**What is True Grit? Or, True Grit and True Love**

*Charity never faileth. I Cor 13:8*

Charles Portis’s novel *True Grit[[1]](#endnote-1)* belongs squarely in the genre of classic westerns such as *Shane* and *The Virginian* that reflect on the status of morality and of civilization in general in relation to the hard demands of survival on the lawless frontier. At the center of the novel’s plot is the court of a certain Judge Parker, a federal judge stationed in Fort Smith, Arkansas, who, not long after the Civil War, is responsible for somehow containing the lawless violence of the Indian Territory (now Oklahoma) just to the west. critics referred to his court as “the Parker Slaughterhouse,” but he said they did not understand “the bloody conditions in the Territory.” Mattie, our young does not claim to know who is right, but she does know that “sixty-five of his marshals got killed.” (41?)

What is “true grit”? Grit is sand, it is substance; it has weight and solidity. (Stonehill to Mattie: “I admire your sand…” (34)) Reuben (Rooster) Cogburn, the federal marshal who is the hero of our story, once complains that even a man who “has got sand in his craw” is now likely to be pushed aside “little thin fellows that have won spelling bees back home.” (84) Grit is tough, it overcomes, and it seems more admirable than the calculated success of the clever. Mattie will use the word “resolute” to honor Rooster on the headstone she provides for him. Grit is that which stands up, which endures, which prevails against great dangers and difficulties.

But is grit truly good, is it virtuous; does true grit define true human excellence or fulfillment? We value such toughness or grit – when it is on our side, when it serves our interest. But do we truly admire it or love it? Is a person with grit a good person in any whole or complete sense? Stonehill the horse-trader readily acknowledges that Coburn has grit, but adds without any sense of contradiction that “he is a notorious thumper.” [I welcome advice on the meaning of “thumper” here –rch.] (Neither Stonehill nor Mattie would care to share a bed with such a man, we learn.) (91) That its meaning for Mattie has no direct and simple relation to conventional morality, or, for that matter, to a minimal legality, is clear enough already in the famously humorous early exchange with the sheriff in which Mattie selects Rooster as the man for the job. The sheriff describes Rooster as “pitiless, double-tough,” fearless and loving “to pull a cork.” He then recommends a certain Marshall Quinn as not only a good peace officer but also a lay preacher, and one who is scrupulous about staying within the law. This is not a difficult choice for Mattie: “Where can I find this Rooster?” is her terse reply.

**MATTIE**

To grasp the meaning of this charming and engaging narrative, we must keep in mind that the story is told in the voice of the central protagonist, Mattie, but perhaps 45 years after the events, and more than twenty years after Reuben Cogburn had died and been re-buried in Mattie’s family’s plot, when the narrator, who has never married, is well into her sixties.

The amusing deadpan of the account is not that of a young girl, however precocious, but that of an old woman who fancies herself a writer – but who is not about to provide articles gratis to the newspaper even though she “has a little money” (43). This voice of old Mattie the narrator is superimposed on herself as 14 year old girl.

How much of the woman was already in the girl? If the basic facts are to be believed, then we know that she twice shot her father’s killer and lost her left arm just below the elbow to a snakebite in her quest for revenge. Whether or not the aging woman accurately relates the young girl’s highly amusing hard bargaining with the horse trader, or her interaction with Cogburn and Le Boeuf, we know that she was already her family’s accountant (and more, instructing her mother “not to sign anything until I get home” (27)) and that she somehow managed to include herself in the party that set off in pursuit of her father’s killer. As amusing, even charming as we may find old Mattie’s portrayal of young Mattie’s icy and remorseless outlook, it is reasonable and humane to assume that the two have been somewhat assimilated in the older woman’s memory. If she was anywhere near as tough as she is depicted by her older self, then Stonehill was not wrong to call her “an unnatural child.” (37)

As far as we can tell, Mattie is and has always been a no-nonsense Presbyterian, with decidedly Old Testament views of morality who says her daily prayers (67), and is, it appears, a tee-totaler: “I would not put a thief in my mouth to steal my brains.” There is little talk of mercy or forgiveness in Mattie’s pronouncements, and grace figures silently only as the mysterious pre-destination of some to salvation and others to damnation. This is her fullest theological statement: “You must pay for everything in this world one way and another. There is nothing free except the Grace of God. You cannot earn that or deserve it.” Further on she explains that she is now a member of the Southern Presbyterian Church, from which the Cumberland Presbyterians separated “because they did not believe a preacher needed a lot of formal education.” Mattie does not object to that so much as to the fact that the Cumberland branch is “not sound on Election. They do not fully accept it.” Mattie embraces predestination, citing four New Testament passages as evidence, acknowledging that “it is a hard doctrine, running contrary to our earthly ideas of fair play.” (114) Such mysterious saving grace appears sufficiently removed from worldly concerns that it does not much impinge upon Mattie’s spirited quest to avenge her father. Does she simply assume that she is saved and Tom Chaney is damned, despite the doctrine of absolutely unearned grace? Or does she simply separate questions of ultimate salvation from her very worldly moral crusade? Even in her late years Mattie is trying unsuccessfully to publish a magazine article celebrating the justice of Judge Parker, and she shows little interest in any distinction between God’s justice and man’s.[[2]](#endnote-2)

In any case, Mattie seems very satisfied with her Presbyterian Christianity. She quotes scripture with unembarrassed finality to bolster her argument. For example, the story of the devils and the swine in Luke 8:26-23 proves that animals can be evil.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Mattie’s judgments of other human beings have little reference to the universal brotherhood of mankind under the fatherhood of God, and still less to the Christian miracle of forgiveness. She unselfconsciously assumes the superiority of her kind of people – people from her rural community are better than those at Fort Smith, and people from Arkansas are better than people from Texas, Louisiana, or Missouri – not to mention Yankees and Republicans. She seems willing to count political party above seemingly more fundamental allegiances in the case of a prominent fellow Democrat : “I know Governor [Al] Smith is ‘wet’ but that is because of his race and religion and he is not personal accountable for that. I think his first loyalty is to his country and not to ‘the infallible Pope of Rome.’(70) “People who don’t like Arkansas can go to the devil!” she exclaims to Stonehill the horse trader. (38) Still more striking is Mattie’s readiness to classify as “trash” human beings who are not up to her standards in one way or another. She refers to lower types as “trash” – as evidenced (in the case of Tom Chaney) by using a string for a rifle strap instead of fashioning a leather strap. And this status as “trash” can be inherited, since, though “Creeks are good Indians… a Creek-white … or a Creek-Negro is something else again.” (58) When Stonehill recounts the tale of a girl who has just “drowned like fair Ophelia,” and who he had worried might have been Mattie, marveling that “people can bear up and carry on under these repeated blows,” (91) Mattie shows no sympathy at all: “She must have been silly.” And when Rooster tries to impress upon her the morality of compromise (“Other people have got their interests too”), she responds with a cold property-owners idea of justice: “When I have bought and paid for something I will have my way.” (98) Nor is she interested in the Stonehill’s friendly counsel: “The Good Christian is not willful or presumptuous.” (92) A general duty to be our “brother’s keeper” makes its appearance in the story, not to describe Mattie’s own behavior or her aspirations, but only to explain her father’s fatal decision to involve himself in Tom Chaney’s business (16). Her stern moralism seems to be tested for a moment when gang leader Ned Pepper exclaims “Christmas gift!” upon opening a bag of loot, which causes Mattie to see the robber in a different light: “I had not thought before of this disfigured robber having had a childhood.” But any human sympathy she quickly translates into a moral platitude: “I expect he was mean to cats and made rude noises in church when he was not asleep. When he needed a firm restraining hand, it was not there. An old story!” (193)

Mattie clearly values true grit instrumentally in view of her own purpose. And what is Mattie’s purpose? She is nothing if not single-minded, and her sole purpose is avenge her father’s murder with the blood of his killer – and she is ready (if not indeed eager) to kill Tom Chaney herself “if the law fails to do so.” (60) To be sure, there is justice in Mattie’s cause, but there is nothing abstract or civic-minded about her motives: “I want him to know he is being punished for killing my father. It is nothing to me how many dogs and fat men he killed in Texas.” (97) And simply ending Chaney’s mortal existence does not meet Mattie’s idea of justice: “I would not rest easy until that Louisiana cur was roasting and screaming in hell! (24) So much for any possibility of divine mercy. When she says she is about her “father’s business” (27), this has little to do with saving sinner through the power of forgiveness. Nor is Chaney the only object of her wrath. When she is angry with Rooster for being ready to back out on their deal, she mutters that she “would have Lawyer Daggett skin Rooster Cogburn and nail his verminous hide to the wall.”

Mattie’s readiness to pass definitive judgment on others does give way to pity for the suffering sinner in some cases. She “felt sorry” for Moon (a young member of Ned Pepper’scriminal gang) as he suffers from a gunshot wound in his leg. And she is moved by the hanging of three convicts in Fort Smith, although she is first drawn by the same vulgar curiosity that seems to attract the rest of the crowd – not to mention the Mexican “hot tamales.” As in the crucifixion scene in the Bible, there are three men to be executed: one who is unrepentant (“I see men out there in that crowd that is worse than me”), one who is morally remorseful, and less concerned about himself than about his “wife and two dear little boys,” and about the moral instruction of the rising generation. (22) Most strikingly, in the middle (in the order of hanging) is an Indian who speaks pure words of Christian holiness: “I have repented of my sins and soon I will be in heaven with Christ my savior. Now I must die like a man.” (21) Mattie does not shed tears over the holy Indian, as she will for the morally remorseful white man (22), since she confesses she still “thinks(s) of Indians as heathens.” But she is reflective and self-critical enough to note that Christ promised a place “in heaven” to the unbaptized thief on the cross, and to confess that “there is no knowing what is in a man’s heart.” (232) Mattie claims to want to see everything (22); “I have never been one to flinch or crawfish when faced with an unpleasant task”(24) she will soon remark, a propos of the identification of her father’s corpse -- as if her natural vision were adequate to the horror of death and the mystery of life. But, like the rest of the crowd, turned away in revulsion when the Indian failed to die immediately from the hanging and suffered in jerks and spasms for a half an hour.[[4]](#endnote-4)

To be sure, Mattie is at times aware of her limitations as a Christian. She recognizes her father as her superior. Frank Ross “was the gentlest, most honorable man who ever lived.” (12)

Stonehill freely offers his praise: “your father impressed me with his manly qualities” (33) He was a “Cumberland Presbyterian” with only a common school education (and thus perhaps of doubtful orthodoxy on the question of predestination). Frank was “A handsome sight” mounted on his horse Judy “in his brown woolen coat and black Sunday hat.” “I did not get my mean streak from him,” Mattie confesses. Strikingly, she compares her mother and herself to Mary and Martha; whereas Mattie is “troubled by the cares of the day,” it is her mother who “had chosen ‘that good part.” (15)

There is one moment when Mattie seems to put in question her cut-and-dried theology of otherworldly grace and worldly self-assured moralism. This is when she notices that Judge Parker was said to have become a Catholic (like his wife) on his deathbed. “If you had sentenced one hundred and sixty men to death and seen around eighty of them swing, then maybe at the last minute you would feel the need of some stronger medicine than the Methodists could make.”[[5]](#endnote-5) In what sense, precisely, is Catholicism “stronger stuff” than Methodism – and where would Mattie’s own Presbyterianism stand on this continuum of religious “strength”? As Mattie says, “It is something to think about.”

What Mattie seems to imply, no doubt without fully grasping what is at stake, is that Judge Parker needed something more than her Presbyterian[[6]](#endnote-6) combination of moralism (which, as we will see, is always tainted by love of one’s own, by a self-interested distinction between friends and enemies) and an abstract and inhuman doctrine of predestinated grace. He needed the real presence of a loving and forgiving God in an at least partly visible Church.

**ROOSTER**

When Stonehill informs Mattie of reports that Rooster “rode by the light of the moon with Quantrill (a notoriously ruthless confederate guerrilla captain who led a murderous raid on Lawrence, Kansas[[7]](#endnote-7)) and Bloody Bill Anderson” and that “he was *particeps criminis* in some road-agent work” before taking his present job, Mattie is undeterred: “He is to be paid when the job is done.”

Later, when Rooster and Mattie are waiting along together in the dark to ambush the gang, Mattie learns more about Rooster’s past, and what she learns is not edifying. At the end of the war, after leaving Quantrill’s band, which included Frank and maybe Jessie James, Rooster had sworn an oath to “the government in Washington city” (142), but then, while on a one-day parole, to avoid being apprehended by the Yankees as “a bushwhacker,” and without a penny to his name, he and another fugitive had “relieved [a Federal captain and three soldiers] of over four thousand in coin.” Rooster’s excuse for this robbery is amusing: “They squealed like it was their own. It didn’t belong to nobody but the Government and we needed a road stake.” (142) Later he explains: “I didn’t look on it as stealing…. It never troubled me in that way. I sleep like a baby. Have for years.” (144)

Rooster’s “true grit” certainly includes physical courage, though Aristotle might see his disposition as tipping considerably towards the extreme of recklessness. This extreme or reckless physical courage is exhibited in the twin actions that seem to exhibit the essence of Rooster’s grit, the first recounted to Mattie from his past, and the second witnessed by her at the apparent climax of the narrative:

1. When the posse had thinned down to about seven men I turned Bo around and taken the reins in my teeth and rode right at them boys firing them two navy sixes I carry on my saddle. I guess they was all married men who loved their families as they scattered and run for home.
2. Rooster said [to Ned Pepper], “Fill your hand, you son of a bitch!” and he took the reins in his teeth and pulled the other saddle revolver and drove his spurs into the flanks of his strong horse Bo and charged directly at the bandits. It was a sight to see. He held the revolvers wide on either side of the head of his plunging steed. The four bandits accepted the challenge and they likewise pulled their arms and charged their ponies ahead. / It was some daring move on the part of the deputy marshal whose manliness and grit I had doubted. No grit? Rooster Cogburn? *Not much!*

And this was not the last of Rooster’s robberies. Once again “in need of a road stake,” he “robbed one of them little high-interest banks there.” Again, his conscience is as clear as can be: “You can’t rob a thief, can you? I never robbed no citizens. I never taken a man’s watch.” (144)[[8]](#endnote-8)

Mattie cannot accept such rationalizations. “It is all stealing,” she says. And yet, she is not particularly inclined to condemn Rooster. This is no doubt in large part because, if he is a robber, she is now *her* robber, serving her purposes. But there are other reasons to sympathize with and to excuse Rooster, as we readers are inclined to do. First, there is a certain residual decency in his limitation of victims to abstract entities (the Washington government, high-interest banks), his sparing of concrete individuals. Moreover, although Rooster takes certain liberties with his expense vouchers, and does not scruple to make personal use of confiscated liquor or the traps of outlaws he has killed, Mattie notes that “he did not touch one cent of the money that was stolen at gunpoint from the passengers of the Katy Flyer.” (165)

More profoundly, we can sympathize with Rooster because we can understand that his lawlessness was born of the lawlessness of civil war. To what degree Rooster was involved in the worst outrages of war, violations of the laws of “civilized” warfare, we do not know; but it is likely he was a young man caught up in horrible and extreme circumstances for which he had no moral preparation. Wounded by LaBoeuf’s accusations concerning his participation in Quantrill’s depredations, the at least half-drunk Rooser will mutter “Well, we done the best we could with what we had. We was in a war. All we had was revolvers and horses.” (171) Whereas the younger LaBoeuf, who was able to serve only six months in the army of the Confederacy, tends to romanticize warfare (“I was almost sick when I heard of the surrender”) (157), Rooster cannot even remember, or does not care to remember, just where he served or in what regiment. (157) We might well judge that he should have embraced the laws of peacetime from the moment the war ended, but it seems that option was not really available to him. We, and Mattie, may not approve, but we can understand that the war never really ended for Rooster. So fuzzy are the lines between legitimate and lawless violence that, when Rooster eventually puts his grit in the service of the law, he is commissioned as deputy marshal by Potter, another past member of Quantrill’s band and Rooster’s first partner in post-war crime. (146)

Rooster’s career illustrates the fragility of the distinction between law and lawlessness, and thus between virtue and vice. It compels us to consider whether Augustine was right that, short of the City of God, human societies are nothing but criminal bands, and whether natural, political virtue (untouched by grace) is much superior to the honor that may obtain among thieves. It is not obvious that Rooster’s virtue is superior to that of some of the criminals he is hunting. Moon gives this description of his fellow gang-member Quincy: he “hated all the laws but he was true to his friends.” (134)[[9]](#endnote-9)

Rooster has proven capable of being ruthless (he has no problem shooting his enemies in the back) (137), but he has no patience for gratuitous cruelty. When he finds two boys sitting on a porch laughing at the suffering of a helpless mule who is being choked by a rope that has shrunk, he cuts the rope and kicks both boys into the mud, and then kicks them into the mud again on his way out, with a stern warning of a dreadful and supernatural punishment if they did not mend their ways. (114, 116) Is this his reduction of religion?

Rooster’s life is a chaotic mess; it is mostly spent more on the wrong side of the law, or in a relationship to the law that is at best ambiguous. Rooster’s career as Marshal Cogburn is a brief episode of his life. His life is a failure, one can suppose, largely because of his failure in love. His first wife, who tried without any success to make a lawyer of him, left him to return to her first husband, with these words: “Goodbye, Reuben, a love for decency does not abide in you.” (Reuben’s commentary: “There is your divorced woman talking about decency.”) (143) He lost his son, too, the “clumsy” (according to his father) Horace. Sadly, Reuben reports that “he never did like me anyhow. I guess I did speak awful rough to him but I didn’t mean nothing by it.” Later, after the main adventure of the book, he takes up with the widow of his longtime partner in crime, and then in law enforcement, Mrs. Potter, who has six children, and eventually marries her. But this does not last either.

If “true grit” is the virtue of a whole human being, Reuben Cogburn falls very short indeed of this standard.

**TOM CHANEY** bears a black mark on his face “like banished Cain.” (76) His evil disposition appears inseparable from his self-pity: “Nothing has gone right for me … Everything is against me,” he complains after Mattie has shot him. (179)[[10]](#endnote-10) Mattie observes: “That was his cur nature, to change from a whining baby to a vicious bully as circumstances permitted.” (180) We are reminded of Cain’s anger and resentment at the Lord’s preference for Adam’s offering over his own. (Genesis 4:3-7) Chaney’s alternation between whining and cruelty contrasts with the relative constancy of Rooster’s true grit. Rooster has known his share of misfortune, but he does not indulge in “womanly” self-pity, faces death with equanimity, and maintains certain standards of decency even in crime.

Ned Pepper is cruel, but he does not whine. Unlike Tom Chaney, traces of decency remain in his character. Stonehill, the forlorn horse trader whines, but he is not cruel. In fact he seems a very honorable fellow, whose character is marred by certain self-pity.

**LA BOEUF r**epresents honor and civilization. Whereas Mattie imagines vengeance can be righteous, he imagines war (and human-hunting) can be simply honorable. He is proud of his dress, his guns, his status as a Texas Ranger. He thinks of war as honorable and wishes he could have fought longer. He begins to descend into cruelty when he is frustrated by Mattie; there may be a sexual dimension to this cruelty. His awareness of harsh necessity and thus his self-knowledge are perhaps inferior to the seasoned Rooster. He shows plenty of raw grit (not to mention skill as a marksman) which contributes critically to Mattie’s success and survival.

**MATTIE AND ROOSTER**

Mattie’s single-minded interest in Rooster’s unscrupulous effectiveness seems to suggest that for her “true grit” is practically identical with whatever it takes to get the job done, with the surest means to a person’s ends, whatever those ends might be. Is Mattie’s idea of what is admirable in a man reducible to sheer instrumentality relative to the end she has in mind? Mattie is not more scrupulous than Rooster, for example, regarding the veracity of the expense vouchers she helps him complete. (88)

Rooster shows signs of affection for Mattie from early on, referring to her as “little sister” and averring “I would hate to see anything happen to her.” (99) He at first allows LaBoeuf to whip Mattie with a willow limb, but puts an end to the action when Mattie appeals to him, recognizing that there is no deterring her: “That will do,” he tells LaBoeuf. “Get on your horse.” (110)

There is some rivalry between the two men (Rooster and LaBoeuf) for Mattie’s esteem and affection. The younger LaBoeuf at first shows some sexual interest in Mattie (he thinks of kissing her), but of course Mattie makes it clear that is going nowhere. LaBoeuf accuses Rooster of being wrapped around the girl’s finger, which seems an exaggeration, but not groundless. When Mattie has finally imposed herself as an irrepressible member of the search party,[[11]](#endnote-11) and Rooster informs some curious gang members “she is with me,” LaBoeuf replies, “she is with both of us.” When Mattie is attending to the Texan’s wound, Rooster, apparently jealous of her attention, tells her to go make coffee, to which she replies, “Why are you being so silly?” (153) -- perhaps her most tender words in the whole account.

Disgusted by Rooster’s drunken carelessness, and doubting his competence for the job she is paying him to do, Mattie denies to Ned Pepper that Rooster is her friend. (189) When she realizes that it is the drunken Marshall’s mistake that has led them “into the robbers’ lair,” (189) and believes that Rooster and LaBoeuf have ridden off and abandoned her, she concludes that Rooster does not have grit after all. (190)

Above I referred to Rooster’s display of courage in defeating the four bandits in open battle as the “apparent climax” of the book. On reflection, the true high point of the story is certainly Rooster’s saving Mattie’s life by doing whatever necessary to get her to Dr. Medill way back in Fort Smith.[[12]](#endnote-12) First the two of them mount the noble pony Blackie, whom Rooster must drive to its death, even cutting him and rubbing salt in the wounds to force the last steps out of him. When the pony finally expires, Rooster, a man who is well past his prime and rather fat, puts the girl on his back and runs or jogs an untold distance, eventually carrying the girl in his arms as the sweat pours down his face, and then commandeering a wagon and a team of mules at gunpoint, before finally finding a buggy pulled by fast horses to complete the journey.

One might well imagine that Rooster could have met the same fate as Blackie in his struggle to save Mattie’s life. Blackie, the humble but gritty and true pony, is the Christ-figure in the book, “the stone which the builders rejected;” who finally pulls Mattie from the hellish, snake-filled pit and then is ridden to his death to save her life. Mattie’s rescue from the pit brings together the combined efforts of Rooster, who descends into the pit, that snake-infested hell where the damned Chaney has fallen, and LaBoeuf, who despite severe injuries is pulling on the rope from above. But these human efforts are not enough without the decisive aid of the blessed pony, Blackie -- the fore-ordained antidote, perhaps, to the evil of the black-marked Chaney.

Rooster, for one brief episode of his life, is an imitator of Christ, ready to lay down his life to save his Little Sister. But Mattie recounts this ordeal (during which she was often unconscious or semi-conscious) without much embellishment or commentary. Certainly, in describing what is in fact Rooster’s most heroic act, she never returns to the language of “true grit,” but simply relates the bare facts of the journey as she does the final financial accounting relating to Rooster’s services. As far as can be gathered from Mattie’s own argument, then, there is no truer grit than the physical courage Rooster displayed in routing the four bandits. Mattie is not consciously open to the true love behind Rooster’s true grit. Mattie’s life is in its own way as mutilated as Rooster’s, and perhaps more barren.

But Mattie’s action in bringing Rooster to be buried in her family plot, where, presumably, she would one day lie down beside him, suggest a deeper connection and another kind of grit. Mattie’s brother Frank has somehow already long ago understood that Rooster was the love of her life, or, let’s say, the image of the love that her life lacked: “Frank had teased me and chaffed me over the years about Rooster, making out that he was my secret ‘sweetheart.’” (221) Love, alas, is barely present in her actual life. People “say I love nothing but money and the Presbyterian Church and that is why I never married,” Mattie avers. And she doesn’t really contradict them, or even comment on the ordering of these two great “loves.” As in Flannery O’Connor’s fiction, the redemptive power of love appears here mostly by its absence, or as a precious flicker of light against a desolate and dark background.

**POLITICS AND GRACE; GRIT AND LOVE**

Rooster and Mattie are the absent love of each other’s life, and her burial of him beside her future grave is a sacrament honoring the possibility of this love. The absent LaBoeuf (whom Mattie never sees again after his critical role in rescuing her from the pit) perhaps represents the life of honor that seeks space between grace and necessity. In Portis’s story, the possibility of pure and enduring love may grace life, but without being able to direct it, to transform it in the here and now, to guide the formation of a community not riven by the polarity between brutal necessity and abstract grace. A community in which true human grit is knowingly, publicly open to the grace of true love would seem to require some “stronger stuff” than is available, at least on this frontier.

The merely fleeting communion between true grit and true love is a tragedy. If by some grace (not necessarily predestinated) we are able to partake of their ultimate communion, then we become participants in the one true comedy that somehow encompasses without simply erasing the human tragedy in which grit and love are necessarily at odds. It may be this divine comedy that resonates beyond the laughter evoked by the affectionate but very sober realism of True Grit.

1. Simon & Schuster 1968. I am quoting page numbers as they appear in the Kindle edition. Later I hope to consider the two film versions as well. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. This is the rather extravagant *title* of Mattie’s still unpublished article: “*You will now listen to the sentence of the law, Odus Wharton, which is that you be hanged by the neck until you are dead, dead, dead! May God, whose laws you have broken and before whose dread tribunal you must appear, have mercy on your soul. Being a personal recollection of Isaac C. Parker, the famous Border Judge.”* The emphatic “dead, dead, dead” seems more sincere than the reference to “mercy.” [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Here are the other direct references to scripture I have noted: The reference to Mary and Martha (15); “The wicked flee when none pursueth.” (17) John 16 (“I have overcome the world.”) -- Preached by Mr. Hardy at father’s funeral -- much to Mattie’s displeasure: “Knowing the Gospel and preaching it are two different things.” (79) “The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner.” – refers to the poney Blackie’s decisive role in saving her life by pulling her from the pit. (214) [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Later she confesses she “could not bear to look at” a mere boy, dead with his mouth open, who had been killed in the ambush on the gang’s shack. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Later she notes that “those Slovak people that came in her a few years ago to cut barrel staves” often stayed and made “good citizens. People from those countries are usually Catholics if they are anything. They love candles and beads.”(126) [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. It should be clear this implies no global assessment of Presbyterianism. For my reflections on the underlying problem of Calvinist transcendence, see my *Calvin and the Foundations of Modern Politics*. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Rooster denies the rumor that “they murdered women and children at Lawrence, Kansas.” But he does not deny “they shot down soldiers and civilians alike and burned the town.” (158) [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. The gang of bandits our threesome is hunting imposed no such limit on itself, but robbed individual passengers at gunpoint. (155) Rooster also recounts an incident in which he shot a man (“the ball just skinned his head and he bit his pipe in two”) for arrogantly refusing to help pull some steers out of the mud. “It was not the thing to do,” he acknowledges, but as usual is ready with what he considers an excuse: “but I was wore out and hadn’t had no coffee.” (146) [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Moon, who is dying in agony from wounds inflicted by Quincy, is somehow disposed to credit him with a fellow thief’s honor: “Quincy was always square with me. He never played me false until he killed me.” (135) He expects to meet his brother, and maybe Quincy too, “walking the streets of Glory.” Mattie says nothing to contradict this expectation. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. When Ned, his boss, makes him stay behind at the gang’s camp with Mattie while the others ride off, he repeats his emblematic complaint: “Everything is against me.” (192) Again he repeats the mantra when apprehended by LaBoeuf. (199) [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Still Rooster makes another attempt (166-as surely was his duty), after the ambush at the bandits’ hut, to trick Mattie into taking a nap so they can leave her behind, and then he attempts once more to persuade her to stay behind -- but this time it is LaBoeuf who, no doubt foolishly, argues “she has won her spurs.” (167) [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. The Coen Brother’s dramatization of this episode is certainly a strong feature of their version of the story. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)