The American Novel of the Late Twentieth Century and Religion. *Blood Meridian* by Cormac McCarthy: A Case Study

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Dieser Text bezieht sich auf das Verhältnis von Religion und Literatur am Beispiel des amerikanischen Romans der zweiten Hälfte des 20 Jahrhundert. Ausgehend von der Idee, dass die Erklärung des Wortes Religion in Verbindung mit dem lateinischen Christentum (Derrida) steht, werden sinnvolle Beispiele, besonders aus dem Cormac McCarthys Roman Blood Meridian, verwendet. Man versucht zu beweisen, dass der religiöse Ausdruck im amerikanischen Roman nichts anderes als eine Ausdrucksform des 'American Way' ist.

Stichwörter: Amerikanische Literatur, Religion, Cormac McCarthy

Any discussion involving a parallel between literature and religion should start with a terminological approach. In the case of literature a consensus is rather easy to reach due to the plenitude of definitions brilliantly formulated by renowned masters of the craft, religion does not usual receive special attention because it is currently being used as part of a *lingua franca* of both theologians and artists, including writers and critics. However, there is one approach which is particularly enlightening and which confines the term and its meaning to its "Roman" boundaries.

According to Derrida, the subject of religion can be discussed today in the open only in the light of two approaches he used to cherish so much: Kant's *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1793) and Bergson's *The Two Sources of Morality and of Religion* (1932). The entire Derridean discussion of religion springs from, as he himself admits, the concluding lines of Bergson's *The Two Sources*: "the effort required to accomplish, down to our refractory planet, the essential function of the universe, which is a machine for the making of gods"[1]. Thus, religion functions as a system of dogmas, as belief organized around a hierarchical nucleus only in the presence of the Secret, of a *mysterium tremendum*, and we could argue, as the counterpart of some radical evil that makes goodness possible[2]. This *religion*, at least the term itself, is accepted as a convention by those

[1] qtd. in Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge. The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone", p. 77.

[2] The great capitalized Secret of Christianity is, according to Derrida, the *mysterium tremendum*. The one who trembles does not know why this actually happens; he trembles before a frightening secret; the cause of trembling or of weeping is mysterious, but altogether so intimate.

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who use it as a *Latin* sign for a Judaeo-Christian signified, and, in the main, it is a synonym of *globalatinization* or *mondialatinisation*.

The Latin etymology of the term is of crucial importance to Derrida. In his "Faith and Knowledge" he argues that its Latin origin recommends it as a purely Roman (-Catholic) invention – at least as it is understood today –, deriving from *relegere* (legere), to harvest, to gather, faithful to the Ciceronian tradition (followed by Otto, Hofmann, Benveniste) or *religare* (ligare), to tie, to bind, meaning accepted by Lactantius, Tertullian and Kobbert. On the other hand, given its origins, the term "religion" should be the property of Christianity, of Christians and should be used exclusively by them and only in a Christian context, as it expresses what they understand by "religion": "the history of the word 'religion' should in principle forbid every non-Christian from using the name 'religion,' in order to recognize in it what 'we' would designate, identify and isolate there"[3].

Derrida starts his commentary on the term 'religion' with several suggestions initially presented at the round table in the isle of Capri (1994). The first section of this essay is titled Italics, a choice he explains through a memorable assumption: "To think 'religion' is to think the 'Roman' ", but not in the city of Rome or too far from Rome. There is a strong connection between religion, language and nation: "language and nation form the historical body of all religious passion". This religious passion should not be always interpreted as the synonym of faith, or theology, for faith exists outside of religious constraints: "faith has not always been ad will not always be identifiable with religion, nor, another point, with theology. All sacredness and all holiness are not necessarily, in the strict sense of the term, if there is one, religious"[4].

This logic of a simple principle leads Derrida to the conclusion that "Christianity is the death of God thus announced by Kant to the modernity of the Enlightenment" and the only possible saviors of God would be Judaism and the Islam that still preserve their identity by keeping a distance from the multiplicity of European Christianity (e.g. the concept of Trinity) and thus manage to keep their belief in the One, a single, unique and indivisible God. Derrida's interpretation is convincing up to a single point where, probably because he calls this phenomenon – the return of religions – *globalatinisation* (or *mondialatinisation*, in French) and given his Jewish and western background, fails to integrate Eastern Christianity in

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"What is that makes us tremble in the *mysterium tremendum*? It is the gift of infinite love, the dissymmetry that exists between the divine regard that sees me and myself, who doesn't see what is looking at me; it is the gift and endurance of death that exists in the irreplaceable, the disproportion between the infinite gift and my finitude, responsibility as culpability, sin, salvation, repentance, and sacrifice. (Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, p. 55–56).

[3] Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge. The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone", p. 71–72.

[4] Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge. The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone" p. 45–48.

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his discourse. This "globalatinization [...] is a strange alliance of Christianity, as the experience of the death of God, and tele-technoscientific capitalism"[5].

The issue of multiplicity did not emerge only as the fruit of biased and distant attention received by Christianity from its contenders, secular or not, but also that of the political and social activity of the Roman Catholic Church in addition to its dogmatic approach to Christianity and Christian belief. From a political (the Pope as a political leader and unique representative of God on earth) and dogmatic point of view, Roman-Catholicism managed to conquer the entire world. This is not something that nations such as the Jews or the Muslims (let us remember that Muslims refer to themselves as the Muslim nation) can easily accept. What Derrida, the Arab-Jew from El Biar, probably has in mind is an external (the way in which Christianity is perceived from the outside) and internal (probably with reference to the three persons of the Christian Trinity, of whom the Holy Spirit is lower in rank, proceeding from both the Father and the Son, to the political and social involvement of the church) multiplicity.

Within such context, the alliance between the Roman, western Christianity, as the experience of the death of God, to use Derrida's words, and the tele-technoscientific capitalism of our present time might seem less strange than initially thought. In fact, Derrida's reaction is somewhat similar to the reaction of the other Christian churches to the hegemony of Roman Christianity: the Reformation, through its attempt to define and simplify faith and cult, laying its main focus on the spiritual dimension of religion, and the Eastern Christian Church in its stubbornness of preserving the belief of early-Christianity and attempt to keep out of the reach of the hegemonic pope.

According to Derrida, *globalatinization* or *mondialatinisation* (the French term seems more accurate), is nothing but "a strange alliance of Christianity, as the experience of the death of God, and teletechnoscientific capitalism" and it is "at the same time hegemonic and finite, ultra-powerful and in the process of exhausting itself".[6] The product of this alliance looks similar to the beast in the Book of Revelation which many identify with the united Europe, Rome's offspring or even with the great American empire. In fact, it extends its wings over everything governed by some form of 'Latin' religion (given the etymology of the word, religio, religare, Derrida identifies it with a 'Latin', European, Christian product).

Therefore, this definition of *religion* as the partner of tele-technoscientific capitalism is crucial to understanding the connections between religion/religiosity/faith and the American novel of the late 20th century when globalization or *globalatinization* reached its apex. The revival of religious feeling in the 1960s-America was thus dependent on Christianity, either through alliance or rejection. This trend has been preserved up to the present day.

Amy Hungerford, in her "Religion and the Twentieth-Century American Novel" quotes Will Herberg who, in his *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*, published in

[5] Derrida, "Faith" p. 51-52.
[6] *Ibidem*.

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1955, "described religion in America as a function of wanting to belong to an American way of life". It is true that American culture witnessed a "religious revival" in the 1960s which impacted upon the American novel of the late twentieth century, in which "the very genre was imagined in religious terms that echoed some of the religious thought on display in the so-called 'Age of the Aquarius' "[7].

There is no evidence to support the idea that there was a distinct American view of religion which dominated the American literature of the time: "There is no single American view of religion that has dominated either our culture or our novels. A brief survey of the role of religion in the American novel demonstrates that a wide variety of religious experiences, ideas, values, metaphors, and myths have shaped much of the most significant and most popular examples of the form"[8].

Nevertheless, there are several American authors who engaged in a constant exploration of religion as defined all throughout their work. J. D. Salinger is one of the first American authors of the second half of the 20th century who published a "manifesto on religion," as Amy Hungerford labeled his novella *Franny and Zooey*. In her effort to follow the Russian Orthodox "way of the pilgrim" (see *The Way of the Pilgrim* - 1884) and "pray without ceasing", Franny does not manage to actually know Jesus, as her brother Zooey argues because she forgot what their brothers had taught them. Zooey is sure that acting, performance is the only possible manifestation of the religious. Hungerford identifies in the "mannered prose and relentless dialogue (…) a belief in the human voice as the locus of divine presence. No matter what one is saying, to inhabit such voices fully (as actor or as the writer of fiction) is to be one with the verbal creativity of God"[9].

Language as a ritual form echoed in the works of American writers well into the 1980s. The abandonment of the Latin Mass after the second Vatican Council (1962-1965) left deep marks in the works of American writers, Roman-Catholic or not. For example, a novelist in Don DeLillo's *Mao II* (1991) defines his genre as follows: "The novel used to feed our search for meaning... It was the great secular transcendence. The Latin mass of language, character, occasional new truth"[10].

To DeLillo, fiction is nothing else but religious meditation: "Glossolalia, the Latin mass, small talk, the ritual of conversation or of the sentence: this is how DeLillo imagines fiction as a religious meditation in which language is the final enlightenment. He imagines an enlightenment that consists not in doctrine, but in prayer; not in instruction, but in vision; not in reason, but in rapture; not in

[7] Amy Hungerford, "Religion and the Twentieth-Century American Novel", p. 733, 739.

[8] Alfred Bendixen. "The American Novel. Six Novel Ideas. Crisis of Faith. Religion's Role in the Novel." Web. 9 Nov. 2011. <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americannovel/ideas/crisis_article.html>

[9] Amy Hungerford, "Religion and the Twentieth-Century American Novel", p. 740.

[10] Don DeLillo, *Mao II*, Viking Penguin, New York, p. 72.

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knowledge, but in mystery. [...]DeLillo's religion of language comes home to its pre-Vatican II, Catholic origin"[11].

Perhaps one of the most representative views of religion in the American literature of the late 20th century is Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian or the Evening Redness in the West* (1985). In *Blood Meridian*, the proliferation of radical evil through violence makes the religious happen, but not in the traditional meaning of the word. The characters in the "ultimate Western" of American literature[12] are proselytizes of a "new alliance," their high priest is an archon preaching a religion without religion, a Derridean non-religion that promises redemption through murder and malignant aggression. In the purest Derridean tradition, there is no capitalized Secret attached to this religion, but the secret that there is no secret: "Your heart's desire is to be told some mystery. The mystery is that there is no mystery"[13].

If McCarthy's language has some sort of an Old Testament flavor, his descriptions run like movie clips in beautiful colors, his characters and the theme of the novel seem to be the production of some lunatic genius. Evil invades the scene from the first pages, the same way in which Bulgakov's magician in *The Master and Margarita* turns the world into a stage for the production of a malefic play. He gives violence and evil a Derridean dimension in that he accepts and describes them as natural, ontological attributes of man. His characters wander in the desert, in a *khôral* space where children, women and men dive together in the melting pot of death, where homoerotic acts, terror and genocide are rituals of a 'new alliance,' of a religion without religion.

In Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, violence is not legitimized by religion, but it is a dimension of the religious, it destroys the religious and it keeps it alive. This does not mean that McCarthy views violence and hatred as the attributes of 'religion.' Violence exists in isolation from any dogmatic principle, it has no apparent purpose, no meaning and, if we were to resort to Hecht's approach, this separates it from religion, as a system of belief or organization. What we identify here is something that precedes religion as defined by bible scholars or historians, it is something that Derrida would define as a *khôral* non-religion, it is something that has accompanied the human race since birth: man's need to find an area of subjective power, a space in which he could exert his personal supremacy and display it before the eyes of the world.

Therefore, in Cormac McCarthy's Blood Meridian, violence is deeply rooted in the human nature, and the first encounter with hatred and conflict starts an unstoppable rage against life and the living. Radical evil is not only possible, but easily visible during the violent encounters in the novel, and it institutes the religious as area for the fulfillment of subjective power. One of the central characters, Judge Holden, is the archon, the high priest of a congregation of villains

[11] Amy Hungerford, *Postmodern Belief: American literature and religion since 1960*, p. 75.
[12] Harold Bloom, *Novelists and Novels*, p. 532.
[13] Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, p. 252.

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worshiping the god of war. These characters, as we shall see in the section below, are engaged in a mythical dance of war destined to end only when the mortals assume their ultimate destiny, death. The only one left is Judge Holden, the true dancer: "And yet there will be one there always who is a true dancer and can you guess who that might be? [...] Only that man who has offered up himself entire to the blood of war, who has been to the floor of the pit and seen horror in the round and learned at last that it speaks to his inmost heart, only that man can dance. Even a dumb animal can dance. The judge set the bottle on the bar. Hear me, man, he said. There is room on the stage for one beast and one alone. All others are destined for a night that is eternal and without name. One by one they will step down into the darkness before the footlamps. Bears that dance, bears that don't"[14].

The world of *Blood Meridian* is a world of the Unmediated Sacred and some of the characters actually perceive it as such. It is the planet Anareta, a planet of violent death. The Christian God is absent in this world, His absence being similar to his being replaced by a non-personal, almighty, all-embracing, demonic god: "mindless" violence. His absence is in fact non-existence, the non-existence of a non-religion worshiping a non-god. Worship involves a eucharist of wilderness, an act of communion which replaces the symbolic blood of Christ, with real blood and flesh. The congregation is a group of misfits united under the slogan: "Kill kill"[15].

The characters are themselves renegades from Christianity and humanity: the demonic Judge Holden (the principal antagonist, the Archon), the kid (the protagonist), John Joel Glanton (leader of the scalping gang), Tobin (an ex-priest in the Glanton gang, friend of the kid), Toadvine (an earless criminal in the Glanton gang, friend of the kid), Black Jackson (the only black member of the Glanton gang, hates white Jackson), White Jackson (a white Glanton gang member), David Brown (one of Glanton's lieutenants) and Long Webster.

The Derridean *khôra* receives both the good and the radical evil, but in this receptacle, mother, nurse, all are one, all distinctions, all dualities disappear. Interpreted from a Derridean perspective, the landscape in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian or the Evening Redness in the West* could be understood as a receptacle in which the negative and the positive coexist, in which death and life are identical categories, in which no distinction really matters. This space is totalizing, it facilitates the observance of the non-religious cult of war even by those who ought to oppose it. The ex-priest Tobin refuses to support Holden's ideas about the moral law, but his very presence in the *khôral* desert with the malefic character is enough evidence to his acceptance of all that the Judge preaches: "Ah Priest, said the judge. What could I ask of you that you've not already given?"[16]

This question of a Mephistophelian substance is basically a premonition for the future: organized religion as known in the past is doomed to disappear and another religion will emerge. According to John D. Caputo, the foremost American

[14] *Ibidem*, p. 331.
[15] *Ibidem*, p. 9.
[16] *Ibidem*, p. 251.

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"Continentalist" and interpreter of Derrida: "The absolute secret is not some sort of conditional secret that could be revealed, but the secret that there is no secret, that never was one, not even one"[17]. A secret without a Secret is at the same time a religion without religion, because one can be religious without necessarily subscribing to the creeds, doctrines, principles and dogmas of an organized religion in order to possess a passion for the impossible. Caputo claims that the deconstruction of modernity's scientific certainties – Judge Holden acts like an explorer of the wilderness – and rational dogmas leads not to atheism but to a recuperation or repetition of the pre-metaphysical situation of faith.

In conclusion, this is what the characters in McCarthy's novel preach: a return to a pre-metaphysical situation of faith, preceded by a repudiation of religion as *religare*, through language seen as the ultimate expression of divine presence and through acting, performance, dance of death as acceptance of human condition and true liberation. This is seemingly a picture of American society, one depicted in various and colorful snapshots in the late-twentieth century American novels, in which religion is but a manifestation of a constant longing for the American Way, embodied in a multitude of "experiences, ideas, values, metaphors, and myths"[18].

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[17] John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, p. 109.
[18] See Alfred Bendixen, "The American Novel…".

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