostics held that Ogdoad also could signify *Barbēlō*, which is another name for the first aeon, Forethought. This aeon is oftentimes responsible for helping humans attain gnosis. The female hostage in the traveler’s waking dream, the eighth mysterious being in the group, could therefore be interpreted as some version of this very aeon, and the act of kissing the traveler could be viewed as her providing him with gnosis, as it is believed in some myths that she did to Adam and Eve. Emperor is another word for emperor, or commander, and therefore the implication is that the Archatron is the leader of the archons, or the chief archon, whom Gnostics believed to be Ialdabaoth. This would explain why the Archatron swiftly decapitates the traveler, as it is suggested that the traveler possesses knowledge of the ultimate truth of the universe; something Ialdabaoth desperately seeks to keep humans from attaining.

Alicia's vision is a double-edged sword. It allowed her to see the deeper truth of reality, however, in turn, the knowledge makes her contemplate suicide. She explains that she knew, after the experience, "that there was an ill-contained horror beneath the surface of the world and there always had been. That at the core of reality lies a deep and eternal demonium. All religions understand this" (McCarthy, 2022, p. 152). However, religions differ in that what some see as demonic, others understand as divine and vice versa. Gnosticism *and* Christianity are prime examples of this. Interestingly, a search on "demonium" shows no results on any reputable online dictionaries. The word itself seems ominous, bearing close resemblance to the word demon. Interpreting the word as referring to something evil, such as the Archatron, therefore seems natural. Furthermore, "demonium" could be a reference to Milton's Pandemonium, *Paradise Lost's* Capital of Hell, which is "the place of all demons" (Cresswell, 2021). *Pan* means all in Greek, and *daimōn* means demon. This interpretation seems likely, as Alicia also refers to Milton earlier on in *Stella Maris*.

However, there is an argument to be made that "demonium" in fact may refer to something that is not inherently evil. Before Christian theologians saw in *daimones*, that is the plural form of *daimōn*, the true nature of the pagan gods as the embodiment and source of evil and sin, *daimōn* had another meaning. In Ancient Greece, demons were understood as divine or supernatural beings somewhere between gods and humans, that were not necessarily evil. The Greek poet Hesiod understood *daimones* as "personal protecting spirits", who accompany each human's life and bring either luck or harm (Cresswell, 2021). "Demonium" could therefore also be interpreted as referring to personal protecting spirits, or a place of such spirits. However, it is unclear whether Alicia is saying that the "ill-contained horror beneath the surface of the world" is the "deep and eternal demonium" at the core of reality, or if she is stating that these are two separate truths of the world.

As proposed, the character of Alicia can be understood as a tool that McCarthy uses to give voice to societal anxiety regarding the future and humanity's coexistence with rapidly evolving technology. Therefore, moving away from religious and historical understandings of the word demon and looking to the world of science for further knowledge regarding the term "demonium" is useful. In computing both daemon and demon are words that are commonly used. Computing is "the action or practice of using computers" for the purposes of studying and experimenting with algorithmic processes, as well as development of software and hardware ("Computing", 2023). In computing, daemon refers to a program that runs in the background of a computer system without intervention from the user, "either continuously or

only when automatically activated by a particular event or condition” (“Daemon”, 2023). Demon tends to refer to a part of such a program, although daemon and demon may be used interchangeably. Alicia’s brother, Bobby, refers to her hallucinations as djinns (McCarthy, 2022a, p. 283). Djinn, jinni, sometimes also called genie, are “spirit[s] inhabiting the earth but unseen by humans, capable of assuming various forms” (“Jinni”, 2023). Similar to the Ancient Greek understanding of demons, in Arabic mythology, a djinn may be either good or evil. My reading of Alicia’s hallucinations suggests that they can be interpreted as both personal protecting spirits as well as parts of a program, which I will discuss further in the next chapter.

Alicia’s demons can be interpreted as beings that have been sent to her by someone or something for a purpose. Evidently, as Alicia explains to Dr Cohen, she first had her vision of the Archatron, and then subsequently the visitations from the horts, her hallucinations, began. The vision seems to somehow have triggered her visitations. As explained, a daemon program may run continuously, or activate automatically because of certain events. It seems likely then that the horts may be a part of such a program, in other words, they may be identified as demons that were “activated” because of an event, namely Alicia’s vision. However, this complicates certain matters. Is the reader to believe that the demons stem from the Archatron, something that Alicia is terrified of? She comes to view the demons as guardians, even considering them friends, whom she believes “keep something at bay” (McCarthy, 2022b, p. 107). That which they keep at bay seems to refer to the Archatron. This is further supported by the gate in Alicia’s vision, which keeps the being imprisoned. Therefore, an Ancient Greek understanding of *daimones*, as personal protecting spirits, seems more appropriate.

In order to discuss the reality of Alicia’s vision, the Archatron as well as her hallucinations the reader must make a series of concessions to Alicia’s point of view and to the form and shape of the world as she experiences it. Her vision must be understood as real, in the sense that the experience was real for her, likewise, her hallucinations must also be understood as more than imaginary. McCarthy is aware of this necessity, evidenced by the fact that there is proof in support of the possibility that the hallucinations are not imaginary. Most notably among this evidence is the fact that Bobby encounters one of Alicia’s hallucinations several years after her death, one that is called the Thalidomide Kid, or simply the Kid, and has a conversation with him. During this conversation, the Kid, among other things, tells Bobby about future events that happen in *The Passenger*: “You yourself were seen boarding the last flight out with your canvas bag and a sandwich. Or was that still to

come? Probably getting ahead of myself” (McCarthy, 2022a, p. 278). That said, the hallucinations are not entirely real either, because not everyone have the ability to see them. They seem to fall under a category somewhere in the middle between real and imaginary, just as the jinni in Arabic mythology fall somewhere between material and spiritual. Alicia asks the horts several questions when they first appear, but she can never get a straight answer from them. She for instance asks them how they got there, to her room, whereupon they answer that they came on the bus. Alicia finds this strange, as all of the entities look odd and would attract attention in any public place:

Could they see you?

The other passengers?

Yes.

Who knows? Jesus. Probably some could and some couldn't. Some could but wouldn't (McCarthy, 2022a, p. 55).

The entity's answer to Alicia's question appears to be truthful, seeing as Bobby is someone who meets one of the entities. When Bobby meets the Kid, Bobby reveals that he thought he saw the entity on a bus one time, whereupon the Kid answers that “Well, you get a lot of people look like me” (McCarthy, 2022a, p. 275). This, however, is unlikely to be true, as this particular entity is described as looking like what his name implies: A small, dwarfish, bald person, with a scarred skull and flippers where there should be hands, all of which are birth defects found in babies born to women who ingest the sedative drug Thalidomide during pregnancy. Buses are mentioned many times throughout both *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris*, and interestingly, may be yet another reference to computing. According to the OED, bus is a term in computing that refers to “A set of conductors carrying data or control signals within a computer system, to which different parts of the system are connected in parallel” (“Bus”, 2023). Therefore, the Kid telling Alicia that he came on the bus might imply that his true nature is akin to data or control signals within a computer system. The computer system in question might refer to Alicia's mind, which, as mentioned, the character herself has likened to “questionable circuitry” (McCarthy, 2022b, p. 10).

The cohorts bear similarities to modern artificial intelligence programs and bots, and Alicia's uncertainty regarding their intentions once more reflects social anxieties regarding humankind's future alongside technology. For instance, the Kid may be inspired from chatbots, such as ChatGPT. The reason for this is that the entity several times is depicted as mimicking human behavior and speech. Alicia notes that the Kid often talks about concepts

that she has never heard about, and she thinks that he is simply making them up, much like a modern chatbot would. The seemingly random things he is saying could further be understood as an AI learning to converse, for instance, he attempts to tell Alicia a joke but gets the punchline wrong, whereupon she corrects him. This is interesting, as AI notoriously struggles with jokes due to not understanding context and irony. As mentioned, the Kid's apparent function is to organize and show Alicia theatrical acts, as well as videotapes from the past. Alicia does not care for the acts he puts on but expresses curiosity at the videotapes the Kid shows her, which seem to depict her childhood. As such, the Kid is reminiscent of certain algorithms on social media, such as for instance Instagram, TikTok or YouTube in that he shows her random things, attempting to find something that captivates. During Alicia's final encounter with the Kid, he seems to be pleading with her not to take her own life and offers to show her more videotapes in an attempt to bargain with her. The cohorts may be understood as a critique, or perhaps a warning, regarding the future of AI. However, as I have mentioned, by the end, Alicia comes to view the cohorts favorably, not worried about ulterior motives.

When the cohorts first appear in Alicia's room, she wants to know what they are doing there, at which point the most prominent entity, the Kid, answers:

Look Presh. At bottom it's pretty much about structure... We're trying for a baseline. Otherwise it all starts to unravel. You got to use your best judgment. Work with the material at hand... But you been peekin under the door, Doris, and we don't have much of a file on that. (McCarthy, 2022a, p. 52)

"Peekin under the door" alludes to looking somewhere one should not, or looking somewhere one is not allowed to look, something which Alicia inadvertently does in the form of her vision. "Doris" is simply one of the entity's antics: Alliterations and calling Alicia by different names, as he does on numerous occasions throughout *The Passenger*. The Kid is referring to Alicia's vision of the Archatron and according to him, a human having a vision of the core of reality is something that "they" do not have a file on. Furthermore, he implies that what Alicia saw did not really matter, but rather what matters is who saw her:

What did she see? A figure at the gate? But that ain't the question, is it? The question is did it see her? A small bore of light. Who would notice? But the hounds of hell can pass through the weem of a ring. (McCarthy, 2022a, p. 8)

The Kid's ominous observation further links the being Alicia saw to that of the Archatron and warns her that it may have seen her. Interestingly, he also calls Alicia "a small bore of light",

which is reminiscent of the small spark of the Gnostic God. This signals that Alicia may possess such a spark. Furthermore, the Kid warns that although Alicia is unable to physically move through the “judas-hole” which she peered into and glimpsed the Archatron, that is not the case for the entities servants who may move freely between realms. As such, the exchange may be read as a confirmation by McCarthy that certain characters in his novels may in fact be servants of the Archatron, i.e., archons. This notion strengthens Daugherty’s argument that the judge in *Blood Meridian* may represent an archon.

A question that the Kid’s warning to Alicia raises is whether or not he and the rest of the cohorts are servants of the Archatron. From what the reader learns about the cohorts, one thing is that they do not necessarily all have the same agenda. The cohorts may serve several purposes, one of which is shown to be collecting data or information. Alicia is asked several times by Dr Cohen what she thinks that the hallucinations want, and what their purpose is. She answers: “They want to do something with the world that you havent thought of. They want to set it at question” (McCarthy, 2022b, p. 23). Dr Cohen asks whether the entertainers that began to appear in her room were a part of this world or not, whereupon Alicia answers: “One theory is that their purpose was rather to deflect that world” (McCarthy, 2022b, p. 40). Later, she says: “I’ve thought from early on that the Kid was there not to supply something but to keep something at bay” (McCarthy, 2022b, p. 107). All of this might be true, as it appears that the entities serve different functions. The Kid organizes several Vaudeville acts and other forms of entertainment for Alicia, which Alicia fails to see the point of, seemingly trying to keep her mind off of certain things. During Bobby’s encounter with the Kid, the Kid explains to Bobby that he is not sure what would have happened to Alicia if he and the other cohorts never revealed themselves to her. However, he explains that he thinks “she would have been just as bloody dead – except I flatter myself – sooner” (McCarthy, 2022a, p. 277). As such, even though Alicia failed to see the meaning of many of the cohorts’ actions, it would seem that one of their purposes was to delay her death, perhaps until she had learned what she needed to learn in order to attain gnosis. Other entities’ purpose can be interpreted as teaching Alicia certain things about the world, for instance by having her ponder metaphysical questions. One such entity is an older woman, called Miss Vivian, whom Alicia describes as thin and eccentric, wearing slabs of makeup and wearing a shabby fur stole.

Miss Vivian, whom Alicia describes as one of her favorite visitors, bears certain similarities to the Gnostic revelator figures, in the sense that she can be interpreted as attempting to open Alicia’s mind to the reality of the world. Miss Vivian attempts this during

a conversation she has with Alicia, in which the entity suggests that babies know that something is wrong about the world, which humans later forget. Alicia relates this conversation to Dr Cohen. She explains that she awoke one day to find Miss Vivian sniffing and crying in the corner of her room. Miss Vivian explained that she was crying because of the babies, exclaiming that “they’re just so unhappy” (McCarthy, 2022a, p. 350). Alicia asked her why babies cry, whereupon Miss Vivian explained that no one knows; “we just know that it’s unanimous” (McCarthy, 2022a, p. 350). Alicia thought that maybe they cry because they know what is coming. Miss Vivian explained that she cannot imagine babies crying in the womb, even though they might want to. Furthermore, Miss Vivian explained that she cannot help but think that babies bring their despair into the world with them, and that as we become older, we forget something: “I dont know what it is that we have forgotten. How could anyone know without remembering? I only know that we dont want to remember it” (McCarthy, 2022a, p. 351). Alicia explains that her earliest thoughts were: “I understood I was in a place where I was going to be for a long time and that I had to figure it out. That everything depended on my finding out where I was (McCarthy, 2022b, p. 37). Her earliest thoughts can be argued to describe *gnosis*. Gnostics held that in order to attain *gnosis*, and in effect salvation, humans needed to understand where it was that they were so that they could understand where it was that they truly belonged. For Gnostics, salvation depended on this knowledge.

Alicia’s conversation with Miss Vivian may have reminded Alicia about her earliest memories and makes her contemplate the meaning behind them, thereby progressing herself further on the path to *gnosis*. Dr Cohen explains that he thinks that babies cry for a lot of different reasons. They could be cold, wet, or hungry. Alicia says that she thought there had to be more to it:

Animals might whimper if they’re hungry or cold. But they dont start screaming. It’s a bad idea. The more noise you make the more likely you are to be eaten. If you’ve no way to escape you keep silent. If birds couldnt fly they wouldnt sing. When you’re defenseless you keep your opinions to yourself. (McCarthy, 2022b, p. 95)

Alicia explains that the more she thought about it, the clearer it became to her that what she was hearing was rage. She furthermore explains: “The rage of children seemed inexplicable other than as a breach of some deep and innate covenant having to do with how the world should be and wasn’t” (McCarthy, 2022b, p. 96). Dr Cohen asks how a baby could know what the world should be like, whereupon Alicia argues that a child would have to be born so; that

from birth babies have a strong sense of justice: “When you hear a sobbing child say it’s not fair you are always hearing the truth” (McCarthy, 2022b, p. 97). During Alicia’s conversation with Miss Vivian, Miss Vivian explains that she thinks that after a while children want to hold someone responsible for the injustices they agonize over, because without someone to blame, there can be no justice: “Of course things can simply happen on their own. It’s just that it’s unusual” (McCarthy, 2022a, p. 354).

Alicia explains to Dr Cohen that she begun pondering another question: “At what age in a child’s life does rage become sorrow?” (McCarthy, 2022b, p. 96). Dr Cohen says that he does not know, nor does he know why their rage becomes sorrow. Alicia says that she thinks she knows why: “The injustice over which they are so distraught is irredeemable. And rage is only for what you believe can be fixed. All the rest is grief. At some point they get this” (McCarthy, 2022b, p. 97). Alicia herself explains that she cried nonstop for the first two years of her life, and then suddenly stopped, which consequently made her parents think something was wrong with her. At the end of their conversation, Miss Vivian asks Alicia if she cries now, whereupon Alicia answers: “Yes. I cry now” (McCarthy, 2022a, p. 354). I argue that this suggests that Alicia has remembered that something which Miss Vivian believes we forget as we grow older. It also suggests that Alicia’s sorrow has once again become rage, meaning that she believes that the irredeemable injustice can be fixed.

Dr Cohen asks if this is what Miss Vivian was sent to tell Alicia, that babies cry because they innately know that the world is wrong and full of injustice. Alicia answers that she does not know, but that she always suspected that it was “just a thing I had to understand before we could move on to the next issue” (McCarthy, 2022b, p. 97). As explained, my interpretation is that Alicia at this point does in fact know what Miss Vivian was really talking about. However, she chooses not to share this knowledge with Dr Cohen, perhaps out of concern about what such information would entail for him, considering what it has done to her. I believe this information to be the Gnostic’s understanding of the material world’s foundational truth: That beneath the surface of the world there resides an “ill-contained horror”, Ialdabaoth, and that the material universe is a simulated reality created by this being in imitation of the spiritual realm. This truth is the breach of the deep and innate covenant regarding how the world should be but is not. All of humanity is believed to be born with the possibility of attaining this knowledge, in the form of the spark of the entirety, hidden deep in our core. However, for most people, the knowledge remains unobtainable.

Alicia, through her vigorous reading and mathematical endeavors, sees a glimpse of the reality of the world in the form of her vision, and subsequently unlocks parts of the hidden knowledge necessary to attain gnosis. However, she only learns that the world is false, a simulation, and not that there exists somewhere else where she truly belongs, or where that is. Subsequently, she becomes convinced that everything, her whole existence, is hopeless and meaningless. This leads to Alicia becoming suicidal at an early age. She tries to kill herself on at least one occasion prior to her death by suicide a few days after leaving Stella Maris. She tells Dr Cohen about her suicide attempt during one of their sessions. She rowed a boat to the middle of Lake Tahoe, tied the anchor to her body and contemplated vanishing in the deep. Ultimately, Alicia explains that she decided against it, partly because of the cold, but mostly because of the physiology of it, that is, the slow and painful reality of death by drowning. Dr Cohen asks her what other plans she has entertained for doing away with herself, whereupon she answers that she had always had the idea that she did not want to be found, that that would be the closest she could come to never having been here in the first place (McCarthy, 2022, p. 147).

At the end of the novel, she tells Dr Cohen about what she calls Plan 2-A, another elaborate suicide plan. It involves travelling to Romania, the place she originally had dreamed that she and her brother would live together one day but ultimately never could, and slowly starving herself to death there while travelling the forests and the mountains:

I'd wrap myself in the blanket at night against the cold and watch the bones take shape beneath my skin and I would pray that I might see the truth of the world before I died. Sometimes at night the animals would come to the edge of the fire and move about and their shadows would move among the trees and I would understand that when the last fire was ashes they would come and carry me away and I would be their eucharist. And that would be my life. And I would be happy. (McCarthy, 2022, p. 190)

Interestingly, in the end, or rather, in the beginning, Alicia commits suicide in a way that contrasts the thoughts she's had previously regarding this matter. It is difficult to pinpoint exactly what has changed at this point. However, a clue that may help explain Alicia's actions can be found in McCarthy's novel *Cities of the Plain*. The revelation that enlightens the traveler in *Cities of the Plain* is this: "That he was repository to this knowing which he came to solely by his abandonment of every former view" (McCarthy, 1998, p. 282). In a similar fashion, it would seem that Alicia also abandons her former views. Firstly, she dresses herself in a way that ensures she is eventually found, her red sash functioning as a sort of beacon

among the wintry ocean of trees. She wears this despite claiming that not being found would be the closest thing to never having existed, something she has previously yearned for. Secondly, she hangs herself up in a tree, ensuring that the animals are unable to get to her, despite implying that becoming their eucharist would make her happy. Thirdly, she is only wearing a dress, and leaves her winter coat in the snow, ensuring that she is freezing cold the whole time, despite having decided against one suicide plan in the past partly because of the cold. All of this implies that something must have changed during the few days following her final stay at Stella Maris. Instead, she now wants to be found, she does not want to become food for the animals, and she embraces the cold.

As discussed, the character Alicia represents several societal anxieties. Foremost among these is perhaps the deep and ancient fear of death. From the character's introduction and until the end of the novel she expresses a desire to die, and yet, decides against death at numerous occasions due to a fear of what lies beyond. In their final conversation, after Alicia has made up her mind to take her own life, the Kid asks if she is not afraid of "the nightgate and the lair of the unspeakables" (McCarthy, 2022a, p. 12). Alicia answers that she will take her chances. Although she still fears the Archatron, she thinks there is a possibility that she will be able to elude the rulers. She explains that most likely, when she "trip[s] the breaker the board goes to black" (McCarthy, 2022a, p. 12). She believes that what awaits her is not the Archatron, or some other terrible presence, but simply darkness. For some, this is a terrifying thought in itself, however, McCarthy views this differently. In the epigraph to *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy includes an excerpt from the works of 17th century mystic, Jacob Boehme, whom Mundik explains possessed a "heretical, Gnostic brand of mysticism" (2009, p. 73). The excerpt is as follows:

It is not to be thought that the life of darkness is sunk in misery and lost as if in sorrowing. There is no sorrowing. For sorrow is a thing that is swallowed up in death, and death and dying are the very life of the darkness. (McCarthy, 1985, p. 1)

My understanding is that McCarthy has not written Alicia to be a character that is an advocate of suicide or death. Rather, the character demonstrates that death, in the end, should not be thought of as something terrifying, such as the Archatron. McCarthy expresses through the character that dying is natural and should be thought of as similar to going to sleep. Life continues in our sleep, through dreams, and McCarthy similarly proposes that there is no reason why life should not continue in the darkness of death.

The rich symbolism in the description of Alicia's corpse on the first page of *The Passenger* may be interpreted in support of the possibility that before her death, Alicia was able to attain gnosis and thereby salvation. Furthermore, I would argue that the character in certain ways can be understood as McCarthy's adaption of the Gnostic savior myth, as described by philosopher Hans Jonas: The Gnostic savior is a definitive divine figure, however this does not prevent them from undergoing in their own person "the full force of human destiny, even to the extent that he the saviour himself has to be saved" (1958, p. 127). Jonas explains that the Gnostic savior as such is the "redeemed redeemer" (1958, p. 50). Similarly, Mundik refers to the Gnostic savior-figure as the *Salvator Salvatus*, the "Saved Savior", which in many cases can be understood as identical to the Gnostic understanding of Jesus Christ (2016, p. 74). This is something that I will revisit in the following chapter, however, I mention this now because understanding Alicia's potentially messianic identity may provide a richer base of discussion regarding the novels' other protagonist, her brother, Bobby Western.

THE LAST PAGAN

In this section I discuss the character Bobby Western. I argue that the character can be understood as representing a religious disciple as well as founder of a faith. This faith bears many similarities to Gnosticism. This idea is something that McCarthy has used in several of his earlier novels. For instance, both the man and the child in the novel, *The Road*, can be understood as representing certain religious disciples on a quest to find God in a harsh environment apparently abandoned by God. Similarly, as critics have noted, the kid in *Blood Meridian* can be understood as a Gnostic in search of enlightenment. McCarthy is not unfamiliar with repurposing ideas, and in this section, I argue that the character Bobby Western encompasses several aspects of McCarthy's earlier wanderers.

Throughout the *The Passenger*, Bobby Western is described as a man without any faith. Several characters in the novel point this out about him: "After all, I'm merely an enemy of society, while he is one of God" (McCarthy, 2022, p. 29), "I know you don't believe in God. But you don't even believe that there is a structure to the world. To a person's life" (McCarthy, 2022, p. 103). While this initially may be true, during the events of *The*

Passenger the character is interested in what other people's beliefs are, seemingly trying to piece together something that he himself can believe in: A religion of his own. He is seeking knowledge, something that he is accused of already possessing by the unknown men that start harassing him after the night dive to the sunken plane.

Much like how the readers are passengers, simply observing and experiencing the story, Bobby is a sort of passenger in his own life, never able to fully take control. Things that are beyond his control have been happening to him for a long time, and all he can do is go along with everything and observe from the sidelines. Bobby's father died alone in a foreign land, seeking a miracle cure for his terminal cancer, and was buried in an unmarked grave that Bobby never could locate. Bobby was left in a comatose state after crashing his car and during this time his sister killed herself. During the Kafkaesque events of *The Passenger*, the authorities are determined that Bobby did something, or knows something, something that Bobby himself has no idea what is and therefore cannot disprove. Whether they blame Bobby for the plane crash itself, the disappearance of one of the passengers or the equipment, is unknown, and likely not important, in the sense that these events may simply be excuses for an unknown party to search the character's belongings for evidence of heresy. The unknown party in the novel very likely is associated with the government in some way. In McCarthy's earlier novels, such as for instance his debut novel, *The Orchard Keeper*, the authorities are depicted as controlling and unsympathetic. They encroach upon the main character's privacy and land and thus limit their liberty. Mundik notes that a belief within Gnostic thought is that humans are not ruled by their own free will, but rather by "some other, all-encompassing agency" (Mundik, 2016, p. 43). Furthermore, this "all-encompassing agency" can be understood as agents of Ialdabaoth, archons, that control the fate of humans in a way that prevent humans from attaining gnosis and escaping Ialdabaoth's rule. The unknown party in *The Passenger* similarly seeks to control Bobby. They scour his possessions, interrogate him and limit his ability to travel and as such can be interpreted as representing the same forces that Gnostics believed controlled the fate of humans.

Bobby struggles with the loss of his sister throughout *The Passenger*. It has been eight years since her death, and he is still unable to move forward with his life. He knows all 37 of her letters by heart, save for the last one, which he refuses to read. According to the Kid, Bobby's real problem in his life is that he does not really believe that Alicia is dead. Bobby asks what he means by this, if the Kid thinks Bobby believes in an afterlife, whereupon the Kid answers that he does not know what Bobby thinks. Furthermore, the Kid says: "Who

knows? ... Maybe you and sis can rendezvous in the sweet by-and-by” (McCarthy, 2022a, p. 282). Bobby sees Alicia and has short interactions with her at various points in the novel, something that supports the Kid’s notion that Bobby refuses to accept reality. These interactions differ from both Alicia’s interactions with the Kid and the rest of the horts, as well as Bobby’s interaction with the Kid, and other apparitions such as the ghost of his father and the ghost of one of his friends. Bobby’s interactions with Alicia are short and intangible, happening out of nowhere, thus resembling memories more than anything else, while the interactions with the other specters seem more substantial. This interpretation is further supported near the end of the novel, when Bobby, similar to how someone slowly forgets the faces of passed loved ones, feels the memory of her slipping: “He knew what the truth was. The truth was that he was losing her” (McCarthy, 2022a, p. 318). Instead of accepting this, he leaves America to live on or near the island of Ibiza, as the Kid foretold, and dedicates the rest of his life to keeping the memory of Alicia alive. Bobby’s dedication becomes a sort of religion for him, and as such, he is “the last pagan on earth” (McCarthy, 2022a, p. 383); the last person desperately clinging onto the memory of Alicia.

At the end of *The Passenger*, McCarthy hints at the fact that Bobby may be close to attaining or has attained *gnosis*, as Alicia perhaps was able to before her death. After all, Bobby and Alicia are two sides of the same coin, as evidenced by their given names, Bob and Alice, and Bobby should therefore be able to attain *gnosis* himself. Alicia, who changed her name from Alice to Alicia, explains that their given names are “the names of the two characters in certain questions of a narrative type in science” (McCarthy, 2022b, p. 27). More specifically, they are names of placeholder characters commonly used in cryptography, as well as in certain thought experiments in physics (Rivest et al, 1978). For instance, Bob and Alice are recurring characters in experiments that have to do with how A can send a secret message to B without fear of the message being intercepted and understood by a third party (Dooley, 2013). McCarthy seems to have borrowed more than the names of his two protagonists from cryptography. At bottom, *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris* are about how character A (Alicia) is able to relate a secret message, secret knowledge, i.e., *gnosis*, to character B (Bobby) without a third party, i.e., the archons and Ialdabaoth intercepting the message. While Bobby is not as brilliant as Alicia when it comes to mathematics, she admits he is very good at it, even surpassing herself when it comes to doing calculations in his head. He is described as possessing a mechanical mind that understands how machines function. He

studied physics at Caltech, but never got his doctoral degree. Bobby read Alicia's PhD thesis three times, and according to her was the only one who understood it:

Did he understand it?

Pretty much. He understood what was wrong with it.

Which was?

That nobody could understand it. (McCarthy, 2022b, p. 151)

Mathematics, specifically Alicia's chosen field, topology and topos theory and its study seems to be what McCarthy suggests is the key to enlightenment: "When you get to topos theory you are at the edge of another universe" (McCarthy, 2022b, p. 14). Her thesis, incomprehensible to anyone, could be understood as the encrypted message that contains the secrets to the universe.

At the end of *The Passenger*, Bobby, much like the child in *The Road*, is trying to find the hidden fire which Mundik identifies as the divine light or the spark of the Gnostic God (2016, p. 310). However, while the child is reassured by his father that the fire is within him, Bobby searches elsewhere. He seems to believe that it is within his sister's thesis that the key to salvation lies. This is evidenced by the fact that he sends a request to the French research institute Institut des Hautes Études Scientifiques for a collection of mathematical papers by Alexander Grothendieck, a non-fictional mathematician whom Alicia in the novels had a friendly relationship with and drew inspiration from. Bobby spends his time solving problems described in these papers, attempting to gain a better understanding of the kind of math that Alicia worked on so that he one day can fully understand her thesis.

While working on Grothendieck's math problems, Bobby also writes in a black notebook that evokes images of religious books, such as for instance the Bible. As such, the character comes to resemble the disciples of Jesus. In the notebook, Bobby writes down things that his sister has said in the past, as well as his own observations and thoughts. His writing is reminiscent of religious language, although with a dark and twisted undertone:

Mercy is the province of the person alone. There is mass hatred and there is mass grief. Mass vengeance and even mass suicide. But there is no mass forgiveness. There is only you.

We pour water upon the child and name it. Not to fix it in our hearts but to fix it in our clutches. The daughters of men sit in half darkened closets inscribing messages upon their arms with razorblades and sleep is no part of their life. (McCarthy, 2022a, p. 381)

At this point in the novel, Bobby is becoming more and more like his sister. Whether this is due to subjecting himself to the same kind of mathematical problems that Alicia worked with or from pondering things that she said to him in the past is unclear. What is clear is that Bobby now sees the world as Alicia saw it, namely, exceedingly flawed.

In the Bible, mercy is often equated with a deliverance from judgment (Deuteronomy 4:30-31). In turn, this can be understood as salvation. According to the Bible this is something God provides through belief in him. Bobby's writings are similar to Gnostic religious texts, in that they oppose this belief, claiming instead that it is only the person alone who can bestow mercy, that salvation is not something given by God but found in ourselves. Furthermore, Bobby's writings criticize the Christian sacrament of baptism and claim that it is not an act of affection but an act of control. Bobby last lines can be understood as another critique, this one of the sacraments most associated with Catholicism, namely the Sacrament of Reconciliation. This is also known simply as confession and often takes place in a confessional, a cabinet or booth, which McCarthy seems to be referring to as a "half darkened closet". A person taking part in this sacrament is often prescribed certain acts of penance for their sins, such as praying numerous prayers, and McCarthy gruesomely likens these forms of penance to "inscribing messages upon their arms with razorblades". This could be in reference to self-flagellation, a disciplinary and devotional practice sometimes used as a form of penance in some branches of Christianity as well as Islam.

Bobby's final entry in his notebook before the novel ends places *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris* in the same universe as McCarthy's previous novel, *The Road*, and answers the question as to the nature of the apocalyptic event that transformed the world in *The Road* into a hellscape:

The ages of men stretching grave to grave. An accounting on a slate. Blood, darkness. The washing of dead children on a board. The stone laminations of the world with their fossil prints unreckonable in form and number. My father's latterday petroglyphs and the people upon the road naked and howling. (McCarthy, 2022a, p. 383).

Here, Bobby is describing what he envisions that the world to come may look like, which bears similarity to the world that is presented in *The Road*. McCarthy is describing the aftermath of a large-scale nuclear explosion: Several whole generations of people instantly reduced to fossil prints upon the earth. Bobby refers to his father's latterday petroglyphs, meaning his father's calculations and work on the creation of the atomic bomb, and thus

seems to hold him somewhat responsible for the future apocalyptic event, the survivors of which he believes will turn mad. This is exactly what happens to most of the survivors of the cataclysmic event in *The Road*, they become insane murderous cannibals. Previously, critics have argued that the end of the world in *The Road* likely did not occur due to human fault. For instance, Mundik argues that it is possible that the apocalypse in *The Road* did not stem from human error, but rather it emerged out of the arrangements of the cosmos (2016, p. 299). Likewise, Josephs thinks there are solid arguments to be made for why it is likely that the apocalypse in said novel was not man-made (2013, p. 135). I believe that the last few pages of *The Passenger*, wherein the contents of Bobby's notebook are shown, heavily imply that the world as presented in *The Road* is a result of nuclear war, or less likely, due to a large-scale nuclear accident. Either way, this implies that humanity caused *The Road's* apocalypse to happen.

The Passenger shares more in common with *The Road*, as well as other novels by McCarthy, than their potential shared universe. In a broad sense, *The Passenger* can be understood as a retelling of McCarthy's earlier novels. This should not be surprising, as McCarthy once stated that "Writing is rewriting" (Kushner, 2007). Furthermore, in an interview with a journalist from The New York Times Magazine in 1992, McCarthy stated that "the ugly fact is books are made out of books... The novel depends for its life on the novels that have been written" (Woodward, 1992). For instance, both *Blood Meridian* and *The Road* can be understood as stories about people travelling on a quest to find salvation in a seemingly godless world. Similarly, this is what Bobby's story in *The Passenger* is all about. The kid, the protagonist of *Blood Meridian*, meets a violent end to his quest at the hands of the antagonist, the judge. *The Road* also ends with the man, the protagonist of the novel, dying. However, the man dies peacefully in his sleep with his son beside him, and it is suggested that he was able to find salvation at last, in his son. The man lives on through his son, who he tells: "If I'm not here you can still talk to me. You can talk to me and I'll talk to you" (McCarthy, 2006, p. 298). At the end of *The Passenger*, Bobby blows out the lamp in his room and goes to sleep and thinks to himself that on the day of his death, he will see Alicia's face and "could hope to carry that beauty into the darkness with him" (McCarthy, 2022a, p. 383). Unlike both *Blood Meridian* and *The Road*, *The Passenger* ends without a clear resolution to the protagonist's quest. Bobby falling asleep is reminiscent of the man falling asleep at the end of *The Road*, however, as Bobby thinks to himself what will happen on the day of his death instead of thinking what *is* happening, it seems likely that the character

lives on. Whether Bobby's journey on the road to salvation abruptly will end in tragedy, like the kid, or if he will succeed like the man, remains up to the reader. The character himself seems to think that he will be reunited with his sister, which supports the notion that perhaps Bobby's story, in the end, will end happily.

The Road, although considered by some perhaps McCarthy's bleakest, most depressing novel, is according to the author himself about love between father and son prevailing even in the harshest of environments (The Narrative Art, 2021, 0:17). Similarly, *The Passenger* is about love, albeit a very different kind of love, prevailing through as well as transcending death. As Alicia herself points out, the love between her and her brother is inappropriate: "I knew that I would love him forever. In spite of the laws of Heaven" (McCarthy, 2022b, p. 111). It is difficult to know what to make of the unusual relationship that McCarthy presents in *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris*. Presumably, most readers' immediate reaction would be disgust, and yet, McCarthy does not present the love between Alicia and Bobby as something inherently wrong. This is not the first time McCarthy has written about incestuous siblings, as he has done so earlier in the novel *Outer Dark*, which was published in 1968. However, the relationship between brother and sister in *Outer Dark* differs from the relationship in *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris* in more than one way. Firstly, it differs in that it is presented as cold and without love. *Outer Dark*'s protagonist, Culla, treats his sister horribly, refusing to call for a midwife during the birth of their child. A day after the child is born, Culla brings it into the woods and leaves it there to die, seemingly afraid of what people would think of them should they find out about their relationship. The fact that the siblings in *Outer Dark* consummate their relationship also distinguishes it from the relationship depicted in *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris*, which according to Alicia and Bobby never went beyond a single kiss. Interestingly, in many religious mythologies incestuous relationships are commonplace. Take for instance Greek mythology, in which nearly every deity in some variants of the myths either are the products of incest or involve themselves in incest ("Gaia", 2023). In Abrahamic religions, it is believed that Abraham and Sarah, the biblical patriarch and matriarch, were half-siblings (Genesis 20:12). Even Adam and Eve can be understood as related, in the sense that Eve was created from Adam's rib, as well as the two of them sharing the same creator. In Gnostic mythology the aeons, the Gnostic God's emanations, were also believed to come in male-female sibling pairs (Brakke, 2010, p. 57). Whether or not McCarthy intentionally sought to compare Alicia and Bobby to any of the

aforementioned mythological pairings remains uncertain, however, such a reading is not out of the question.

By the end of *The Passenger*, Bobby has become a sort of disciple of Alicia and has created what can be understood as his own faith along with his own scripture and sacraments in the process. Like the disciples of Jesus, Bobby emulates Alicia, taking on a mindset as well as beliefs similar to hers as well as acting as she would have. He dedicates most of his time to solving mathematical problems, an act which in the novels is likened several times to acts of faith and thus can be read as a sort of sacrament. For instance, Alicia describes mathematics as “ultimately a faith-based initiative” (McCarthy, 2022b, p. 66). Furthermore, Bobby writes passages permeated with Alicia’s thought, which may as well have been written by her. In many religions it is believed that their holy books are the word of God, and the passages that Bobby write can be understood in a similar way. As such, Bobby is the last pagan not only in a figurative sense, due to his devotion to keeping the memory of his sister alive, but also in an actual sense as the sole practitioner as well as creator of his own faith, a faith which is similar to Gnosticism in many ways. For instance, knowledge and intellectual pursuits are seen by both as having religious importance. Bobby believes that solving mathematical problems will bring him closer to enlightenment. Alicia even goes as far as to claim that “what quantum mechanics ultimately describes is the universe” (McCarthy 2022b, p. 45). Gnostics believed that understanding the universe was akin to attaining gnosis, that knowledge of another realm and another higher god, was what would enable the human soul to return and reunite with the Gnostic God (Brakke, 2010, p. 69).

SUMMARY

In this chapter I have presented and discussed the views and beliefs of the characters Debussy, Alicia and Bobby and how they relate to Gnostic thought. Through these characters, McCarthy gives voice to certain fears and anxieties such as existential anxiety as well as fears regarding the future. For instance, Alicia displays fears regarding the meaninglessness of existence in addition to raising questions as to humanity’s coexistence with rapidly evolving technology, something she believes may end in an apocalyptic nuclear event. These fears are anthropomorphized as the Archatron, a being that can be understood as Ialdabaoth, the Gnostic deity believed to be responsible for the creation of the whole material universe and everything in it, as well as humanity’s captivity in it. The existence of this being is revealed to

Alicia through a vision, and Alicia subsequently becomes convinced of the meaninglessness of existence. However, despite her pessimistic outlook on life, it is suggested that she is hopeful of the possibility of salvation. She believes that mathematics and physics may ultimately describe the universe, and this knowledge may in turn allow one to peer beyond the borders of the universe and into another realm entirely. This notion can be interpreted as the Gnostic concept of gnosis, the attainment of which was believed by the Gnostics to be equivalent to salvation. By the end of *The Passenger*, Bobby displays similar convictions to that of his sister. He continues in the footsteps of Alicia after her death, becoming a sort of disciple to a faith of his own creation, deifying his sister as a modern-day messiah. This faith ultimately comes to resemble Gnosticism in certain ways, most notably in the belief that knowledge leads to salvation as well as the rejection of certain Christian beliefs and sacraments.

CHAPTER 2

Sacred Symbology and the Unconscious

In this chapter, I firstly present and discuss the religious symbology that can be found throughout *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris* and how it may be interpreted to relate to certain Gnostic myths and beliefs. Much of this symbology is related to the character Alicia as well as her cohort, the Kid. The second section of this chapter discusses the role of the unconscious in the two novels. In life, McCarthy was deeply interested in the unconscious, evidenced by the fact that most of his novels include dream sequences and symbology related to dreams and the unconscious. I argue that many of the characters and occurrences of *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris* may be viewed as inspired by the work of Carl Gustaf Jung, specifically his theory of the collective unconscious and the archetypes found within. While McCarthy doubtfully agreed with all of Jung's ideas, evidenced by certain remarks made by one of his characters in *Stella Maris*, McCarthy undoubtedly found in Jung's work inspiration and angles for discussing the true nature of the unconscious mind.

THE REVELATOR OF THE DIVINE

The first page of *The Passenger* describes a hunter out in the woods who comes across the frozen body of a young woman with golden hair, hanging from the winter trees. She is wearing nothing but a white dress, with a red sash tied around her waist “so that she'd be found” (McCarthy, 2022a, p. 1). Her coat is lying in the snow and one of her yellow boots has fallen off and is standing underneath her. Her head is bowed, and her hands are “turned slightly outward like those of certain ecumenical statues” (McCarthy, 2022a, p. 1). The body belongs to Alicia Western. McCarthy paints a bleak and depressing scene, and yet, leaves just enough hints of soteriological potential, that is the potential for salvation, in the description of Alicia's body to imbue the opening pages with a spark of hope amid the despair.

From the very first page of *The Passenger*, McCarthy uses what may be identified as Christian symbolism in order to associate the character Alicia with a messianic, or divine,

identity. Stella Maris, the titular ecumenical hospice for psychiatric patients where Alicia is committed in the novel, is named after the Virgin Mary, the mother of Christ. *Stella Maris* is Latin for Star of the Sea, which is an ancient title given to the Virgin Mary, used allusively of a protectress or guiding spirit (“Stella Maris”, 2023). The title came to be seen as representing Mary’s role as a guiding star to Jesus (Llywelyn, 2016). Furthermore, Mary as the Star of the Sea is an important patron saint to sailors, believed to help sailors in peril by acting to them as a guide through storms and dangerous waters. McCarthy likens Alicia to Mary on the very first page of *The Passenger*, by describing her body as resembling that of certain statues of Mary where her head is slightly bowed, and her hands are turned outwards. Furthermore, the hunter who finds Alicia’s body in the woods thinks to himself that “he should pray, but he had no prayer for such a thing” (McCarthy, 2022a, p. 1). The hunter proceeds to bow his head and utter the words: “Tower of Ivory... House of Gold”, both of which are titles that have been used to refer to the Virgin Mary (Shapin, 2012, p. 2). The ivory tower is a symbol of noble purity, signifying Mary’s virginity and innocence in Christian tradition. House of gold also symbolizes nobility and specifically highlights Mary’s role as the mother of Jesus. The novel’s name, *Stella Maris*, along with all of the aforementioned symbolisms, associates the character Alicia with the sacred, specifically, the Virgin Mary, the Star of the Sea. As such, the character can be understood as representing a divine guide, or divine revelator.

The colors of the clothes that Alicia is wearing also point in the direction of the sacred. For instance, she is wearing a white dress, which evokes images of saints and other religious figures. Furthermore, the color white has vast symbolic meaning; white signifies purity, holiness, spirituality, illumination, ascension, revelation and more (Cirlot, 1971, p. 56). White robes, which Alicia’s dress is reminiscent of, are often worn by prophets in the Bible. In addition, she is wearing a red sash, something Jesus is often depicted as wearing. The color red may symbolize blood, and in extension sacrifice (Cirlot, 1971, p. 29). In Christianity, a red sash represents Jesus’ sacrifice to atone for humanity’s sins. According to Cirlot, the combination of these two colors, red and white, has great mystic importance, representing the soul and immortality (1971, p. 3). In the previous chapter I discussed how Alicia, from beyond the grave, guides her brother Bobby on the road to attaining gnosis. The many symbolisms that McCarthy uses to describe Alicia further strengthens the notion that the character represents a Gnostic savior figure.

The date on which Alicia commits suicide implies that the character fully embraces her role as a savior figure. Alicia’s body is found on Christmas day, frozen, meaning she most

likely killed herself on the 24th of December or the same day she is found. Christians believe that Jesus was born on the 25th of December and annually celebrate his birth on this day. Gnostics did not acknowledge that Jesus was physically born, as they neither believed him to be of flesh and blood, but rather an immaterial being that in some variations of the Gnostic myths came into being by himself. The notion that Jesus ascended to heaven after his death, however, is something that is not unfamiliar to Gnostic faith as it very much resembles Gnostic soteriological myth, that is, the Gnostic concept of salvation. According to Jonas, Gnostics believed that the archons barred the passage of souls that seek to ascend after death in order to prevent the souls' escape and reunion with the Gnostic God (1958, p. 40). However, equipped with gnosis, Gnostics believed that the soul travels upwards after death, rather than remaining trapped on Earth, and reaches the Gnostic God and becomes reunited with the divine substance that is the entirety. Alicia dying on the birthday of Christ, a religious figure that is famously believed to have ascended into heaven after death, further ties the character to a savior figure and likely signifies her spiritual ascension.

Further evidence of Alicia's likeness to a Gnostic savior figure is her warnings of world-ending events. Following the final appearance of the savior, Gnostics believed that the material world, along with Ialdabaoth and the archons, would be destroyed (Brakke, 2010, p. 68). Alicia warns that to think that "The grim eruptions of this century were in any way either singular or exhaustive was simply a folly" (McCarthy, 2022b, p. 152). *Stella Maris* takes place in the 1970's, and "the grim eruptions" very likely refers to the detonations of atomic bombs during this century. Alicia furthermore warns that the only other option is that "In the end... there will be nothing that cannot be simulated. And this will be the final abridgement of privilege" (McCarthy, 2022a, p. 382). What the character is warning about can be inferred to be a total loss of free will, the Gnostic concept of *heimarmene*, meaning universal Fate, something that Jonas explains refers to "the tyrannical world-rule" of the archons (1958, p. 43). A simulated reality, the world as the Gnostics saw it, seems to be to Alicia a more frightening thought than an apocalyptic event.

Throughout *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris*, McCarthy further hints at Alicia's connection to the Virgin Mary. There is the aforementioned symbolism, as well as numerous occasions where Alicia is shown resembling the Holy Mother in certain traits. Most notably perhaps, is the fact that Alicia herself is a virgin in the novels, something the character tells her psychiatrist at one point in the novel *Stella Maris*. Throughout her life she never considers a relationship with anyone other than her brother, and when Bobby denies her advances

despite both of them having strong feelings for each other, she resigns herself to a single life. However, the character does not give up hope that they will be together, that is, until Bobby's accident occurs, leaving him comatose with a very low chance of ever waking up. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Bobby and Alicia shared a single moment of illicit love, a single kiss. Their relationship never went further than this according to the characters themselves. However, near the end of *Stella Maris*, Alicia tells Dr Cohen about an intimate dream that she had, wherein she had intercourse with her brother, explaining that she did not regret having such a dream, instead only regretting that "it was a dream" and not real (McCarthy, 2022b, p. 167).

In McCarthy's novels, the veil between dreams and real-life is oftentimes flimsy. There are numerous examples of this in *The Passenger*, where for instance, both Bobby and Alicia interact with figures in their dreams, who could be interpreted as being real in the sense that the characters talk with their actual ghosts, and not some figment of their imagination. As such, it is sometimes difficult to tell whether certain occurrences actually take place in the character's imagination or not. Furthermore, should the reader interpret these occurrences as happening solely in the character's imagination, the question becomes whether or not this makes it less real. According to Bobby, "Saying that it's just in your head doesn't change anything" (McCarthy, 2022a, p. 82). This is one of the repeated messages of the novels, that subjective experience and the unconscious are as real and ungovernable as the material world. In light of this, Alicia's intimate dream involving her brother could be interpreted as actually having happened, at least that is, in the dream world.

Several times in *The Passenger*, Alicia is shown to have a connection to babies, something that further connects her to the Virgin Mary. There is for instance the conversation she has with one of her cohorts, regarding babies, which I discussed in the previous chapter. Furthermore, at one point in *The Passenger*, the Kid shows Alicia an old videotape of a child's funeral. Likewise, Bobby also is shown to have some sort of connection to babies, as the character has dreams that seemingly are about the birth of a child:

Certain dreams gave him no peace. A nurse waiting to take the thing away. The doctor watching him.

What do you want to do?

I don't know. I don't know what to do (McCarthy, 2022a, p. 315).

Bobby's hesitation in the conversation with the doctor implies that something has gone wrong during what could be interpreted as the birth of what is likely his child. The conversation continues, and Bobby asks the doctor if she has seen it. "She" likely refers to Alicia, as she is shown to have been on his mind a few pages prior to this dream sequence. The doctor tells him that she has not seen it, whereupon Bobby asks if that is something she must do. Bobby refers to the child as "it", something that in all likelihood means that the baby is stillborn or has suffered serious birth defects. This makes it difficult for the character to see his child as anything other than a nameless thing, or rather, it can be interpreted as the character attempting to emotionally distance himself. The doctor explains that whether or not Alicia should see has to be Bobby's decision, "Bearing in mind of course that a thing once seen cannot be unseen" (McCarthy, 2022a, p. 315). This comment seems to be in reference to the trauma the sight of one's own stillborn child would inflict upon a person. Simultaneously, the comment harkens back to Alicia's vision and the repercussions it has on her, further connecting her to this dream. The dream ends with the following exchange:

Does it have a brain?

Rudimentary.

Does it have a soul? (McCarthy, 2022a, p. 316).

The ending of the dream is the most essential evidence of the dream being about a stillborn baby. The dream overall may be interpreted as a philosophical reflection on the nature of the soul. McCarthy seems to be asking the reader to consider the question: When does a soul come into existence, and when does it cease to exist? It ends before the doctor answers Bobby's final question, thereby signaling that the doctor does not have an answer to whether or not a stillborn baby can be said to have a soul, or furthermore, an answer to whether or not the soul even exists.

Continuing on the notion that McCarthy's dreamscape is as real as the physical world in his novels, the dream sequence posits the possibility that Alicia became pregnant with Bobby's child and that said child was stillborn. Furthermore, it does not seem to be a coincidence that the foremost of Alicia's hallucinatory cohorts, aptly named the Kid, is one described as having certain birth defects, such as a scarred skull and deformed hands. Alicia states several times throughout *Stella Maris* that she wanted to be a mother: "What I really wanted was a child" (McCarthy, 2022b, p. 13). Alicia tells Dr Cohen that she told Bobby that she "wanted to have his child" (McCarthy, 2022b, p. 163). Bobby remembers this conversation after his meeting with the Kid in *The Passenger*:

You dont know what you're asking.

Fateful words.

She touched his cheek. I dont have to.

You dont know how it will end.

I dont care how it will end. I only care about now. (McCarthy, 2022a, p. 283)

This conversation seems to refer to having a child together, which Bobby expresses worry that it might not end well. Further tying all three of these characters together is the fact that The Kid appears to both Alicia and Bobby. One interpretation is that the reason for this is that the Kid represents their co-creation, the child they made in their collective unconscious, which explains why Bobby is also able to see him. However, the Kid first appears to Alicia several years prior to her dream, and he is described to be too old to possibly be her child. One explanation is that the Kid has a special relationship with space and time, perhaps existing separately from it all together. When Bobby meets him in *The Passenger*, he is for instance able to tell Bobby's future. Further implying that The Kid exists outside of time is that he tells Alicia at one point that "The past is the future" (McCarthy 2022a, p. 13). Alicia tells Dr Cohen that "If I had a child I wouldn't care about reality" (McCarthy, 2022b, p. 13) Furthermore, in Bobby's final vision of the Kid, he describes the Kid "trudging the shingles of the universe, his thin shoulders turned to the stellar winds and the suck of alien moons" (McCarthy, 2022a, p. 382). This description evokes an image of an alien faraway place, possibly another reality, where there are multiple moons and where the wind emitted from the stars can be observed and felt. Furthermore, the description bears similarities to what Alicia has to say about topos theory: "When you get to topos theory you are at the edge of another universe. You have found a place to stand where you can look back at the world from nowhere" (McCarthy, 2022b, p. 14). As such, in Bobby's vision of the Kid, the Kid may be interpreted as existing at the edge of another universe. In turn, this may be regarded as evidence that the Kid represents a transcendent being.

Another interpretation of the Kid's identity is that he may represent a Gnostic deity such as the luminary Afterthought, whom in some variations of Gnostic myths is able to appear to humans in different forms. As mentioned in the introduction, some Gnostic myths held that Afterthought took on the appearance of Jesus and appeared to humans (Brakke, 2010, p. 68). An obscure hint of the Kid's connection to Jesus is the vast number of times the character uses this name as a curse word in conversation with both Alicia and Bobby. This occurs throughout *The Passenger*, and by the end of the novel, Bobby adopts this catchphrase

for himself, which may symbolize the Kid's influence on him. There might be many reasons for why the deity takes on the appearance of the Kid, one such reason may be in order to prepare Alicia for the sight of her future stillbirth, which again may or may not be interpreted as something that actually takes place in her unconscious and not in the material universe of the novels. However, as discussed in the previous chapter, the cohorts are similar to the Ancient Greek personal protecting spirits. As such, the Kid representing the Gnostic deity, Afterthought, believed to be responsible for guiding humans to gnosis, by preparing them for the future reunion with the Gnostic God, might not be entirely inconceivable. Strengthening this notion is the fact that both Alicia and Bobby believe that the Kid is some kind of emissary. While discussing the Kid's nature with Dr Cohen, Alicia explains that "I do think he was sent. Nothing else really computes" (McCarthy, 2022b, p. 155). Similarly, one of the questions Bobby asks the Kid when he meets him is "Are you an emissary?" (McCarthy, 2022a, p. 281). Neither Bobby nor Alicia is entirely sure who sent the Kid, or who he is an emissary of. Alicia explains to Dr Cohen that the Kid is "no more mysterious than the deeper questions about any other reality. Or mathematics. For that matter (McCarthy, 2022b, p. 155). She explains that he is simply a form turning in a nameless void, "Salvaged out of a bleak sea of the incomputable" (McCarthy, 2022b, p. 155).

The end of *The Passenger* bears much resemblance to the epilogue of *Blood Meridian* and connects the two. As mentioned in the introduction, Daugherty explains that what initially led him to believe that *Blood Meridian* has Gnostic thought central to it, was the epilogue, in which a man is depicted as traversing the plains by going rock to rock, freeing the fire within that God has placed there (1992, p. 129). As established, this likely symbolizes a Gnostic savior figure freeing the pneuma from the material human body, i.e., guiding them to gnosis. Similarly, at the end of *The Passenger*, Bobby hopes that he can see the Kid once more, and when he finally does so in a dream, he describes him as "God's own mudlark, trudging cloaked and muttering the barren selvage of a nameless desolation" (McCarthy, 2022a, p. 382). According to the OED, mudlark is an old term used to describe a person who "scavenges for debris in the tidal mud of a river, harbour, etc." ("Mudlark", 2023). In *The Passenger*, McCarthy once more ends one of his novels with a character seemingly doing a mundane activity when in fact it very likely symbolizes something highly significant. McCarthy, perhaps worried that the hidden meaning would go unnoticed, clarifies that the character is not just a simple mudlark, he is God's own mudlark. Furthermore, this suggests that the Kid is singular, he is not one of God's many mudlarks, he is the one and only. This

appears to be Bobby's own interpretation as well, as he goes on to describe him as "A lonely shoreloper hurrying against the night, small and friendless and brave" (McCarthy, 2022a, p. 382). The Kid's lonesome task echoes that of many of McCarthy's characters, wanderers traveling on desolate roads, but especially seems to be an homage to the man of the epilogue of *Blood Meridian*. The man's task is "striking the fire out of the rock", freeing spirit from matter (McCarthy, 1985, p. 355). The Kid's task is searching through muddy waters for something of value, something worth salvaging, on the behest of God. Alicia summarizes his task perfectly when describing to Dr Cohen what or who he is: A form turning in a nameless void, "Salvaged out of a bleak sea of the incomputable" (McCarthy, 2022b, p. 155). Just as the Kid was once saved from out of the sea of the incomputable, the material universe, it is now his task, while "trudging the shingles of the universe", to save others (McCarthy, 2022a, p. 382). As such, the character becomes identical to the Gnostic savior figure, as described by Jonas: "The saviour himself has to be saved" (1958, p. 127). Both the Kid and the man of the epilogue of *Blood Meridian* represent the same being, namely, the Gnostic Christ, the revelator whose purpose it is to guide humans to gnosis. The two characters may even be interpreted as identical, perhaps not in form, but in spirit. Their two tasks may be interpreted as metaphorically symbolizing the same thing, which is helping humans free themselves from the clutches of Ialdabaoth. The Kid and the man of the epilogue being so much alike supports the notion that McCarthy's novels are connected through a shared universe, and with that, a shared reality.

Another interpretation of the nature of the Kid, which does not necessarily oppose the view that he is an emissary of the Gnostic God, is that the Kid stems from Alicia's unconscious, something I discuss in the next section of this chapter. This is a concept that McCarthy briefly outlined in the interview with Oprah in 2007. In this interview, McCarthy tells Oprah about some ideas he had at the time regarding the unconscious: "It may be that, you know, the subconscious is really a committee. And they may have meetings and say, 'What do you think we should tell him? Should we tell him that? No, he's not ready for that'" (World Traveler, 2014, 1:40). This idea is likely what inspired Alicia's cohorts, and the cohorts could be interpreted as representatives of the committee that makes up Alicia's unconscious mind. The pneuma, the spark of the Gnostic God, bears similarities to the unconscious as depicted in McCarthy's novels. For instance, similarly to how the cohorts can be understood to be part of the greater whole that is Alicia's unconscious, Gnostics believed the pneuma to be part of the Gnostic God. The pneuma, the spark of the Gnostic God, is both

a transmitter and receiver of signals from the Gnostic God. Furthermore, just as the cohorts protect and guide Alicia, the pneuma can be understood as that which makes gnosis possible, in other words, that which guides humans to salvation.

The Kid has strong symbolic ties to that of the Gnostic Christ figure. Similarly, Alicia herself may be interpreted as having both ties to the Virgin Mary as well as Christ. There are also indicators that point to the fact that the Kid is part of Alicia, an anthropomorphized version of her deeper, unconscious thoughts. However, during their last conversation together, the Kid says to Alicia that “I’m not coming with you to the bin you know” (McCarthy, 2022a, p. 16). Furthermore, the Kid tells her that he and the other cohorts will miss her, whereupon Alicia asks if they will miss themselves. The Kid answers, “We’ll be around. There’s always work to be done” (McCarthy, 2022a, p. 16). This suggests that the Kid and the other cohorts in actuality will continue to exist after Alicia is dead, something that is later proved in *The Passenger* when Bobby meets the Kid, which occurs eight years after Alicia’s suicide. As previously mentioned, the number eight is significant in Gnostic belief systems. The Kid appearing to Bobby eight years after Alicia’s death is unlikely to be a coincidence and may be interpreted as symbolizing a sort of second coming of Christ. He is able to perform miracles akin to the miracles Jesus performs in the Bible. One of his final acts is to bring back to life an old man, explaining to Alicia that before she kills herself, she “might want to see how you’ll be spending your time” (McCarthy, 2022a, p. 13). Furthermore, the Kid is depicted as able to conjure something from nothing, and he is likely omniscient due to having knowledge of the future and access to other characters’ memories and dreams.

The Passenger may be interpreted as McCarthy’s adaptation of the Gnostic myths’ soteriology. According to Brakke, the final return of the Gnostic God’s lost power and the subsequent destruction of the lower, material realms, would follow the appearance of a great savior in human form (Brakke, 2010, p. 68). Furthermore, Brakke explains that this appearance is sometimes said to be the third time the savior has arrived, noting that scholars are still debating what the first two advents might be. The third advent of the savior is sometimes portrayed as still to come or other times to have already taken place. Brakke explains that in one Gnostic text, the *Secret Book of John*, the luminary Forethought claims that in her third advent she “entered the midst of their prison”, that is, “the prison of the [human] body” (Ap. John II 31:3-4, as cited in Brakke, 2010). Subsequently, a “true human being, within a modeled form” will come to reveal the spirit of truth and teach the saved posterity about everything (Hyp. Arch. 96:27-97:21 as cited in Brakke, 2010). The deity

“entering the midst of their prison” resembles how the character, the Kid, appears to Alicia. Similarly, the human that is believed to reveal and teach others about the truth of the universe resembles Alicia. It is not unlikely that McCarthy found inspiration from these myths when writing the characters of Alicia and the Kid, Alicia representing the “true human being” and the Kid representing Afterthought.

Gnostic soteriological myth is a story of return, and the stories presented in *The Passenger* may be interpreted as being about return as well. Gnostic salvation, i.e., gnosis, is about reuniting the pneuma found within all humans with the Gnostic God (Jonas, 1958, p. 40). In *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris*, the character Alicia is shown several times wishing to return to a state of nonexistence, something that she herself believes is impossible. This is discussed throughout both *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris*, and the argument is that once something has existed, it is impossible for it to never have existed, since there will always be traces of said thing’s existence. Furthermore, at the end of *The Passenger*, Bobby thinks to himself that “Some stranger not yet born might come upon her [Alicia’s] photo in a school album in a dusty shop and be stopped in his place by her beauty” (McCarthy, 2022a, p. 381). Even though Alicia is dead and long gone, traces of her remain. In *The Road* there is the message of the possibility of living on through others in their memories. One of the messages in *The Passenger* is that one must accept the fact that, over time, the memory of those one has lost will fade. Furthermore, not being able to accept this may prove detrimental and prevent one from moving on with life. It is only in the end of *The Passenger* that the character Bobby is able to accept that sooner or later, he will not be able to remember his sister’s face or her voice. When he does so, Bobby realizes that all of these things will return to him on the day he dies. Bobby knows that, in the end, he will see Alicia’s face and he hopes to be able to “carry that beauty into the darkness with him” (McCarthy, 2022a, p. 383). The fragment of Alicia that is still living on through Bobby in the form of a faint memory will return to nothingness when he dies. So too will he, and in that nothingness, he hopes that they can be reunited.

THE COLLECTIVE UNCONSCIOUS

The Passenger and *Stella Maris*'s connection to the psychological theories of Carl Jung may not be immediately obvious. However, there is clear evidence in the novels that McCarthy himself is very familiar with Jung's work, and there are even specific references to him, such as Alicia calling Jung "moonminded" (McCarthy, 2023, p. 52). Alicia is not shown to be overly convinced by Jung's ideas, and neither perhaps was McCarthy himself. However, Jung's influence on McCarthy is evident in *The Passenger*, and it is clear that McCarthy has drawn inspiration from Jung when writing certain characters and events. As noted in the previous section of this chapter, the Kid may be interpreted as representing a being stemming from the collective unconscious of the two characters Alicia and Bobby. Jung would likely define the Kid as what he calls an archetype of the collective unconscious, a primordial and universal symbol that may represent numerous things (1969, p. 5). The archetype that the Kid may be associated with is what Jung calls the child archetype, an archetype that is "extremely widespread and intimately bound up with all the other mythological aspects of the child motif" (1969, p. 158). There is for instance the Christ-child, as well as numerous folklores where the child motif for instance may appear as a dwarf or an elf, or other such personifications of the hidden forces of nature. Other archetypes of the collective unconscious include the mother, the wise old man and the shadow, all of whom may be interpreted as appearing in *The Passenger* in certain forms.

Jung differentiated between what he calls the collective unconscious and the unconscious, the latter being of a more individual nature. The collective unconscious is a deep layer of the unconscious mind, that according to Jung, "does not derive from personal experience and is not a personal acquisition but is inborn" (1969, p. 3). In contrast to what Jung defines as the personal unconscious, namely a superficial layer of the unconscious, the collective unconscious is universal and not individual. Furthermore, Jung explains that the collective unconscious has contents and modes of behavior that are more or less the same in every individual and "thus constitutes a common psychic substrate of a suprapersonal nature which is present in every one of us" (1969, p. 4). The contents of the collective unconscious are known as archetypes, which Jung explains are "primordial types... universal images that have existed since the remotest of times" (1969, p. 5). There are many different archetypes, all of which Jung explains in some way, shape or form should be thought of as "symbolic expressions of the inner, unconscious drama of the psyche which become accessible to man's

consciousness by way of projection – that is, mirrored in the events of nature” (1969, p. 6). Summer, winter, the phases of the moon and the setting of the sun are not simply external observations. Through the unconscious irresistible urge to assimilate outer experiences to inner psychic events, these objective occurrences come to symbolize such things as life and death, new beginnings and change. In the individual, the archetypes appear as involuntary manifestations of unconscious processes whose existence and meaning can only be inferred (1969, p. 153). The pre-existent forms, the archetypes, which make up the collective unconscious may give personal form, that is individual meaning, to certain psychic contents. However, according to Jung the collective unconscious does not develop individually but is rather inherited (1969, p. 43).

The first and perhaps foremost hint that *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris* are deeply connected to the unconscious is the reoccurring motif of water, specifically the sea. According to Jung, water is the most common symbol for the unconscious (1969, p. 18). The reader’s first introduction to the character Bobby in *The Passenger* is while he is at work out at sea. His profession is diving, specifically, salvage diving. His job is to dive deep into the dark sea and recover parts of ships, aircraft parts and the like. Bobby fears being deep under water and explains that he thinks that “fear sometimes transcends the problem. What if it’s about something else?” (McCarthy, 2022a, p. 83). Furthermore, the character explains that maybe solving the problem may or may not actually solve the problem, that what he is afraid of may not be what he is actually afraid of. Bobby shares his fear of deep waters with his sister, who as mentioned in the previous chapter decides against killing herself by way of drowning in a lake. The fear these sibling protagonists exhibit may be interpreted as a fear of the unconscious, or a lack of consciousness. As previously mentioned, Bobby experiences firsthand what a lack of consciousness is like, when before the events of the novel he ends up in a coma due to a racecar accident. Despite this, the character continues diving into the unconscious after his recovery, in the form of his dives into the deep sea. The purpose of this may be interpreted as searching for knowledge outside consciousness in order to better understand reality and coming to terms with the death of his sister, of which he feels responsible for.

Bobby’s dives metaphorically mirror Alicia’s dives into her books and subsequent peek through the judas hole, and the outcome is similar. According to Jung, water means spirit that has become unconscious (1969, p. 18). The conscious mind only knows spirit as something to be found in the heights, it is something that comes from above, and the meeting

of the conscious mind and the unconscious is therefore met with violent resistance. Jung explains that the unconscious is commonly regarded as an incapsulated fragment of our most personal intimate life (1969, p. 20). The Bible calls this the heart and considers it the source of all evil thoughts. It is where “wicked blood-spirits, swift anger and sensual weakness” resides (Jung, 1969, p. 20). To the conscious mind, this is exactly what the unconscious appears as. However, consciousness is an affair of the cerebrum, which sees everything separately and in isolation, including the unconscious, which is therefore outright regarded as “my unconscious” (Jung, 1969, p. 20). Hence, Jung explains, it is generally believed that those who descend into the unconscious enters a “suffocating atmosphere of egocentric subjectivity, and in this blind alley is exposed to the attack of all ferocious beasts which the caverns of the psychic underworld are supposed to harbour” (1969, p. 20). As mentioned, after Bobby’s initial dive in *The Passenger* he is tormented by unknown men. Similarly, in Alicia’s vision, she feels a terrifying presence, and in the following years feels that something that bears semblance to Yeats’ rough beast is coming for her: “Something on the road. Something coming. Some sweatsoaked beast, some hooded and wheezing abhorrence atrundle upon the foothpath” (McCarthy, 2022a, p. 188).

Diving into the unconscious is a confrontation with oneself (Jung, 1969, p. 20). It is the first test of courage on the inner way. According to Jung, this confrontation is frightening enough to make most people turn around, “for the meeting with ourselves belongs to the more unpleasant things that can be avoided so long as we project everything negative into the environment” (1969, p. 20). Those that are able to quell their fear in this meeting with the unconscious are able to see their own shadow, a part of oneself that represents our helplessness and ineffectuality. This shadow is “a tight passage, a narrow door, whose painful constriction no one is spared who goes down to the deep well” (Jung, 1969, p. 21). It is a reminder that there are problems “which one simply cannot solve on one’s own resources” (Jung, 1969, p. 21). According to Jung, admitting this fact prepares the ground for a compensatory reaction from the collective unconscious and allowing the helpful powers slumbering in the deeper strata, the deeper unconscious, to come awake and intervene. Through the narrow gap that is our shadow, there is a boundless expanse “full of unprecedented uncertainty, with apparently no inside and no outside, no above and no below, no here and no there, no mine and no thine, no good and no bad” (Jung, 1969, p. 21). To Jung, this deep reflection of the self, which initially might seem dangerous, ultimately is necessary to know oneself and to know who one is.

While the confrontation with the deep beasts of the unconscious is to Jung a mostly harmless test of courage, to McCarthy this is not the case. Bobby and Alicia both experience the attack of the beasts, thought to inhabit the innermost caverns of the psychic underworld, and neither one of them is unscathed from this. Bobby blames himself and his loss of consciousness for the death of his sister, something that haunts him throughout *The Passenger*. McCarthy makes manifest the beasts residing in Bobby's psychic underworld. They are the agents of the government that take away his car, the detectives uncovering the truth of the sunken aircraft and the unknown force responsible for his diving colleagues' death. They are the externalized unpleasant truths of Bobby's innermost self that Bobby projects onto the reality he finds himself in. They are his shadow, representing his helplessness and futility. Similarly, Alicia's Archatron can be interpreted as serving much the same function as Bobby's mystery men. It is her personal shadow incarnate, "the presence beyond the gate" (McCarthy, 2022b, p. 106). It is shrouded away, formless and "transcending representation" (McCarthy, 2022b, p. 172). Alicia's shadow represents her insignificance, her fear of her reality being nothing but a simulation, and depending on how one interprets her death, is ultimately her undoing.

However, as Jung would have it, Alicia's confrontation with the unconscious results in the collective unconscious taking action and attempting to postpone her death. The archetypes of the collective unconscious are sent to her. They are her cohorts and are comprised of not only the child archetype, the Kid, but Jung's wise old man archetype as well, in the form of the wise old lady, Miss Vivian, who offers Alicia guidance and introspection. According to Jung, the child archetype appears in dreams and visions oftentimes as a child god, or young hero (1969, p. 165). According to Jung, the child archetype is connotated with a motif of being "smaller than small yet bigger than big" (1969, p. 158). Furthermore, this complements the impotence of the child by means of its equally miraculous deeds. Despite the Kid's limp gait, his scarred head and malformed hands, he is still shown to be able to accomplish miraculous things, such as conjuring the dead, telling the future and keeping a suicidal person from killing herself for eight years. Further connecting the Kid to Jung's child archetype is that Bobby describes him as "small and friendless and brave" (McCarthy, 2022a, p. 382). This echoes the trait of being "smaller than small yet bigger than big", which Jung explains is a typical feature of the "Christ-child" in the legend of Saint Christopher (1969, p. 158). The Kid furthermore fits the description of the young hero, which is another version of the child archetype. According to Jung, the hero's main feat is to "overcome the monster of

darkness: it is the long-hoped-for and expected triumph of consciousness over unconsciousness” (1969, p. 153). It is perhaps no coincidence that after Bobby meets the Kid, there are no further mentions of the mystery men that harassed him until this point in the novel. The reason for this might be found in the dialogue between the two, whereby at the end of the conversation, Bobby falls to his knees and professes his grief: “There is no other loss. The world is ashes. Ashes. For her to be in pain? The least insult? The least humiliation? Do you understand? For her to die alone? Her? There is no other loss” (McCarthy, 2022a, p. 282). This is the first and only time in the novel where Bobby is shown to confront the thoughts that torment him. In this moment, the Kid, an emissary of the collective unconscious, enables Bobby to face his inner thoughts and that which truly has tormented him over the past years, namely his self-blame for his sister’s death and the circumstances surrounding it. There is no further mention of a conspiracy against him, no further mystery men, and this may signify that the character has begun a journey on the road to healing and forgiveness.

SUMMARY

In this chapter, I have presented and discussed religious symbolism as well as symbolism related to unconscious, both of which can be found throughout *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris*. In the first section, I have discussed how from the very first page of *The Passenger*, McCarthy links the character Alicia to that of the Virgin Mary. McCarthy makes this connection clear by describing the posture of Alicia’s corpse to be similar to that of “certain ecumenical statues” (McCarthy, 2022a, p. 1). Furthermore, there is significant symbolic meaning in the attire Alicia is wearing, which further hints at the character representing a divine figure as well as hinting at the possibility of her transcendence before death. The Kid, Alicia’s cohort, whose nature I have discussed in the previous chapter, also has significant ties to a divine figure, specifically the Gnostic understanding of Christ: A figure who saves others and is himself in need of saving. He bears resemblance to the man of the epilogue of *Blood Meridian* and may be interpreted as attempting to fulfil the very same task, which is freeing the spiritual pneuma from matter, in other words, making it possible for humans to attain gnosis and rejoin the Gnostic God. While the man of the epilogue of *Blood Meridian* is depicted as doing this physically, by breaking apart rocks, the Kid scours the muddy waters of

the sea in search of salvageable things. Both tasks may be interpreted as guiding humans to gnosis, thereby making it possible for their spiritual fragment to reunite with the Gnostic God.

In the second section of this chapter, I have presented and discussed Jung's theories regarding the collective unconscious and archetypes, as well as how certain characters and events in *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris* may be understood as having been inspired by these theories. Jung's understanding of the unconscious was that it had multiple layers, the first being what he called the personal layer of the unconscious. Jung argued that confronting the inner self, one's unconscious, was necessary to truly know oneself. However, such an undertaking is frightening to most people, because peering into deep caverns of the self may reveal truths that one might not be able to face. As such, the inner conflicts of the psyche may be avoided by externalizing them. The character Bobby in *The Passenger* may be understood as an example of someone who externalizes that which truly haunts them, namely the death of his sister. In the preceding chapter, I describe Bobby as the titular passenger, someone unable to take control of his own life. Things merely happen to him, which he himself has no say in. In terms of Jung's theory of avoiding inner conflicts by projecting them onto nature, Bobby fits this description. According to Jung, the collective unconscious may provide help to someone who faces the frightening truths of the personal unconscious. To do so, certain archetypes of the collective unconscious, universal images, may show themselves to those in need and provide guidance and support. In *The Passenger*, the Kid may be understood as representing such an archetype, the archetype of the child, whose purpose it is to miraculously defeat the monster of darkness despite his flaws, signifying the victory of consciousness over unconsciousness. It is only when the character Bobby is able to confront his guilt that he no longer experiences persecution and harassment by the unknown men, which signifies that the processing of hardships that the character has endured leads to him regaining control.

CONCLUSION

“He rose and turned and walked back out to the road” (McCarthy, 2006, p. 306)

Cormac McCarthy’s novels have interested me since I read my first novel by him sometime in the early 2010s. The first novel by McCarthy I read was *No Country for Old Men*, by recommendation from my English teacher, Ms. Kirsten. I read the novel for a school project and faintly remember discussing themes of the novel, such as good versus evil, in the subsequent school paper I wrote. I was specifically interested in the novel’s main antagonist, Anton Chigurh. The character both fascinated and unsettled me. He forces the other characters in the novel to take part in a coinflip and bet on either heads or tails. Those lucky enough to bet correctly win their life and those who bet incorrectly lose their life. For Chigurh, the coin is an instrument of fate, and he is fate’s henchman. Had I known back then what I know now, I might have argued that Chigurh represents the Gnostic concept of *heimarmene*, universal and nearly inevitable fate. Like the judge in *Blood Meridian*, Chigurh may be identified as an archon, an evil angel in service to the blind and ignorant Ialdabaoth, whom Gnostics identified as the craftsman God of the Bible. Ultimately, one might argue that the stories of *No Country for Old Men*, *Blood Meridian* and other novels by McCarthy boil down to stories of the struggle between good and evil. As such, it might have been a good idea to simply discuss the theme of good versus evil in my old school paper, as discussing this in depth might have resulted in a whole thesis such as this, in which I think there is still much more to discuss.

It has been very interesting to research Gnosticism over the past months and attempting to identify and discuss elements of Gnosticism in McCarthy’s novels. What has made this even more interesting is that during this process, it has become evidently clear to me that I share my fascination with Gnosticism with McCarthy himself. Where I once saw a simple coin toss, or a Western tale of the harsh life at the American frontier, I now see fragments of Gnosticism on nearly every page I turn. Unlike the scholars that debate whether or not Gnosticism as a term should be dismantled altogether, McCarthy likely did not care much what exactly Gnosticism is or was. I would like to think that what McCarthy found

fascinating about Gnosticism are the very same things I find fascinating about it. These are namely the cosmogenic myths, the soteriological myths and the myths regarding certain divine figures such as Ialdabaoth and the archons, the Gnostic God and the aeons and finally, humanity's place in the world in between these forces. I believe all of these things make for a great source of inspiration when writing a novel.

While I think that most people probably know that Christianity at first was a Judaic sect, I do not think that most people know that a lot of different sects within Christianity helped shape and form Christianity to be what is today. I assume fewer people know that Gnosticism, with its radically opposite beliefs to Christianity, was one of these sects (or multiple sects known collectively as Gnosticism). As such, and partly for my own sake, in the introduction to this thesis I have presented information regarding Gnosticism which I think is necessary to know about in order to identify and discuss what may be interpreted as elements of Gnosticism in McCarthy's novels. Some of the key concepts and beliefs I have presented are the beliefs that the material world and the human body are prisons where the craftsman God of the Bible, Ialdabaoth, has trapped divine fragments of the Gnostic God. These fragments are called *pneuma*, meaning breath, and are hidden deep within every single human. In order to become free from the clutches of Ialdabaoth and the archons, humans have to attain *gnosis*, meaning knowledge. Gnosis is what makes it possible for humans to reunite with the Gnostic God. However, in order to attain gnosis, one must first learn the truth of one's situation, namely that all humans are prisoners in a prison realm. Furthermore, one must also learn about the existence of the Gnostic God, which is a difficult task, as Ialdabaoth and his servants are hard at work to keep humans oblivious.

With this knowledge regarding Gnosticism, scholars have identified certain Gnostic elements in McCarthy's novels. The universe in which McCarthy's characters exist is shown to be like that of the Gnostics' understanding of the material universe. It is bloody and barbarous, a horrific and poor simulation of the spiritual realm in which the Gnostic God resides. One of the strongest pieces of evidence of Gnostic influence in McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, the first of his novels to be identified as containing Gnostic elements, is the main antagonist of the novel the judge. Scholars have pointed out that the judge has traits similar to that of the Gnostic archons. He is as controlling, jealous and ruthless as the Gnostics believed the craftsman God of the Bible to be. He is capable of supernatural feats and seemingly immortal and undefeatable. However, scholars have identified in the man of the epilogue of

Blood Meridian someone who can oppose him. He is the divine revelator, freeing spirit from matter, slowly but surely diminishing the judge's power and influence over the world.

In this thesis I wanted to examine whether McCarthy's last two novels, *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris*, provided definitive answers regarding his metaphysics, that is the reality of the universe of his novels. I have argued that McCarthy's two last novels present a culmination of his metaphysics, which can be understood as intrinsically Gnostic. To prove this, I initially attempted to identify what the characters in the two novel's convictions regarding life, death and God were. My findings suggest that these characters, in particular the character Alicia, share common views and beliefs found in Gnosticism. Furthermore, my reading of the novels revealed that there are many Gnostic ideas throughout them. For instance, in *The Passenger*, Alicia experiences a vision that terrifies her, in which she feels the presence of a being she calls the Archatron. This being is likely inspired by the Gnostic myth of Ialdabaoth. Alicia learns the horrifying truth of reality, that ultimately, there is a terrible being at the core of the material world, and that this being has power over her. She believes that escaping from that being's clutches is impossible. However, after experiencing the vision, what she initially thinks are simply hallucinations start appearing to her. She calls them the cohorts, and they may be interpreted as similar to the aeons, emanations from the Gnostic God, sent to help her attain gnosis and thereby salvation.

Mathematics, physics and understanding are the means of obtaining gnosis for Alicia. However, it is uncertain whether or not the character was actually able to achieve salvation before her death, and McCarthy leaves this up to the reader to decide. However, her brother Bobby, the other main protagonist of *The Passenger*, seems to believe that Alicia was right, as he continues in her footsteps after her death. He decides to dedicate the rest of his life to learning the complex mathematical theories that his sister worked with. As such, I have argued that Bobby comes to represent a Gnostic in search of enlightenment. Furthermore, his actions may even be viewed as religious in nature. His mathematical undertakings may be regarded as sacraments, his notebook his bible and his sister his deity.

In the final chapter of this thesis, I present and discuss religious symbology and the unconscious. My findings suggest that McCarthy wrote the character of Alicia as representing the Virgin Mary as well as Christ. This is partly due to numerous symbolisms connected to her corpse, which is detailed on the very first page of *The Passenger*. Among these symbolisms there is the description of Alicia's corpse as resembling that of statues of the Virgin Mary, something the hunter who finds her points out by praying and uttering titles

connected to the Holy Mother. The most obvious hint of Alicia's identity may be found in the title of the second of the two novels, *Stella Maris*. Translated from Latin, this means star of the sea. Our Lady, Star of the Sea is an ancient title given to the Virgin Mary to demonstrate her role as a guide to Jesus, in other words, a guide to salvation. As such, the character Alicia also becomes connotated with the Gnostic understanding of Christ as someone who helps others attain gnosis, as the character posthumously guides Bobby to a higher understanding of the universe.

Alicia's cohort, the Kid, may also be identified as representing the Gnostic Christ. This is due to the entity's supernatural abilities to conjure the dead and know the future and the past. Alicia comes to regard the Kid as a protector and believes that he was sent to her. Similarly, Bobby, who also meets the Kid, describes him as God's mudlark and believes he is an emissary of God. A mudlark is someone who scavenges for things of value in riverbeds and muddy shores. This description connects the Kid to the man of the epilogue of *Blood Meridian* and may be interpreted as symbolizing that the two are identical in nature. They are both versions of the divine revelator whose task is to free the spiritual pneuma from matter. Alicia at one point describes the Kid as having been salvaged himself, from the bleak sea of the incomputable, which may be inferred to mean the material universe. The Gnostic Christ was believed to be someone who himself had to be saved, and Alicia's description of the Kid therefore connects him to the Gnostic Christ.

Another source of inspiration for the character the Kid may have stemmed from the works of Carl Jung. McCarthy was fascinated by dreams and the unconscious, and these things are at the base of Jung's theory of what he called the collective unconscious. According to Jung, there are layers to the unconscious. There is for instance the personal unconscious and there is the deeper, universal collective unconscious. The collective unconscious is not something that is developed over the course of one's life, rather it is inherited, according to Jung. Its purpose is to help the individual. In the collective unconscious, Jung argued that there are certain archetypes, figures that may appear to us and have universal meaning. One such common archetype is the child archetype. This figure oftentimes represents the child god or the young hero. Their purpose is to defeat the beast of darkness that Jung explained resided in the deepest caverns of the psyche. This beast may symbolize truths about us that are difficult, or even impossible, to accept. According to Jung, to truly know who you are you must confront the truth. However, this may be a terrifying experience. One common strategy to deal with this is therefore to ignore the beast, and project the inner conflicts of our psyche

to our surroundings. In the case of Bobby in *The Passenger*, this may be interpreted to be exactly what is happening to him. There may not really be a mysterious conspiracy against him, and the things that happen to him in the novel may not be very mysterious at all. Rather, it only appears as such because Bobby refuses to confront the beast within him that is the guilt he feels over the death of his sister. Bobby is only able to confront his guilt after meeting the Kid, the child archetype, which the collective unconscious has sent to him to triumph over the beast.

McCarthy found inspiration for his novels in what he imagined the world might look like in the near future. McCarthy has stated that *The Road* and the desolate hellscape the novel's protagonists travel through was directly inspired by what he feared the world might come to in 50-100 years. Similarly, the characters in *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris* might be interpreted as a way for McCarthy to express certain fears and anxieties. Alicia for example, may be understood as a representation of fear of a meaningless existence. Another reoccurring theme is a fear of technological advancement and humanity's coexistence with technology in the future. McCarthy asks the reader to consider what a future with sentient artificial intelligence might look like. If such a thing might become possible, where does it go from there? Is it even possible for humanity to coexist with technology, when we struggle to coexist with ourselves? Alicia believes that there are only two options. Either the world ends in flames and nuclear annihilation, or everything becomes simulated, a final abridgement of privilege and a total loss of free will. The world seen through the Gnostics' eyes was exactly this: A simulated reality where one's choices never truly mattered and destiny was preordained by the rulers of fate.

It is not hard to understand why McCarthy's novels resonate with so many people, the fears he writes about are universal and it is difficult to make sense of the world. As I am concluding this thesis, the world continues to be in turmoil. It is commonplace to hear or read about threats of the use of nuclear weapons. There are people suffering and dying meaninglessly. Choices that affect the lives of millions of people are made by tyrannical forces and it may often seem that ordinary people are powerless to oppose these forces. In *The Passenger*, McCarthy writes that there is mass hatred, grief and vengeance in the world but no mass forgiveness. The world of McCarthy's novels is a bleak and depressing one, however, it is realistic. Despite this, McCarthy includes characters and passages in his novel that provide hope. It is as if McCarthy comforts the reader and tells them to remain hopeful that the world one day may change. There are still wanderers on the road to knowledge and a better

understanding of our world. There are still those that work tirelessly to open our minds to the truth and teach us that the notion that our voices do not matter is nothing more than a preconception, instilled in us by those that profit from oppression.

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