The Cormac McCarthy Journal

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^{*}Editorial note: the pagination of the Vintage paperback edition of *The Road* is slightly different from that of the hardcover Alfred A. Knopf edition. Please check the 'works cited' for each article to determine which one the author is using.

Editor's Notes John Cant

Tolume 5 of the Society's *Journal* was devoted to Cormac McCarthy's ninth novel, *No Country for Old Men*. How many of us would have wagered, Holden style, that the author would, in the next two years, have this work turned into a film, have a play performed in both Chicago and New York, publish the text of this play and a tenth novel, win the Pulitzer Prize and be interviewed on television by Oprah Winfrey? Perhaps the least surprising aspect of these events has been the general acclaim that has greeted *The Road* in the USA. No surprise either that the University of Tennessee in Knoxville should choose to host its first conference on Cormac McCarthy following the appearance of *The Road*. This issue of the journal features a number of the papers delivered at the conference. Jay Ellis was asked to give the keynote address and this is published as spoken, since it is exactly that, an "address" rather than a paper. Other contributions have been edited, but only to transform them into articles, the distinction being largely a matter of presentation. Dianne Luce has contributed two items not presented at the conference, one of which is an overview of McCarthy's latest "progress," together with brief outlines of the conference papers.

Although this issue is ostensibly devoted to considerations of *The Road*, the book commanding attention on an international scale and seeming to occupy a more significant place in McCarthy's oeuvre than *The Sunset Limited*, it seemed to me appropriate to pay attention to the latter work also; others clearly shared this view since several contributors mention both. Dianne Luce offered to reprint her review of the play here and I was glad to accept.

Further articles came from regular contributors Linda Woodson and John Vanderheide. I was hoping to arrange the journal's contents in an order that would reflect a sense of continuity or development in the ideas expressed. Needless to say this proved to be impossible, not because the contents lack cohesion--they are all focused on the same work(s) after all--but because our contributors represent such an enormously wide range of points of view and fields of expertise. There is nothing surprising in that of course, but what is truly astonishing is that they are all able to demonstrate convincingly that all their tropes, images and ideas are to be found in McCarthy's text in ways which make one sure that he is aware of them himself, that they are not unconscious influences. From Job to Schopenhauer and Derrida, from the Christian mystics to Steinbeck and Ford, from the 'locomotive' imagery of death to the painterly imagery of still life, McCarthy seems to know and revere them all. What other living writer displays such erudition?

Place and landscape is of prime significance in all McCarthy's work: this seems especially so in the case of *The Road*. For anyone familiar with his

literary "journey," the question of the location of this particular road is, I believe, fundamental. Is the sense of "return" that so many find here justified? It is for this reason that I have placed Wesley Morgan's piece on "Route and Roots" early in the sequence, since I am sure that it answers the above question in the affirmative.

A little noted aspect of McCarthy's novels lies in the fact that each new work is different in form from any that has gone before. Further work is promised and eagerly awaited. What form will it take? Debate is certain to ensue and the journal will seek to reflect it. McCarthy's work has always been a "matter of life and death." His importance grows as our culture faces this, the eternal question, in more urgent ways as each year passes.

Beyond the Border: Cormac McCarthy in the New Millennium

Dianne C. Luce

n April of 2007, a group of Cormac McCarthy readers and scholars came together in his hometown, Knoxville, Tennessee, to share their perspectives on his work as it has been evolving in this decade and its continuities with his earlier writing. Hosted by the University of Tennessee and coordinated by Chris Walsh, visiting lecturer from Great Britain, the conference bore the title "The Road Home, McCarthy's Imaginative Return to the South." With that sense of urgency that possesses many long-time readers of McCarthy's novels, most presenters chose to focus on his newest work: the widely reviewed novel *The Road* and the stage play *The Sunset Limited*, largely ignored in the press. The conference thus comprised some of the first scholarly responses to these two important products of McCarthy's seventies and remains the most extensive collaborative treatment of them. (A significant follow-up took place in the two McCarthy sessions of the American Literature Association's convention in Boston in May.) The online proceedings preserve the Knoxville conference papers, which point significant new directions for McCarthy studies, and the vibrant discussions that followed.

In different ways, The Road and The Sunset Limited, both published in 2006, are startling works. Together with No Country for Old Men (2005), they proclaim McCarthy's quenchless creative energy and the variety in which that creativity is manifesting itself, from the genre-bending noir western, to the existentialist life-and-death debate, to the disturbingly realistic contemplation of the loss of the world in a future that reinscribes the terrain of McCarthy's personal and writerly beginnings. In the final decade of the last century, the publication of the Border Trilogy, together with Knopf's concerted efforts to enhance McCarthy's recognition, resulted in his belated acknowledgement in the popular press as one of America's foremost living writers. (McCarthy's earlier novels, published under the Random House imprint, had each sold fewer than 2,600 copies [Tabor]). However, after the ambitious labor of the Trilogy reached its slow culmination with the publication of Cities of the Plain in 1998, many readers (certainly many reviewers) saw him as writing in a western niche. In the seven-year interval between Cities of the Plain and No Country for Old Men, some had also begun to wonder whether he would close the book on his writing career. But scholars knew that there was still the "New Orleans novel" in the works, and when Richard Woodward interviewed McCarthy in 2005 for *Vanity Fair*, we learned that there were as many as four or five novels underway, even while McCarthy was intensely engaged with the various intellectual activities of the Santa Fe Institute, where he has been

an "unsalaried" fellow since 2001 (Woodward 100, 104). It was not surprising to read that McCarthy was working on several projects concurrently; this has been his practice from the beginning. What is intriguing is the revelation that the two most recent novels have been produced in short creative explosions: McCarthy told Woodward he had written *No Country* in "about six months" (103), and he told Oprah Winfrey that *The Road* was composed in just a few weeks after a four-year gestation period when it lay percolating in his subconscious (McCarthy).

No Country for Old Men was published July 19, 2005, in a first printing of 147,000 copies (*Publishers Weekly*; Maryles, "Hardcover"). By August 1, it appeared on the *Publishers Weekly* hardcover fiction bestseller list, ranked at nine, and it stayed on the list for five weeks, rising to the rank of sixth in three of those weeks (*Publishers Weekly*). It was reviewed extensively and for the most part favorably in the U.S. and Great Britain. The novel made the short list for South Africa's Boeke prize, but when the award was announced in late September 2007, it went to Australian Markus Zusak for *The Book Thief* (Rossouw).

Consistent with its genre-appeal, film rights to *No Country for Old Men* were staked–even before the novel's publication–by producer Scott Rudin, who also owns the film rights to *Blood Meridian* (Woodward 103; "Paramount"). With screenplay and direction by Joel and Ethan Coen, the film features Tommy Lee Jones (Sheriff Ed Tom Bell), Josh Brolin (Llewelyn Moss), and Javier Bardem (Anton Chigurh). It won early acclaim at the 2007 Cannes Film Festival, where it was nominated for the Golden Palm Award. It was a "Special Presentation" at the Toronto International Film Festival on September 8 and 10 (*Toronto International Film Festival '07*) and screened as the "Centerpiece" of the New York Film Festival on October 6 (*The New York Film Festival—Film Society of Lincoln Center*). The film's general release to U.S. theaters occurred November 21, 2007 (*Internet Movie Database*).

By other measures, *The Sunset Limited* has also been received well. Long-time scholars and readers of McCarthy had no idea that this play existed until Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre Company announced it for its 2005-2006 season. It played in Steppenwolf's Garage Theatre from May 18 through June 25, 2006. McCarthy's agency had offered the play to Steppenwolf about six months earlier, and director Sheldon Patinkin has said that it was written about the same time as *The Road* (McBride, par. 8), which would place its composition in about 2004. It was attractive to the theatre because they were already set to stage a new play by novelist Don DeLillo, *Love-Lies-Bleeding*, in that season (Patinkin). (The theatre's artistic director, Martha Lavey, introduced DeLillo to McCarthy some time that spring [Lavey, "Our Success," par. 3]). Lavey thought the role of White would be a good match for resident actor Austin Pendleton, and Pendleton himself had already read and been "stunned by"

Suttree and Blood Meridian. His response to The Sunset Limited was that "you'd think it was his 16th play, at least. The dramatic sense in it is at once traditional and frighteningly original....[I]t's a mountain I'm very excited to have been asked to try to climb Cormac McCarthy is just a gorgeous writer, that's all" (Pendleton, "Pendleton on McCarthy," par. 3, 6).

McCarthy agreed to work with the director and the two-man cast (Freeman Coffey had signed on to play the role of Black) as they prepared the production. The writer was in Chicago in spring 2006, arriving for the first table-reading on April 25th and staying on for a week and a half, consulting and rewriting. He was there again for the week of dress rehearsals and prereview performances in late May (New, par. 1-2; Patinkin). Patinkin found McCarthy "a delight to work with He gave the lie to my own oft-stated maxim, speaking as a director, that the only good playwright is a dead one! . . . At first he was resistant to rewrites but then he realised he had less experience of theatre than we did and he did some major re-writes before rehearsals began. He was very open and very interested in the whole process" (McBride, par. 13-14).

In late June 2006, there were no plans to stage the play again, and no bids for filming it that Patinkin was aware of. But shortly after that, the play was slated for production at the 59E59 Theaters in Manhattan, with the same director, cast and crew. Rehearsals began on October 19, and the play ran there from October 24 through November 19, 2006 (Lavey, "Productions," par.2). According to Austin Pendleton, there were some significant changes in the staging of this production—changes that the actors and director initially found risky. In April, McCarthy had asked them to perform the entire play "seated at a kitchen table, talking." Patinkin and the actors had been very reluctant to stage it in such a static way, and they had built in considerable physical activity within the tiny corner set. But Pendleton writes that they were "haunted by his [McCarthy's] original suggestion. So when we came back together again for a week in Chicago to rehearse it . . . for this New York run we found ourselves eliminating much of that movement and finally eliminating all of it, except for the two or three specific times that Cormac calls for it in the script. And it works! . . . Even apart from the thrill of doing this play again, with this group of people, there is a thrill to finding something about the power of stillness that I hope won't ever fully leave my awareness" (Pendleton, "Austin in New York," par. 2). Both Austin and Patinkin felt that the play was well received, and building on the successes of Chicago and New York, their Sunset Limited moved to the Galway Arts Festival in Ireland in summer 2007, playing at the Town Hall Theatre July 16-21. (McBride, par. 16; Pendleton, "Austin in New York").

Meanwhile, *The Road* was published on September 26, 2006, a month before *The Sunset Limited* opened in New York ("Calendar"). McCarthy told

Winfrey, "It's interesting because usually you don't know where a book comes from. . . . It's just there, some kind of an itch that you can't quite scratch." But The Road had its genesis in a very specific moment, when McCarthy had checked into an old hotel in El Paso with his young son, John (probably soon after their relocation to Santa Fe, perhaps not long after September 11, 2001), and stood looking at the still city at two or three in the morning from the window of their room, hearing the lonesome sound of trains and imagining what El Paso "might look like in fifty or a hundred years." "I just had this image of these fires up on the hill and everything being laid waste and I thought a lot about my little boy. And so I wrote those pages and that was the end of it." At the time, he did not think of this as the germ of a novel, but perhaps "two pages" to be worked into another novel. This image of a wasted El Paso seems to have been fixed in his memory in conjunction with that of his small boy sleeping in the bed behind him—an image of paternal care, the father standing guard between his son and the world outside, between his son and a future that implied the loss of the world of the father's memory. Then a few years later, in Ireland, he "woke up one morning and . . . realized" that it was indeed a novel, "and that it was about that man and that little boy" (McCarthy). This likely places the early stages of composition of *The Road* in summer 2004, when McCarthy spent six productive weeks writing in Ireland, according to Woodward (104). In the writing process, the emotional grounding of the novel, the city of the father's past, which he and his son travel through and away from, mutated from El Paso to Knoxville, the town of McCarthy's own boyhood.

Knopf ran a first printing of 250,000 copies, and *The Road* was also a Book-of-the-Month Club main selection. The novel hit the *Publishers Weekly* hardcover fiction bestseller list at number two on October 9, 2006, and remained on the list, gradually declining in rank, for six weeks (*Publishers Weekly*). That fall, producers Nick Wechsler and Steve and Paula Mae Schwartz acquired film rights to *The Road*. John Hillcoat ("The Proposition") has signed on as director, and the novel has been adapted for screen by Joe Penhall ("Enduring Love," "The Long Firm") (Fleming). By September 2007, negotiations were underway with Viggo Mortensen to play the role of the father and with Dimension Films for North American distribution rights (Beggy and Shanahan). Later in the fall, Mortensen signed for the lead role (*Internet Movie Database*). Steve Schwartz commented, "All of the players understand that we're stewards of a masterpiece. . . . We're taking this very seriously" (Beggy and Shanahan). Shooting began in March 2008.

The Sunset Limited was published by Vintage International in January 2007, three months after *The Road*, to almost no critical notice in the popular press. In the same month *The Road* was nominated for a National Book Critics Circle Award ("Book Critics"), but in March, Kiran Desai won the award for *The Inheritance of Loss (National Book Critics Circle Award)*. By March 29,

when Oprah Winfrey announced that *The Road* would be her book club's next selection, the novel had sold 138,000 copies by Nielsen BookScan figures (Van Gelder, "Arts"). The next week, McCarthy was nominated for the \$135,000 International Impac Dublin Literary Award (Van Gelder, "Impac")—although in May his novel was edged out by Per Petterson's *Out Stealing Horses (Impac Dublin Award*, par. 1). On April 16, however, the announcement came that *The Road* had won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction (Rich E1). On August 25 it received Edinburgh University's James Tait Black Memorial Prize for fiction, the most long-standing literary award in Great Britain ("Another Prize"). And in September it was announced that on October 22 McCarthy would receive the Quill Award in the general fiction category for *The Road*. Editors of *Publishers Weekly* nominated books for the award, and 5,000 booksellers and librarians cast the votes ("McCarthy, Gore").

The publication of the trade paperback was moved up from its previously planned release date in September 2007 to take advantage of the recognition The Road was receiving. Vintage published a printing of 950,000 copies in April, and only a little more than a week after Oprah Winfrey's announcement, on April 9, the trade paperback hit number one in its very first week on the Publishers Weekly bestseller list (Maryles, "Paperback"), remaining at the top for six weeks. It dropped to number five by the first two weeks in June, then popped back up to number one in the rankings on June 18 and 25, after the June 5 televising of Winfrey's taped interview with McCarthy. It stayed on the list for twenty-four weeks, last appearing on September 17 (Publishers Weekly). In the previous year, for Elie Wiesel's Night, the "Oprah effect" meant a total of forty-one weeks on the list, twelve of those at number one (Maryles, "Bestsellers Vol. 06"). Nevertheless, according to Nielson BookScan figures, The Road had sold 498,000 paperback copies in the first half of 2007, ranking sixth of all bestsellers for the period, regardless of genre or format ("It's 'The Secret"").

In their various ways, *No Country for Old Men*, *The Sunset Limited*, and *The Road* have been critically and commercially successful, and they give ample and admirable evidence of the continued vitality of a formidable writer. The papers presented at the Knoxville conference represent the very earliest efforts by the scholarly community to assess the significance and place of *The Road* and *The Sunset Limited* in McCarthy's canon. The authors of these papers take varied productive and often original approaches to the work. Keynote speaker Jay Ellis discusses *The Road* from a personal, reader-response perspective, focusing largely on the father/son relationship. There are also Wesley Morgan's tracing of the realistic geography of the journey in *The Road*, Euan Gallivan's and Phillip Snyder's considerations of ethics in that novel from the contexts of Schopenhauer and Derrida, respectively, Tim Edwards' examination of its pastoral imagery and themes, Randall Wilhelm's study of

its pattern of framed, still-life imagery. In addition to Ellis's summary of the ways in which *The Road* revisits the key themes of McCarthy's earlier works, several other presenters focus on the continuities between the new works and McCarthy's earlier Tennessee novels. Chris Walsh discusses McCarthy's return to the south in *The Road*, his reinscribing it as a post-modern imaginative space. And Louis Palmer explores the novel's relationships with one of McCarthy's most personal earlier Tennessee novels, *The Orchard Keeper*. Examining thematic continuities between *The Sunset Limited* and *The Road*, Susan Tyburski treats these works' invocation of the mystical concept of the darkness of unknowing as a pathway to the divine, a philosophical orientation that scholars have also noted in earlier southern and western novels. All together, the papers presented at the conference comprise an admirable introduction to the works published in 2006, one that will surely stimulate further thought and debate about McCarthy's latest work and its place within his career.

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Cormac McCarthy's *The Sunset Limited*: Dialogue of Life and Death (A Review of the Chicago Production)¹

Dianne C. Luce

o what am I supposed to do with you, Professor?" a big, warmhearted black man in mid-life asks a slight, rumpled, nervous older white man in the tiny kitchen of a shabby tenement apartment (McCarthy 3). Thus begin the questioning, ribbing, storytelling and debating that comprise the single act of Cormac McCarthy's two-man play, *The Sunset Limited*, which premiered from May 18 through June 25, 2006, at Steppenwolf's Garage Theatre in Chicago. With a running time of an hour and forty-five minutes, the play is an intense dialogue of life and death with the highest possible stakes—the white man's life, the black man's faith in God—a debate that resonates with much of McCarthy's most philosophical work, one in which every line impales the heart.

Far and away the most effective dramatic work McCarthy has written, *The Sunset Limited* deftly poises between the allegorical and the realistic, blending McCarthy's career-long ear for dialogue and dialect with his movement in some recent novels away from narrative commentary in favor of the objective, dramatic point of view. As the theater's artistic director Martha Lavey writes, "That [McCarthy] chose the stage as a venue for this conversation suggests that he sees the drama of *The Sunset Limited* as one best unmediated by the narrative voice: he seeks the pure exchange of ideas and he leaves you, the audience, to negotiate your position in that argument. . . . The novelist abandons his guiding and shaping narrative voice to deliver that responsibility for point of view into our lap" ("Letter").

This "pure exchange of ideas" is anything but bloodlessly intellectual, however. The play is dynamic, human, often humorous, but with ultimate dramatic questions at its core. Actor/playwright Austin Pendleton, who plays the professor, comments, "to me, these two men are so real and so alive that all [the philosophical material] pertains to them. It pertains to actual people. It doesn't pertain to some abstract idea. This is what I always respond to in a play The characters are either convincing and urgent and alive to me, or they're not. If they're not, I don't care about anything else. And if they are, I don't care about anything else" ("Storytellers" 13). This capacity of the characters for making us care about and identify with them is key to the emotional life of *The Sunset Limited*, which is inescapably intimate and deeply personal to the audience. "Our emotional movement towards or away from these men is the registration of our belief," says Lavey ("Letter").

The play's director, Sheldon Patinkin, indicates that McCarthy's agent sent the script to Martha Lavey of the Steppenwolf Theatre about six months before the production. And it seems likely that it was written in 2004 (see my "Beyond the Border" in this issue). It echoes much earlier work, especially the gnostic and existentialist novels and screenplay written in the late 60s and 70s. But its most profound thematic and technical parallels are with the Border Trilogy, especially *The Crossing* and the epilogue of *Cities of the Plain*, and even more strikingly with McCarthy's new novel, *The Road*, in which a father confronts questions of suicide and even the mercy killing of his beloved son as they try to survive a post-apocalyptic winter in which all life has been destroyed except for a few humans—many turned utterly feral.

The title of the play is metaphorical: to ride the Sunset Limited is to take the final journey, to die, to ride west of everything. Although the play is set in a New York tenement, the actual Sunset Limited, as Rick Wallach has pointed out, is a southern transcontinental Amtrak train that for many years ran three times a week connecting Orlando to Los Angeles via New Orleans, El Paso, and other points south. The Louisiana and Mississippi tracks were destroyed in Hurricane Katrina, however, and now no service runs east of New Orleans. The tracks included those from several old lines, notably the L & N (Louisville and Nashville), one of the major lines serving Knoxville when McCarthy grew up there. The name "Sunset" goes back to the Sunset Route of the Galveston, Harrisburg, and San Antonio Railway and was used as early as 1874. Thus the Sunset Limited has figured for decades in the popular culture of the region. In the play, the black man, who is from Louisiana, introduces the metaphor, drawing from his familiarity with its presence in the blues and folklore of the South.

According to the program provided by the Steppenwolf Theatre, the play takes place in the "present," which I take to mean the eternal present. It is the professor's birthday (6), but just before the play opens he has attempted to make it his death day by throwing himself in front of the train in the subway station, becoming one of those his rescuer wittily calls "terminal commuters" (85). The professor has checked carefully to determine that he is alone on the platform, especially that there are no children to witness his suicide. But the black man has come from the shadows or from nowhere to snatch him out of the arms of death, arresting him in his "amazin leap" (22) and setting his feet back on the platform—much to the chagrin of the professor. The black man has offered to deliver the professor to Bellevue, but the suicidal man has refused, so his rescuer has taken the professor to his own apartment, where the sound of the subway train rumbles ominously at intervals throughout their conversation. (Director Patinkin indicates that the subway sounds were recorded for the opening scene but that in the rest of the production they are random and real-time, a creative incorporation of the Garage Theatre's location next to the Brown Line trestle crossing Halsted Street.)

For the duration of the play, the rescuer (played by Freeman Coffey) la-

bors patiently, diligently, and with all the cleverness, wisdom, and humor he can muster to keep the professor's feet on the platform, while the professor persists in declaring querulously and petulantly, "I need to go." In the original script from which the theater company worked, the professor did not demand to leave his rescuer's apartment until late in the play, and after a performance for the theater's staff, the audience expressed puzzlement that he did not simply walk out. In response, the professor's refrain was added at intervals throughout the play (Patinkin). The apartment's door is conspicuously locked with a ladder of five mismatched bolts, chain locks, and a key-operated deadbolt, then reinforced with a massive chain stretched between eyebolts on opposite sides of the door frame and a police lock wedged beneath the door handle for a total of seven locks, which Rick Wallach connects with the Seven Seals.² These locks are installed to keep thieves and other intruders out, but on this day the black man uses them to keep the suicide in until he can change his death-seeking philosophy. "So what am I, a prisoner here?" asks the professor, both challenging his rescuer and stating his existential position (31). And indeed, the black guards the key to the deadbolt lock in his pocket. Early in the play, when the professor declares that he must go home, his rescuer agrees to release him but makes it clear he intends to accompany him. His unwelcome guardianship persists until finally, at the end of the play, the locks are all undone and the professor departs.

Although McCarthy's stage directions refer to the characters as "the professor" and "the black" or "the black man," in designating speakers of the lines he identifies the two principals merely as "White" and "Black," emphasizing their allegorical opposition. Their differing races come into play in realistic characterizing strategies, but this is not a play primarily about race or social class. The two men are polar opposites philosophically, one embracing life, faith, hope, love of humanity; the other devoted to death, atheism, pessimism, and misanthropy. Their racial designations reverse conventional lightversus-dark associations. White asserts, "I'm a professor of darkness" (140); "The darker picture [of the world] is always the correct one" (112). Black tells him he may be mistaken, but White remains adamant. The two have opposed epistemologies, and through much of the play the dialectic-without-synthesis suggests that White's belief "in the primacy of the intellect" (96) is a kind of blindness—although of course he does not see it that way. White asks his rescuer, "Is it your belief that I lack understanding of the world in a way in which you do not?"—convoluted rhetoric that inspires Black to laugh appreciatively.³ But later Black, a convicted criminal turned preacher, tells White, "The light is all around you, cept you dont see nothin but shadow" (118).

Despite the incompatibility of Black and White's philosophical positions and their full realization as individualized characters of differing backgrounds and experiences, it is also possible—even necessary—to read their conversation as a dialogue of self and soul, as Susan Hawkins suggested to me. Such a dialogue occurs in several of McCarthy's earlier novels. One instance appears in *Suttree* when the protagonist speaks with his shadow cast on the wall of his houseboat, another occurs in the conversations between *Blood Meridian*'s Holden and the kid, and still another between Billy and the dreamer in the epilogue of *Cities of the Plain*. In *The Sunset Limited* many viewers will find it possible to identify with both characters' points of view and will recognize in their debate the internal dialogue of the modern or postmodern, or the competing voices of spirit and intellect within. The plot movement of *The Sunset Limited* hinges on a reversal from Black's dominating the argument to White's—from faith to despair. But rhetorically and emotionally the arguments of soul and intellect are balanced, poised in a dialectic that is finally about itself. Like some of Dostoevsky's dialogues, the play represents humankind's eternal dialogue with self, and with God.

Although the professor exhibits an exaggerated sense of his own exceptionalism, White is every lost man; but as a spokesman for the spirit, Black's allegorical significance is richer and more ambiguous. If Jesus is everyman, Black argues, then every man is at least partly Jesus (95). Though Black is not entirely orthodox (he does not believe in original sin, for instance), he delivers a largely Christian message—at least in its surface trappings. He is a human avatar of Jesus, Jesus in his everyman manifestation; he is a seeker not a "doubter" but a "questioner," as he tells White (67); he is the "big black angel" (23) who seeks to deliver White from destruction but whose blessing is rejected; he is the gnostic messenger from the alien good God; he is a projection of the professor's own being—the alienated, abjected spirit within. He was White before he became Black. He tells White that he has tried it White's way but concluded that "what it got" him was "Death in life" (14). Imprisoned and near death (like White in the present), Black underwent a conversion experience when God spoke to him in his convalescence. And this conversion the defining event of his life—has made him a spiritual messenger who ministers to others—mostly the drug addicts and alcoholics in the subway tenements. These men seek death and oblivion in their own way, although what they really want, according to Black, is what everyone wants: "to be loved by God" (59).

The two men are strangers to one another, and they share relatively little of their own histories, but some outlines are sketched in. Black is more willing to share his history than is White, but since Black is admittedly trying to put White in his "trick bag" (43-44), White (and we) can't be certain that the stories he tells are "true." Scheherazade-like, he spins stories to save his brother's life, narrating his jailhouse yarns to keep White with him and to communicate a life-in-life philosophy to this man whose very existence is in

jeopardy. Black seems to have lost his family when he was like White; he deflects questions about marriage with jokes but reveals that he had two sons who have died (37). While serving a seven-year sentence for murder, Black brutally beat and crippled another inmate who had assaulted him with a knife. As Black relates it, while he lies in the prison hospital with his two halves stitched together (he has been slashed again by the first inmate's friend), he hears a voice speaking to his heart, telling him "If it was not for the grace of God you would not be here" (49). His vision teaches him that he is not "in charge": "I never knowed what that burden weighed till I put it down. That might of been the sweetest thing of all. To just hand over the keys," he says anticipating the end of the play when he will surrender the deadbolt key to White—so to speak and—accept that he cannot save him from himself (53). Released from the prison of his death-in-life, Black has devoted his new life to helping his troubled brothers; his role in the play and in his life is to be his brother's keeper. But he also lives in hope that God will speak to him again; and for him, this is one of the things at stake as he labors to save White's life: he hopes that if he is successful he will hear God in his heart.

When White expresses deep skepticism about Jesus' speaking to human-kind, asserting that he thinks it is all in Black's head, Black affirms that Jesus is, indeed, in his head (13). Jesus has not spoken to White, and thus the empiricist believes He does not exist, but Black suggests that God may not bother to speak to those who won't listen: "You think he's got that kind of free time?" he asks (51). To counter White's despair, Black asserts that "if God is God then he can speak to your heart at any time" (64). For Jesus to talk to you, "You dont have to be virtuous. You just has to be quiet" (109). For Black, the answer to the problem of living is connecting to God and to his brothers. As he probes for the reasons for White's suicide attempt and devises strategies to help him value his life, some of the first questions Black poses concern White's family and friends.

White is reluctant to answer his questions, but it gradually emerges that he has no one in his life because congruent with repudiating God and his own life he has rejected all others. To the professor of darkness, "the whole idea of God is just a load of crap" (62) and hell is other people. (There are several allusions to Sartre's *No Exit* in the play, especially in the central image of the locked door.) White describes his mother as "Kafka on wheels" (135), and he has refused her request that he visit his father (an attorney for the government as was McCarthy's father) as he dies of cancer. The professor has no wife or children. He once had a relationship with a woman, but he claims, "We ended it." However, the context and Black's reaction imply that either White ended it or he drove her away. Whenever Black reaches out to touch him, White cringes and pulls back. White admits that he hates his colleagues at the university and that in his heart he curses the people he sees on the subway each day

(82; 89). The subway, of course, is the world, and when White declares that the subway tenement building in which Black lives and ministers to his fellow man is "a horrible place. Full of horrible people . . . not worth saving" (40) or that "This place is just a moral leper colony" on which "Even God [must give] up at some point" (75-76), he is not so much making a social class statement as a philosophical one.

Although he is clearly interested in Black, White announces plainly that he dislikes other people; "I'm not a member," he says, "I never wanted to be" (86). Both men agree that White is a special case. He is deeply depressed, they both see, but he explains that anti-depressants do not work for him. White claims to have nothing in common with other riders on the Sunset Limited, men and women who are there because of specific experiences of personal suffering. Rather, the professor's is a more existential and perhaps irremediable condition.

Thwarted in his effort to remind the professor of his connection to his fellow humans, Black asks him what he does believe in. It is characteristic of the professor that in the first three-quarters of the play, despite his intellect and breadth of reading, he has much more difficulty articulating his beliefs than does the preacher with his home-spun language of experience. What he finally manages to formulate is that what he has most valued is art, books, music—that he is what Black calls a "culture junky" (27). In the past, these humanistic works, ironically, have sustained him even as he hated humanity, but now he believes that "Western Civilization finally went up in smoke in the chimneys at Dachau" (27). The world of the arts and humanistic values has almost vanished, he claims, and he believes he has lived "to witness the death of everything" (26). His knowledge of human history has led him to conclude that happiness is "contrary to the human condition" (54) and is not to be expected or achieved in life. White recognizes that his devotion to culture has contributed to his misery, yet he cannot let go of his intellect or his exceptionalism, even though he partly agrees with Black that his education is pushing him toward suicide. Like Billy Parham in Cities of the Plain, White concedes that "I think about minimalizing pain" (123), and finally he admits to Black that "The one thing I wont give up is giving up" (130).

At first it seems that the professor may be no match for the preacher, Black, who is entirely confident in his ability to serve as a conduit for the message of Jesus. And it seems that progress is made when the professor agrees to share a meal with him, succumbing to another of Black's kindly-meant stratagems. "You break bread with a man you have moved on to another level of friendship," Black tells White (93). According to Patinkin, McCarthy's script called for an intermission during which the meal would be prepared off-stage, but the director felt strongly that this intermission should be deleted to maintain the play's momentum and its dramatic trajectory. As McCarthy collabo-

rated with the company, he somewhat reluctantly approved reworking the scene to allow for the stage business of Black's cooking the meal in the small set's fully functioning kitchen.

Black makes a pot of coffee and warms up a soul-food dish, a multi-cultural melange of ingredients that include bananas, mangos, rutabagas and other fruits and vegetables—none of them white, he jokes. ("Messin with you, Professor," he laughs more than once in the play [100].) Ironically, the death-seeking misanthrope, who has needed to be coaxed to eat, finds the dish representing humanity in all its variability quite palatable: "This is good," he repeats appreciatively, "This is very good" (98). But when the communion is finished and he begins to fear that his cynicism has offended his host, he again moves anxiously to the door, announcing that he must go.

Throughout the play White resists Black's arguments stubbornly, but Black lures White away from the exit by feeding him, either stories or food. This suggests a certain infantile quality in White that is reinforced in his dress. He wears a t-shirt under a knit track suit that manages to suggest pajamas. And the body posture of Austin Pendleton, though he is a slender man, makes his belly protrude like that of a toddler. Freeman Coffey's much larger stature and more commanding demeanor contribute further hints that his may be the more formidable wisdom.

The professor is smart enough to see through most of Black's ploys, and Black is smart enough to recognize this in White. At one point, Black tells White about a custom among African-American males, playing "the dozens." He explains that in the game, men trade insults and "the first one gets pissed off loses" (72). White immediately sees the trick Black is up to, responding sarcastically, "So if I find you a bit irritating and decide to leave then I lose" (73), and Black more or less admits that he has been caught. White is nevertheless detained temporarily by Black's playing on his pride, and he lingers as long as Black's food or language or stories interest him.

But playing the dozens becomes the template for the reversal and climax of the play, when White finally accesses his rage and forcefully explains why he seeks death: real death, nothingness. To him "the world is basically a forced labor camp from which the workers—perfectly innocent—are led forth by lottery, a few each day, to be executed" (122). Life is a horror: Dachau. Everyone would commit suicide if they shared his clarity about the world's reality, he claims. Black has told him that without spiritual meaning, "The road is just made up of road." But White's perspective on the linearity of life is that "Everything you do closes a door somewhere ahead of you. And finally there is only one door left" (131) and that "There is no direction, no meaning." The worst thing that has ever happened to him, he snarls at Black, was "Getting snatched off a subway platform one morning by an emissary of Jesus" (132). Quite undoing the meaning of Hamlet's internal debate, White asks, "Who

would want this nightmare if not for fear of the next?" (137). It is not Shakespeare's version of Hell he fears, but Sartre's. He yearns for darkness, and he wants the dead to be dead forever. He abhors the idea of an afterlife, the conventional idea of heaven or hell, in which he might again be thrust into the company of his fellow beings who have tormented him on earth—specifically his mother. "Perhaps I want forgiveness," he concedes, "but there is no one to ask it of" (141).

White again demands to leave, and admitting defeat in the face of White's inability to listen, to hear, Black unlocks the door. But he calls after White, "I'm goin to be there in the mornin. I'll be there," suggesting that the spiritual voice cannot be silenced even when it cannot be heard (141-42). Earlier in the play, White has asked Black if he is a test of Black's faith, and at that point Black laughs off the suggestion (105). But in the play's final moments, it seems that the eloquence of the intellect has indeed shaken Black, rather as the Judge's formidable presence and rhetoric undermine what little naïve belief and instinct for brotherly care reside in the Glanton gang in McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*. Black addresses God, demanding, "If you wanted me to help him how come you didnt give me the words? You give em to him. What about me?" (142), articulating the anguish of the spiritual voice of humanity yoked to a rational psyche.

Ironically, in this game of dozens White's anger has won him the argument; but in leaving Black behind—in closing the door on the voice of hope, compassion, and spiritual wisdom—he seems likely to lose or throw away the life he does not value. Black has lost his gambit to help this special case, but he has not decisively lost his faith in God and his own mission. He slumps to the floor in defeat, but affirms, "That's all right. That's all right. If you never speak again you know I'll keep your word" (142). However, his final lines reveal his anguish that God does not answer him, does not speak to him again: "Is that okay? Is that okay?" (143).

The play ends, then, with the mysterious silence of God.

Notes

1 *The Sunset Limited* was published on October 24, 2006, as a Vintage paperback. The commentary that follows is based on my viewing of the play before it was published, on two consecutive nights (May 18 and 19, 2006) and on several lively discussions and follow-up email messages with other members of the Cormac McCarthy Society who attended (including Jay Ellis, Rachel Eustache-Ney, Marc Goldin, Susan Hawkins, Wes Morgan, Marty Priola, and Rick Wallach—to all of whom I am grateful for observations and insights). A version of this review-essay was delivered at the 2006 conference of the American Literature Association and was originally published online at www.Writecorner.com. In revising it for the *Cormac McCarthy Journal*, I have slightly expanded my interpretation, altered a few details, and changed quotations where

possible to bring them in line with the published version.

- 2 McCarthy's scene directions indicate that "The hallway door is fitted with a bizarre collection of locks and bars" (3). He does not specify the number of locks.
- 3 These lines do not appear in the published version, although other changes made when McCarthy worked with the theater company do. This suggests either that McCarthy took the play through a subsequent revision in the summer of 2006 before submitting the manuscript for publication, or that he had sent in the manuscript while his collaboration with the company was still in progress.
 - 4 This material does not appear in the published text.
- 5 This is literally true of the father in *The Road*, whose despair is at least as deep as White's, but less petulant, and who resists the very real temptation of suicide.
 - 6 This line is omitted in the published version.
 - 7 Omitted in the published text.

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Another Sense of Ending: The Keynote Address to the Knoxville Conference

Jay Ellis

Introduction

irst, I must thank Chris for the invitation to give this talk, and for the hospitality of the University of Tennessee. And second, I must thank many of you here today—especially Rick Wallach, who was crazy enough to invite me to my first conference, and Chip Arnold, Dianne Luce, and Wes Morgan, whose work on patterns and correspondences made my book possible and continues to inform my reading of McCarthy.

Chris's timing even inspired me. His email reached me within a day or two of the heaviest snowstorm I have ever seen—and I lived in Boston for seven years. Over three feet fell before the first twenty-four hours of that recordbreaking storm. And every week for three weeks, another storm came and dumped more snow on us. Where I live in Boulder, we are not actually in the mountains, but rather right up against the Front Range. I shoveled and shoveled and thought, "how can I not be thinking about that book again?"

One day about a month later, the sun melted the top layer down on our street. As if to help me imagine a world without the conveniences of the Republic of Boulder's frequently magnificent municipal parenting power over its citizens, they never plow our street. I made the mistake—failing McCarthy's requirement of constant vigilance and handiness—of driving up the hill to get my son to school more quickly, and my car slid into the curb, where despite all-wheel drive and practice in this kind of thing, my son and I were stuck. He was terrified. At seven years old, he still does not like me to be out of the car with him still inside. Just gassing up the car becomes a ballet of intricacy, with one hand always holding his. His mother is still around, but somehow he inherited or was accidentally frightened into a persistent problem of unacquired object permanence. We sat on the ice and he said, "I'm scared," as I stepped out of the car and tried to dig into the wet glass beneath the left front wheel some broken ice for traction. Then he said, "Dada? I'm really scared."

Oprah, you know it doesn't take a suasion novel about everyday domestic troubles to enable a connection between a great work of fiction and the fears that abide in any family.

After a month of storms, one day in the car again taking Hank to school on the now some several feet of compacted snow turning into wet glass under the recurring Boulder sun, I thought, "It might be easier with constant cloudcover." And then, "Wouldn't a shopping cart be a little easier in this shit?"

And so I confess, after years of assiduous close reading, to a reader's

response to *The Road*, and, for that matter, to Cormac McCarthy. But I'm only following what I found through close reading in the previous novels: "the man" and "the boy" referred to in the new novel might instead be called "the father" and "the son." I mean this in both biographical and theological senses. The ending, then, of *The Road* works on both levels. Cormac McCarthy, after circling it in more obviously different genres, has finally fully addressed the concerns of the domestic novel. Or at least that of the single father—and the relatively quick, if not painless, "divorce" that occurs in *The Road*. But he has done so by also accomplishing another step through the theological darkness that has troubled—alongside the son and father trouble—the ten novels that preceded this one.

Sacrificial Resonance

That most reluctant father, Culla Holme, watches his own child throat-slit at the end of *Outer Dark*, without naming him. *The Road* reveals the father on a more linear, eschatological road than the one on which we see Culla, lost, at the earlier book's ending. The plot of *The Road* might be described as a father trying to avoid the death and cannibalization of his son. In *Outer Dark*, the bones that Rinthy finds in the coals are those of her son—Culla's son—so that the "mute" son of the bearded man sucking at the infant's throat suggests that they, or at least "the mute one" of the triune, ate the child. Before the father dies in *The Road*, he sees a baby on a spit. The last bullet left him is preserved for suicide in the event of capture by the cannibals, so that even if the son is to be eaten, he will be unaware of it. To the preoccupation with the son's sacrifice and literal consumption in both *Outer Dark* and *The Road* we might add the ending of *Blood Meridian*. Why the cannibalism?

I've argued that in *Blood Meridian* it is the inevitable consummation by consumption by Holden when the kid proves to be only partially redemptive. Notwithstanding persuasive readings of the kid as Christ-like by Arnold (or Bartleby-like by Vanderheide), I still find him more like the son losing an argument with the father—an argument we see outlined first in *Suttree*, over how one should live one's life. Holden, then, eats of the kid what fits him, and leaves the rest behind to shock the otherwise jaded eyes of the men who open the jakes after the judge is back in the bar, dancing immortality.

In *The Road*, as previously in *Outer Dark*, cannibalism enacts a reversal in the ancient human progression to symbol, to metaphor, that we find in the story of Abraham. Abraham stands over his own son, ready to kill him and give him up to God—the ultimate sacrifice, and one that the story of Abraham would tell us God makes of his Son—but God intervenes. As I have described this to my son (who, although I am not Christian, lives next door to the kind of Christians you want next door to you—in fact they are watching him before

and after school today), it is as if God tells Abraham, "Hold off: use a lamb instead." It is the introduction of the symbol to the human need to reach up for security, for favor, for meaning, through magical transaction.

We find that literal human sacrifice was practiced by humans everywhere at some time, if we dig far enough back. (A student of mine just finished a paper comparing this in *Blood Meridian* and *Apocalypto*.) Child sacrifice, however, runs far enough against the collective good of ensuring the survival of a tribe or kinship group—because it kills a member of that group before he or she can reproduce or even add to the collective non-genetic inheritance of adaptive innovations in behavior—that the only reason for it is that it implicitly demands a greater favor in the magical transaction of sacrifice: we give up one of our young, our greatest natural promise, so that we may secure the greatest magical favor for the whole group.

The killing of one's own son, not in malice, but in sacrifice, negates the most direct biological imperative to advance one's genetic inheritance into the future. It is the ultimate sacrifice for Abraham and one that we cannot imagine today. Abraham spares not only his son, but us, and our sons.

We might pause here to note that, by the numbers, however, the father's sacrifice of his own son could not enact as great a sacrifice as that by the mother, whose reproductive years and ability to engender hardly more than one child a year make any child more precious still. Notwithstanding Lacan's reading of the father demanding the child's entry into the world of the symbolic as something injurious to him, we might actually see a hidden feminine demand of the symbolic. What if Abraham heard not God, but his wife, whispering from behind a shrub, "Hold off! Use a lamb instead!"? A well-educated feminist buddy of mine at CU once asked a Native American park ranger about the kivas at Mesa Verde. The ranger, a woman, explained that the kivas were places where men went to find god. "Did the women not go there?" he dutifully asked. "No, they never needed to. They had the power of making babies and food in the home. Only the men needed to run around looking for god outside." So perhaps, at times, at least, women prefer men to chase after the symbolic outside—if only they would come home and do more laundry as well.

The mother in McCarthy usually sacrifices her child indirectly, when instead of demanding this, she delivers the son up to the father—both consciously and unconsciously. In *Outer Dark*, of course, Rinthy never intends this. But her near-death in childbirth and her subsequent inability to get out of bed nonetheless accomplish an entirely unintentional abandonment. We cannot imagine her, as she would want to had she known what he was up to, being able to leap out of bed and get her son back from the father who will leave him Oedipus-like alone to die in the woods. But many a son with a grudge against his father is unable, or takes a very long time, to come to grips with the know-

ledge that perhaps his mother could not have better protected him from the father.

The kid's mother in *Blood Meridian* of course dies outright in childbirth. This leaves him to the drunken disregard, and perhaps physical abuse, of the father. At the very least, the father who "lies in drink" blames the child for the death of the mother. It's that odd syntax that does it. "The mother dead these fourteen years did incubate in her own bosom the creature who would carry her off" (*BM* 3). In this astonishing grammar the mother is guilty of giving birth to the child who is guilty of killing its own mother in its birthing. Only the father remains, within this crazed grammar, unimplicated. We know him, however, to be the only truly guilty one in the equation: he has fallen from his position as a teacher of poets—a man of symbol—to that of a literal hewer of wood, and a pisspoor father. And he drinks too much!—certainly nothing merely to laugh at after *Suttree* (even if you like a good drink now and then. I don't want to spoil the Stagger).

So the early fathers in McCarthy novels are more guilty than the mother. In the first, whatever the failures of Mildred Rattner to keep her half-wild son in a loving home (he sleeps on the porch, that intermediary domestic space, when weather allows), Kenneth is of course worse. But the father is usually distant enough that his faults are relatively removed. Kenneth Rattner is at least entertaining, in a dark Faulknerian way. He's spider-like. He's a trickster. He's got a bit of the gift of the gab. The grifter. No good, for sure, but persuasive to a point.

So is Holden, of course. Much darker. But also humorous. And persuasive.

Between these, the failed father in *Child of God* has hanged himself in a farm that, because he has not paid taxes on it, he has only left to his son long enough for the son to be evicted from it. This early fear will also echo in *The* Road, that after your death your son will be left without enough to get by. Lester Ballard falls from the rafter from which his father hanged himself, and he keeps falling, all the way through the medial domestic of the empty house in the woods with its found dead replacement for a live wife/mother, further down to the caves where he takes his killed victims in a replacement of the natural order. It is not for nothing that the final scene in *Child of God* conjures the double meaning of "child" as both the literal child of a family, and the figurative sacrificial son of god: the bodies found in the final cave are arranged like "saints," but of course also like a family. And Lester's dressing in both the men's shoes and the women's clothing of his victims suggests probably less sexual preoccupation than instead a magical need to enliven the substitute family he has assembled, as well as to take on the part of—and indeed "inspire," to breath life into—the "saints" around him. As in many a religion, the priest puts on the mask of the holy fathers (and in this case, mothers as well). Lester wears the shoes, and the wig of the hair of the mother lost, the father hanged, and the saints from whom he is otherwise so horribly banished—down in that womb-grave cave. Farthest from literal healthy life, and fallen also from the holy, he enacts what magic he can to bring back more than he ever had. A prosopopoeia—bringing the mask forward—of the lost antecedents, and lost gods.

We know little about Suttree's father, except just enough to speculate quite a bit, as I already have, on how he echoes McCarthy's own. Here I just want to point out that his letter to his son suggests that of course, he too, like Rattner, has the gift of the gab. But unlike the previous fathers of the protagonists, Suttree's father is a success in the world. In this, he is more like the bearded man—who successfully looks after his own—and like Holden, who at least feeds his leashed fool, a son who will not challenge him.

We begin to see, therefore, two types of fathers in the novels: one, a failure, might love you, but he leaves you with not enough to go on in the night. Cannibals are about. Or auctioneers. Or evil Mexican captains. Or evil Mexican pimps. In *The Crossing* the father shows the son just enough to set him out on his errand. He shows him how to speak the language of wolf scent to kill the wolf, but the son (like all McCarthy sons) takes the spirit of the father's law and ignores its letters. He leaves home to restore the wild mother to the home from which she has probably tried to escape and has simply found no refuge. His son will die trying to rescue that feminine in distress that is so wholly perfect in her wildness that whether she is fierce (as is the wolf) or meek (as is Magdalena) or in between (as is Alejandra), she cannot live in the same world as the son. So either she or you will lose, and will die. This, of course, is not a good legacy with which to leave your son.

The alternative for the successful father is to subjugate her (for Holden, to replace her procreative power with destructive power—her light with his darkness). Or rescue her from her inferior social station by selling out your principles, using the gift of the gab, the indirect powers of rhetoric, to out-dance, out-file (in the lawcourts), and ultimately subjugate your kinship group, and perhaps, as William Prather suggests, entire towns of newly poor refugees to Knoxville. Rescue the wild idiot from the water after Aunt Sally (as Sarah Borginnis) fails to domesticate him on a higher level, and put him on a leash. Keep the mother at home and do your work in the halls of government. Wrest free will from nature by your insistence that because men are born for games, war is the ultimate game, and only in war can we evolve up beyond merely antic clay, you should participate wholly in the scalp trade. You should join war, as Arjuna is enjoined by Krishna to be the warrior he of course only appears to be. The truth that all is one lies outside the stage on which you dance, on which the bear dances. So dance, war, and even mess around with children along the way.

The center of McCarthy's work struggles with this successful father, through *Suttree* and *Blood Meridian*. And he remains persuasive: if you would not join me, at least shoot me. I'll give you three tries—says Holden as he walks naked before the kid and the expriest in the desert. This father, however, despite the horror—the Kurtz-like Faustian and Oedipal horror—with which he builds his dams, kills his children, and finally would sacrifice and eat his own son (as I've argued Holden partially eats his figurative son in the jakes) does teach ethics. Not morality. But ethics: "At least claim your son. Take care of your own. Feed him. Teach him away from wasting himself on the poor, and women." And to be fair to this father, he does truly desire the endurance of the son: it is dangerous to love "the heathen" who "rage" on the road. The son's inability to act out the father's terrible ethos of will to power, then, will cost him dearly in the middle novels. He will be sacrificed—by that father.

Perhaps this is how Harold Bloom might be wrong about Jesus and Yahweh. What if the father, the angry and willful Yahweh, so ready to abuse his own people, so demanding of their willingness to adore him but also to kill any worshipers of any other gods (as we read repeatedly in the Old Testament—including in Jeremiah), were to engender (wherever the mother) a kinder son? What if he were to find that son softer than he, and even opposed to the distinction the father insists on (of heaven above, not among us)? That son, rebellious to the point of helping the needy on earth, wherever he finds them (including McAnally Flats), might be sacrificed back up to the father; taken back in, even consumed, by him. In such a sacrifice to god, heaven is furthermore reinstituted as distinct from the world around us; the transcendent distinction is maintained: I am that I am, but you are a mere mortal—so much so that I might ask you to literally sacrifice your son to me to prove that I am the ultimate father. So says Yahweh.

But with the birth of the trope, the origin of the symbol, all bets are off. The sacrifice of the son is no longer, after all, literal. And even the distinction between the father and the son is insubstantial. Then even the possibility that God is not your father, above you, away from you, up in heaven, arises. You might be, as Holden even teases us to think, "tabernacled" in every other (*BM* 141). If so, then the choice between hugging your brother and killing him is merely one between acting out your part rather literally, or instead acting it out more figuratively. (Holden's game analogy doesn't work, as to accept the premise is to allow for the possibility that true play does not, after all, entail literal winning by killing.) Holden's arguments echo those of Krishna to Arjuna, and yet he remains the avatar of darkness from Jacob Boehme's *Six Theosophic Points*. We are persuaded by him only if we forget (or don't go find out) that McCarthy intentionally left out a line from the passage of Boehme that he quotes to begin *Blood Meridian*. There is, after all, a world of lightness at least equal to that of darkness. The life of sorrowing is the joy of the darkness. But

not of the light. For Boehme, beings born in light can never be happy in the darkness; they may be drawn to it, but they must return to the light. I still see the kid's entry into the jakes as a failure, in that he never opposes the judge's thanatotic power with his potential erotic power. (He fails upstairs with the "dwarf of a whore." He fails to simply avoid Fort Griffin, or leave it, the way Suttree leaves this city.) But the kid's—the man's—death in the jakes completes the sacrifice of the son by the father, and it includes a literal cannibalism. In this way, it seals the victory of darkness over the light—at least within *Blood Meridian*. But McCarthy must have known where he was headed all along in his extension beyond Chamberlain: thus the redaction of Boehme, with his elision of light.

It now seems much less a failure of artistic nerve, as I once thought, and more a progression to symbol, to follow that tree of dead babies in *Blood Meridian* with the thorn-struck birds seen by John Grady Cole in *All the Pretty Horses*. This character's mother willfully rejects him; his father fails to protect him (by failing to teach him to fold not only with Alejandra, but with the worse hand of Magdalena). John Grady dies the symbolic death in the prison at Saltillo, but then has to die the literal one in the child's packingcrate house. He fails with his literal housing project for Magdalena, and dies in the symbolic house of a child. The families continue to fail.

No Country for Old Men has grown on me, quite a bit, because of all this. The father and son problem is woven through the problem of the literal and the symbolic, the impetus to lead an ethical life of success conflicting with the call to death after you fail in a hopeless moral quest. The sense of ending in The Road surprised me more than did the suddenly stark autobiographical depiction of a man who cannot live long enough to fully teach his son to survive the forces of darkness gathering around them. Because here, for the first time, the apocalypse seems literal. It isn't, of course. The book's ending suggests that even after nuclear winter, or the calamitous climate change sped up by a comet strike, or whatever happens to cover the book with an endless snow of ashes, there remains a distinction between the fires that ravage the hillsides and scorch the road, and the fire carried forward by the father and son.

As I argued in my reading of *No Country for Old Men*, McCarthy's myth remains stuck in the androcentric vision of father and son (where's the mother in Bell's dream?). The son, to truly move forward, must come to terms with his feeling that the mother abandoned him. (To the child psychologist, that feeling is simply called primary ambivalence, and it must be achieved—that is, recognized and assimilated, perhaps more than sublimated—if you are to stop hating your mother for throwing you out of the womb more than loving her for seeming to be you in the originary.) You must further love the mother despite her inability to protect you from the demands—those demands of the word, the lawcourts, the Lacanian symbol standing in for the real hug—of the

father. But the vision of Sheriff Bell remains one of the son following the father. In Jungian terms, that's good. But it's only half the journey. Bell fails as a father and father figure in his role as Sheriff.

The Road follows that pairing onward through a darkness worse than that of the previous book. As Bell's Jeremiad suggests (and his wife's reading of Revelation, too), Chigurh turns out to be small potatoes compared with whole tribes of humans using women for nothing more than to birth babies straight to the spit. The wife/mother of The Road, unlike Loretta in No Country for Old Men, isn't up to watching this happen to her own child. Who can blame her? And yet her abandonment of her own child—and in the novel, that is what this suicide entails—to the thanatotic world of men, a world of fire and literal sacrifice and cannibalism—haunts the novel. Any McCarthy novel presents the occasion to ask, where are the women? But put another way, why would even a fictional woman, a character, if we imagine she has the free will to choose, wish to inhabit such books?

"I'm really scared Papa."

When my son is most frightened, and most tender with me, is when his mother isn't around. Susie, my wife, is a great Mom! But we aren't very traditional at all when it comes to domestic work or childcare—never have been and I'm actually more likely to do most of this, because it's easier for me to do my own work beyond standard business hours. And because Susie's job requires her to be "on the road" in that contemporary sense of airports and hotels and business meetings, my son and I spend a lot of time together, some of it without his mother around. Far more than most men ever had with their fathers—more than I did, at least. It is a gift to me, and he doesn't seem to miss her too much when she's out of town—but he does miss her. No matter how many diapers I changed or how much time I now spend with this now sevenyear-old boy, sex—which is to say the biological difference of our roles as parents, as opposed to constructed gender alone—gets a vote. Hank and I have taken vacations together, just the two of us, every summer when Susie couldn't get away from work, usually driving down to East Texas or the Gulf Coast from Boulder. We've logged a lot of miles in this way. And I recognized much of the feeling in McCarthy's latest nightmare of a novel (and I recall Arnold's essay reminding us how many of the books are wrapped in dreams, usually dark dreams) in the dialogue.

In *The Road*, the word "scared" appears seventeen times in the boy's dialogue. This dialogue, along with what the boy is physically capable of, and not, in the book, are what determine his age at around six or seven years old. An older boy will not so readily admit his fears—even in such a space of horror. A younger one would not express them so accurately in time.

That fear is the fear of a child without its mother, set out into the world with its father, carrying fire. The fire might be merely their attempts at decency. They encounter the backward hungry heathen tribes that would eat them, that would succumb to the latest feeling that the end is nigh by rejecting the forward progress from mere predatory cannibalism, to the literal sacrifice for magic reassurance that God is on our side—and therefore against another tribe—and on to the symbolic sacrifice and its collapse of binaries. The world of *The Road* really is one of two kinds of people. The father and son in the novel stay on the road less out of some hope of a better place, than out of a spiritual (which is to say optimistic beyond the bounds of reason) hope for a better space; they might find people who do not eat people. People who carry the fire of civilization.

McCarthy's latest apocalypse shows us one of the early acts of Revelation, where the forces of darkness seem to be winning by Holden's law. But the limitations of violence against even such a palpable evil are exposed: the father loses his humanity in his fear of inhumanity. It is the son—perhaps like the kid, the man, if he went into the jakes of his own free will—who risks being devoured because he cannot give up his feeling for strangers. Three times the son uses the word "scared" for someone else: he is "scared" that the little boy "was lost," (236) and he tells the father that not only the old man, but even the thief, are "scared" (137, 218). It is striking that what the son fears will happen to the old man and the thief is precisely what will happen to his father, and that what he fears will happen to the other little boy is what is about to happen to him. His father will die, and he has no friends. His father loves him fully, however, and ultimately, the father listens to the son and knows the son is—as McCarthy said in the second interview with Woodward, "better" than he. This is new.

But the father remains trapped in his own world without women. He must do, in order to survive and secure the survival of his son. He must move through the burning world like a distrustful Old Testament Yahweh, ready to kill other tribes that threaten him, not really very optimistic about the long-term goals, unable to love the other. He must act always with utilitarian efficiency. This comes out in the many Hemingwayesque passages of fixing things, using tools. *Homo techne*. Peter Josyph, taking a break from his work with Paulo Faria, translator of *The Road* into Portuguese, complained to me about what I call the burden of handiness:

THE ROAD. Whew! Give me a fucking break! Do you notice how much McCarthy builds his protagonists almost exclusively out of their cunning or lack of it? A strange system of values, not one I especially admire. McCarthy just loves to show cunning in his villains, in his heroes. People always know how to do practically

everything. I find it stifling: there's never any room for slackers or just plain ordinary mortals in his world. I am exhausted by his endless survivalism. Life's not all about that—he should know, he lived in a country club in El Paso! I feel less and less entertained by a story and more and more dared, taunted, inflicted upon. Like having to listen to Burt Reynolds in *Deliverance* every time I turn the page. It makes me want to say: "So, going out to shoot nine holes—is that your way of preparing for the Apocalypse, Charlie?"

Now, I have to agree that the constant handiness with things could feel like a parody of Hemingway (whose description of how carefully and skill-fully and with what great discipline Frederick Henry rows Catherine across the lake—and toward her death in childbirth—near the end of *A Farewell to Arms* has kept me for twenty-five years from ever rowing across more than a pond). But as always, teaching helps me here. I must have so much the habit of telling students to assume that the author's a living genius with a brain the size of Einstein's and a heart the size of Texas, that even after I start to reject some of this handiness—or many another apparent fault in McCarthy's work—as I was so tempted to do the first time through *No Country for Old Men*, I remember to try and work out why is it there?

Honestly, when I received Peter's email with that complaint, I couldn't answer right away. It was, after all, the same week in which I received Chris's invitation to give this talk—and there's a reason why the National Center for Atmospheric Research (the building out of which Woody Allen dangles in *Sleeper*), and the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration buildings are within jogging distance of my house. And it ain't an ocean. We do get weird weather where I live, but this was off the charts. Peter's complaints about survival and handiness arrive, and just after I read them the Internet goes out again. Then I'm too busy—shoveling snow, drying out firewood in case the electricity goes out again, counting how many sports bars we have in the camping closet, and meanwhile repairing a dishwasher—to answer him. But I'm thinking, "I know, I know, I'm tired of it too."

But I got the reason for McCarthy's "handiness" by comparing the day-to-day tasks, and the bedtime routine, of those days when Susie's out of town on business, with those when she is home, and Henry can sneak into our bed and huddle on her without expectations of his doing homework, getting dressed, feeding the pets. Even if we both care for him a lot, I'm the parent of must do. On a bad day I worry about him as any parent worries about his child, but my worries probably do revolve more around what he will be able to do than do those of his mother. I maintain that idiotic male illusion that his skill in doing might make him not only safe, but happy. This of course is true to a point, but not if the anxiety over skillful doing displaces the joy.

The Road is therefore the troubling expression of a father who has not gotten over past wounds enough to keep his fear that the mother of his child might up and disappear from overwhelming him. The loss of the suicide mother/wife haunts this book's father. It reduces him to a life of parodic extremes of skillful doing: the closest he comes to the customary role of the mother is to be forever shopping, pushing that inglorious shopping cart through all that damned snow, unable to find the right things to put in the basket. Whom do you see on the streets out there, pushing a shopping cart? The homeless.

In McCarthy's nightmare vision, there isn't even the question of setting up house: a still target is a dead and eaten one, so the domestic space as a place of loving family is entirely obviated, and displaced by the meat-locker basement that recalls several post-Vietnam 70's horror films. In movies such as *Dawn of the Dead* and *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *Last House on the Left*, the American domestic is the site not of refuge from lawless terror, but the site of lawless terror. The family that eats other people together stays together. (In one scene from *Dawn of the Dead*, a little girl eats her own mother.) In *Last House on the Left*, the alternative to the reality of the self-cannibalizing American nightmare that lies beneath the surface of middle class family values is a 60's rejection of values that itself begins the slaughter: the hippies start the shooting, and their chic criminality is then surpassed by a vengeful family that, with the aid of power tools—that domestic scaled-down model, affordable by Dad, of the same machinery that blows people up in war—takes it out on the revolutionaries in a counter-revolutionary fable of horror.

When the boy and the man encounter the slaughter-cellar prisoners, we are seeing an echo of the holocaust brought down to the quotidian possibilities of Home Depot. (We might recall that the house even has its own clever techne, its signaling system by which one member of the cannibal tribe can spot people on the road and alert the others to their proximity. It's like an old-fashioned surveillance-security system with intercom.)

The house, therefore, is not to be trusted. One can only raid the house and move on. Forever shopping for the leftovers, there's even an interesting Luddite fallback to the usefulness of past technology. (No Luddite gives up all techne. Even if you won't have your horse collar—so as not to have to plow with a mule—you wouldn't give up your plow, etc. It's the nostalgia for a previous technological level that seems more secure.) Thus, canned goods are the only things left to eat (beyond the odd dried seeds from apples of a horrible wisdom). And the canned goods can kill you, if you can't spot the signs of poison that every containment of the domestic might secrete under its lid. The mother who births you can reject you; the peaches that can keep you alive might kill you with ptomaine poisoning. Inspect the lid carefully then; you must be handy.

The Road is in part the moving expression of a single father's worst night-mare: that the world will prove to be arcing down to apocalypse, that the mother

will no longer be around to help with the child, and that the father is doomed—that cough can come from fallout or the ashen air following a comet-strike, but it can also come from any number of the maladies that, sooner or later, will visit us all just before we die if we are lucky enough to die of what we still call "old age."

The ultimate skill for the parent is to judge, carefully, which skills of cunning, of suspicion, of handiness, to hand down to the child, and which habits of these would prove to be a burden, even a curse. Anyone explaining to a small child that the people who flew the planes into the buildings were bad people recognizes this. Did they think they were bad, the child asks? They were bad because they decided, perhaps a long time ago in their lives, that they had the only truth in the world, that they carried the only fire. They took away the possibility of disagreement, of other fires, of other stories. The Road speaks to us because the end is, as I previously quoted Frank Kermode saying, always with us. Apocalypse may haunt the literal-minded among the religious or the pessimistic among the scientists on a truly terrifying, literal, level. But I think McCarthy's book works just as well for those who are probably more worried about their own little skins than those of the polar bears dwindling as the temperature—on average—climbs. We want our selves, and our children, to get along past what the poem at the end of *Cities of the Plain* warns against: "The Heathen rage."

In this way, this story of a father and son proves to be more convincingly optimistic. I don't want to argue that you have to have a child to understand this novel. But by my unofficial poll, the readers I know who hated the ending do not. They may be right that at the level of McCarthy's more universal obsessions with eschatology—the ending of *The Road* can seem a bit of a *deus* ex machina. But McCarthy's done plenty of work with complex philosophy right up to the book before this one, and I'm sure I haven't found what's going on at that level yet in this book. Or perhaps he has turned a kind of corner. I ended my book with the thought that to get the drama back into his work, the characters of his next book would need to keep moving—that they would need to escape the frightened hiding under the blanket of inaction and dream where we find Bell at the end of No Country for Old Men. I knew nothing about the new novel, but it was an easy prediction to make. What astonishes me now is how he managed to confront, head on, the father and son problem. And his ending suggests that the father and son problem cannot be solved without women.

The End of the End

At the end of my book I quoted Frank Kermode explaining that, "the End itself, in modern literary plotting loses its downbeat, tonic-and-dominant fi-

nality, and we think of it, as the theologians think of Apocalypse, as immanent rather than imminent." We then must "make much of subtle disconfirmation and elaborate peripeteia. And we concern ourselves with the conflict between the *deterministic pattern* any plot suggests, and the *freedom of persons within that plot to choose and so alter the structure*, the relations of beginning, middle, and end" (*The Sense of an Ending* 30, my emphasis). By the end of *No Country for Old Men*, McCarthy's play with chance and fate—Chigurh sometimes allows his victims a coin toss before he shoots them in the face—and the peripeteia of altogether avoiding predictable generic resolutions to his narrative twists, has unraveled into a more imminent end, even as Chirgurh has told Carla Jean that her life had "a beginning, a middle, and an end" (260).

So what sense of an ending do we find in *The Road*? Briefly put:

Father and son are together. The mother has given up on the post-apocalyptic possibilities into which this son was born.

The world is "dimming away" after some unspecified calamity.

But the world has not ended: there are hints that the son has found "the good people" he and his father sometimes doubt still exist.

The father has confessed his sins to the son, by telling this story, in which the father's actions begin to worry the son that perhaps the father is no longer, after all, one of "the good guys." The father's vigilance, his handiness with fear, has led him to play it safe to the point that life itself can be preserved and yet its meaningfulness dim away.

The son forgives the father for this, as intelligent Christians, I imagine, might believe Christ forgave Yahweh. The ending expands, at least a little, in the Jungian sense. A woman—yes, a replacement, at least, of the boy's lost mother—now complements the new bearded man's shotgun fosterage. She believes even more than the son can believe. When she "would talk to him...about God," "He tried to talk to God but the best thing was to talk to his father" so that "he did talk to him and he didnt forget" the father (241). The fire now is no longer Freudian, but Jungian, if we see that the presence of the woman even in a moveable camp through a never-ending darkness has become a critical part of moving the light—Jung's candle flame in his famous dream—forward. If we read the calamity, as I finally did after talking with Rick last night, as most specifically a man-made disaster, this allowance for the feminine manages another small step forward.

The ultimate fear any parent can express still lingers in the ending. Without us, will the world turn colder still for my child? The father's fear—all parents' greatest fear—is that they will outlive their own children. But the second greatest fear is that in the parent's dying before the child can protect him or herself, the child will die alone.

After avoiding biographical readings of these novels for years, I simply could not get at the full why behind their iterations of familyless young men

on the run, unable to be constrained by houses or fences or graves, until I was willing to see further. From inside McCarthy's words of fiction—in the emergent anxieties over son and father relationships, the near-total absence of the mother in these books, the nostalgia of the characters (and as a classicist friend at CU told me, that word to the Greeks could mean "the pain of longing for one's homecoming") the novels resonate, at least, with strong suggestions of the author's own relationships. Respectfully, delicately, but unavoidably, I tried to extend the argument I had already heard from some of you, for those connections between the author's life, and the larger philosophy we keep determining in these novels—including McCarthy's sense of god as a kind of absent parent no longer able, or willing, to do anything.

At seventy-three years old, in his third marriage, Cormac McCarthy has a second son, now about seven or eight years old. You can find his name on the dedication page of *The Road*—a page that was not in my copy of the page proofs. *The Road* now seems to me the expression of this father's fears that he may not see his son grow to adulthood. And it makes another end—very likely not the last—in the long arc of McCarthy novels.

At the end of my book, I noted that dialogues, monologues, and dreams had overtaken the action in his work. I speculated that whatever might come out next from this author, the characters would be forced to move again. And that if McCarthy's sense of an ending were to prove to be narrative, aesthetic, and renewable, rather than the false or rather local apocalypse that vanishes with the next sunrise in *The Crossing*, there might be some return to the power of storytelling, in lieu of the interest in stories about storytelling—the telling that had overtaken the showing in his work since Blood Meridian and All the Pretty Horses. But I also noted that there's no place for home for characters always set out on the run. In *The Road*, it seems remarkable to me how it was possible to see what changes might come from this author—the genuine feeling between the father and the son, the setting after a literal apocalypse. The problem of the absent mother hovers over this new work, too. But in the end, a woman is there, along with a new father, to look after the boy. As the man had said to his son, worried about the other little boy, "Goodness will find [him]. It always has. It will again" (236).

This hope, that without God, without one's parents, and with a world lost to a catastrophe of Frostian fire and ice—of burning forests and unending winter—life can nonetheless renew itself, is voiced for and by the son. When has there not been a time when one could make arguments against bringing children into this world? And *The Road*'s final paragraph also laments what is lost, what we may already be losing now. It recalls "brook trout in the streams in the mountains. [. . .] On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all

things were older than man and they hummed of mystery" (241).

This could be the remembered sound, the vibrations of the smallest strings McCarthy's colleagues at the Santa Fe Institute still imagine might hold the universe together. Unraveled, and impossible to restore to their former relation in a complex system, they can be mourned for their loss even as anyone with children to worry about must hope that other arrangements might yet arise, and that one's own apocalypse might not spell the end for a generation to follow. This ambivalent nightmare expresses most forcefully these deepest fears, and yet its ending enacts a small promise of hope against that dimming away of the world.

The ending of *The Road* echoes that to *Cities of the Plain*, the first book to speak from both a father and mother figure to a son, so that the poem ending *Cities* has now, in *The Road*, become literalized:

I will be your child to hold And you be me when I am old The world grows cold The heathen rage The story's told Turn the page. [COTP 293]

That poem, symbolic in its initial delivery, now resonates further. We first read it in part as the comforting of Billy, an old man then who had failed as a figurative father to John Grady Cole. I had read this poem closely toward the end of my book on McCarthy—before I could have read *The Road* even in page proofs. It seemed to me then to be a poem to the young (second) son McCarthy might have hoped for at the time of its composition, but did not yet have. Now, in *The Road*, this astonishing author finally hands off the fire to a young son who, unlike so many of his fictional sons, is not dying. Instead, in *The Road* it is the father who is dying—a kind of dying god handing off the fire to a Christ-like son who is entrusted to carry it better, less guardedly and yet therefore more truthfully in trust.

After the father dies, the boy is comforted by the woman of a family, in *The Road*'s strongest echo of *Cities of the Plain*. Where the earlier failed father, Billy, lies comforted by the figurative mother Betty at the edge of his last sleep, we now find a son released by his father's death into a new world—though yet darker than any we had seen before in McCarthy—that nonetheless holds out some promise beyond that of a few seeds and spores. The boy at the end of *The Road* has been released into a future that includes a mother who does not run away or kill herself. In this sense, it restores the child to the mother, too, and therefore echoes and reverses Rinthy's loss and the child's abandonment and murder in *Outer Dark*. *Outer Dark* most obviously presages

The Road with its carnage and cannibalism, its fires, and the centrality of Outer Dark's problem of a father and son on the road with the first and last sympathetic mother in McCarthy lost behind them. The ending of The Road restores, as it were, the child to Rinthy and the mother to the still nameless child.

Detractors of *The Road*'s ending either speculate that the family will eat the boy, or complain that the appearance of the family comes off as forced—a *deus ex machina* clanging in to finish the book. Either of these interpretations tilts too far from the dream balance of a book that at once describes an unbelievably hopeless situation for a man and his son, and yet repeatedly wrenches hope from that situation. The first reading gives in to pessimism, and that would be fine if the tense in the text itself ("She would talk to him sometimes about God.") did not obviate this guess into a short future. As for an unbelievable note of optimism, the book's final paragraph does (as I have argued) express a deep mourning for an unrecoverable world: the "thing which could not be put back." It even leaves the characters behind to do so.

McCarthy's sense of an end to our world fits an idea that any world arises out of iterative and yet locally mutable creative force on the brink of everpresent entropy and destruction: wreck this one, and there may be another, but it will never be the same. This does not mean, however, that the sudden arrival of the family and the woman's embrace of the boy merely enacts a dramatic retreat from the horror of the novel that precedes them. It simply fulfills the logic that with the passing of the father, the boy enters into a new world—with new characters in it—not unlike the end of many a Shakespeare play (including, and most important to us here, the tragedies). As Edwin Arnold has noted, the importance of dreams in McCarthy's novels runs beside the possibility of reading their larger narratives as dreams. At the end of *No Country for Old Men*, we end literally inside one dream that is left unfinished in the waking memory of the dreamer. At the end of *The Road*, we are rather allowed a glimpse into the dream that will follow—before the final paragraph looks back at all that has been lost.

As for the new dream, things are not so easy for this renascent family as we might imagine. The ending provides us for the first time in a McCarthy novel with a full family. And yet the heavy price paid for that is that they, too, are on the road. If they are the good people (and the tense of the text tells me they are), they are not out of danger from encountering the many more bad people still about.

The new father figure trusts the boy to keep his own gun, which not only reminds us that he is not out of danger, but suggests the boy's advancement to a new level of independence within his new family. The boy is allowed his choice of talking not to the woman's god, but to his father. This family that has found him, then, has its own order and beliefs, but he is not forced to submit to

those in order to join them. The breath of prayer might be that of the boy talking to his father, and it might yet be more. That the woman recognizes this and tells the boy "that was all right" (241) even allows for the ambivalence toward god (which, as I had argued earlier, might even be an indecision between belief and agnosticism in McCarthy) to express itself in two directions in the same penultimate paragraph.

The Road's vision finally reaches beyond that of the poem in Cities of the Plain. "The heathen rage" yet, and the world certainly grows colder. But we have turned the page beyond the very end of our world and seen the beginning—however fragile—of a new one. The woman's reassurance is not to an old man going to sleep, but to a young one just awakening to what "the fire" might now truly promise: love beyond a father and son in a world dying from the rage of men. Indeed, hope beyond reason.

The Route and Roots of *The Road*

Wesley G. Morgan

Placing Cormac McCarthy's new novel, *The Road*, in geographical and chronological perspectives are among the first challenges to an inquisitive reader of the book. This paper will address the geographical question by attempting to trace the route followed by the father and son

Among other attributes, Cormac McCarthy is known and admired for his careful research and close attention to the details of physical settings in his novels. Those readers familiar with the general terrain described in a McCarthy novel can usually identify multiple specific locations in each of his earlier books (with the possible exception of *Outer Dark*). One might expect that this generalization would hold true for *The Road* as well.

However, reviews by a number of apparently geographically challenged critics and commentators have suggested some novel (no pun intended) locations for the route. Mike Shea in the *Texas Monthly* said that "the man and the boy could be anywhere", but that the "See Rock City" sign "suggests Georgia" (Shea 60). Jerome Weeks of *The Dallas Morning News* placed the pair "in a barren Southwest" where "[t]hey seem to be headed for the coast of California." William Kennedy in *The New York Times* maintains the pair "are heading to the Gulf Coast" (Kennedy 10).

I first presented my ideas about the route of *The Road* on the Cormac McCarthy Forum in a thread titled, "First Look at The Road," on June 28, 2006. The ideas presented there are elaborated in this paper.

The location of the beginning and end of the trip are unclear to me, but I believe the trail can be picked up fairly early in the novel in Middlesboro, Kentucky: "A raw hill country. Aluminum houses" (*TR* 12). In Middlesboro, along the route of the old Wilderness Road (US 25-E) and the old Dixie Highway, there are a large number of mobile homes, euphemistically called "aluminum houses," just north of the Cumberland Gap tunnel. It seems safe to assume that the father and son pass through Middlesboro, Kentucky on their way over Cumberland Gap.

Just beyond the high gap in the mountains they stood and looked out over the great gulf to the south where the country as far as they could see was burned away, the blackened shapes of rock standing out of the shoals of ash and billows of ash rising up and blowing downcountry through the waste. The track of the dull sun moving unseen beyond the murk. (12)

The high gap is Cumberland Gap. The saddle of the gap itself was on US 25-E before the Cumberland Gap Tunnel was opened in 1996. Wonderful views to the south are indeed to be seen from the Gap and Pinnacle Overlook.

Descending the south side of the Gap, US 25-E enters Harrogate, Tennessee. The traveller then turns west on TN 63 toward Arthur, Speedwell, Fincastle, La Follette, Jacksboro, Caryville and Lake City, Tennessee.

At the crest of the hill was a curve and a pullout in the road. An old trail that led off through the woods. They walked out and sat on a bench and looked out over the valley where the land rolled away into the gritty fog. A lake down there. Cold and gray and heavy in the scavenged bowl of the countryside.

What is that, Papa? It's a dam. (16-17)

The lake is Lake Norris and the dam is Norris Dam. The dam, the first built by the Tennessee Valley Association (TVA), was completed in 1936 to provide flood control and recreation, and to generate power. The place described is the Norris Dam Overlook, and a bench is still there.

It is presumed that the pair continue to follow US 25-W through Bethel and Clinton toward Knoxville. Evidently, they do not cross over the dam and take US 441 into Knoxville:

Can we go down there and see it? I think it's too far. (17)

By dusk of the day following they were at the city. The long concrete sweeps of the interstate exchanges like the ruins of a vast funhouse against the distant murk. (20)

The "city" is Knoxville, Tennessee, and the interstate exchanges are likely those of I-40 and I-75 (or now I-275). For years that particular interchange was known as "malfunction junction." The more recent construction of new interchanges and I-240 were intended to reduce the traffic problems. It does look like a "funhouse" from the air.

They crossed the high concrete bridge over the river. A dock below. (21)

The "high concrete bridge" is the Henley Street Bridge over the Tennessee River. A dock and marina can now be seen looking east from the bridge. The bridge figures prominently in *Suttree* (11, 89, 364) and is mentioned in

The Orchard Keeper (211). Suttree's houseboat would have been tied to the bank where the docks are located, and Hooper, the ragpicker, lives under the south end of the bridge and is visited there by Buddy Suttree and Gene Harrogate. And it is also on this bridge that Marion Sylder's car stalls causing his arrest for bootlegging in *The Orchard Keeper*: "It quit in the middle of the Henley Street Bridge" (*OK* 211).

Cormac McCarthy and his family of origin lived for many years in south Knoxville and would have traveled over this bridge on the way to work, shop, church or school.

The day following some few miles south of the city at a bend in the road and half lost in the dead brambles they came upon an old frame house with chimneys and gables and a stone wall. The man stopped. Then he pushed the cart up the drive.

What is this place, Papa? It's the house where I grew up. (TR 21)

Writing in *The New York Review of Books*, Michael Chabon suggests that the father and son "seem to repeat the visit that Cornelius Suttree, the hero of the novel who leaves his rich family to become a river fisherman, pays to his ruined childhood home" (Chabon 24). But the description of Suttree's home, "the old mansion" "on a promontory" "above the river" with "tall fluted columns" does not fit the description provided here. The house where Cormac McCarthy grew up is located on Martin Mill Pike. It is a frame house with seven gables that has seen better days situated on a now overgrown lot. And there are the remains of a stone wall made by the McCarthy boys near the drive. It fits the description and location given in *The Road*.

Three nights later in the foothills of the eastern mountains he woke in the darkness to hear something coming. (TR 23)

They passed through the ruins of a resort town and took the road south. (TR 25)

The route to the Smoky Mountains and Gatlinburg has been mentioned several times by McCarthy in his earlier works. The road passes through the towns of Sevierville and Pigeon Forge before reaching Gatlinburg.

And far in the distance the long purple welts of the Great Smokies. (*OK* 55)

The town of Sevierville was mentioned in both Child of God (96, 166) and

Suttree (195), and Gatlinburg appears several times in Suttree:

He made himself up a pack from old sacking and rolled his blanket and with some rice and dried fruit and a fishline he took a bus to Gatlinburg. (283)

They took a cab to Gatlinburg and stopped at a service station to have chains put on the tires. (399)

On their way into the mountains father and son stop briefly.

He stood on a stone bridge where the waters slurried into a pool and turned slowly in a gray foam. Where once he'd watched trout swaying in the current, tracking their perfect shadows on the stones beneath. (*TR* 25)

This is reminiscent of a scene from Suttree.

Suttree lay on a warm rock above the river and watched the trout drift and quarter over the cold gray stones. (283)

Leaning into the cart, winding slowly upward through the switchbacks. (*TR* 25-26)

Another place along the route of *The Road* that can be specifically and unambiguously identified is Newfound Gap in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park on the Tennessee/North Carolina border. The giveaway detail is its altitude:

The pass at the watershed was five thousand feet and it was going to be very cold. (25)

It didnt snow again but the snow in the road was six inches deep and pushing the cart up those grades was exhausting work. (28)

The wind in the dead black stands of hemlock. The empty parking lot at the overlook. (28)

It was very cold. Toward the afternoon it began to snow again and they made camp early and crouched under the leanto of the tarp and watched the snow fall in the fire. (29) The altitude of Newfound Gap is 5,048 feet and it is the lowest gap in the Smoky Mountains. The earliest road over the mountains went through Indian Gap at 5,271 feet. The current route is lower and shorter and was called the new found gap after its discovery. There is a large parking area at the gap, and it was the site of President Roosevelt's dedication of the Park on Labor Day, 1940. Because of its scenic views it is a popular stopping point for travelers along US 441 and for hikers along the Appalachian Trail. According to the National Park Service, Newfound Gap is on average 10° F degrees cooler than the nearby lowlands and receives on average 69 inches of snow each year (*Newfound*). The nearby stands of hemlock have been decimated in recent years by an infestation of the Hemlock Wooly Adelgid (*Adelges tsugae Annand*), an invasive species introduced on the east coast in 1951.

The parking area at the gap had been visited earlier in McCarthy's fiction by Suttree and his girlfriend, Joyce, during their cab ride to the mountains.

At Newfound Gap there were skiers, a bright group bristling with their poles and skis about the parked cars. (*S* 400)

After crossing the mountains, the pair would go through Cherokee and on to Franklin, North Carolina via one of several routes. I believe the most likely would be through Bryson City, the place where Suttree emerges after his six weeks or so in the mountains (291), and then take NC 28 through Wests Mill and Lotla. From Franklin they would continue on NC 28, US 64 southeast toward Highlands, North Carolina.

They came out along the rim of a deep gorge and far down in the darkness a river....High rock bluffs on the far side of the canyon with thin black trees clinging to the escarpment. The sound of the river faded. Then it returned. (*TR* 31-32)

This sounds like a description of Cullasaja Gorge and the route along NC 28, US 64 southeast of Franklin, North Carolina. The river does become significantly separated from the highway at several points and alternates between wild rapids and lethargic drifting at others.

They left the cart in a parking area and walked out through the woods. A low thunder coming from the river. It was a waterfall dropping off a high shelf of rock and falling eighty feet through a gray shroud of mist into the pool below. (32)

The waterfall mentioned is likely Dry Falls. It is located in Cullasaja Gorge about 20.5 miles southeast of Franklin on the way to Highlands, North Caro-

lina, along NC-28, US-64. There is a small parking lot just off the highway and a trail that leads a short distance down to the falls. The river falls 75-80 feet and is a popular tourist attraction. It is named Dry Falls because one can walk behind the falls and remain relatively dry. After the father and son swim in the pool below the falls, the reader is told,

They dressed shivering and then climbed the trail to the upper river. They walked out along the rocks to where the river seemed to end in space and he held the boy while he ventured out to the last ledge of rock. The river went sucking over the rim and fell straight down into the pool below. The entire river. He clung to the man's arm.

It's really far, he said. It's pretty far. Would you die if you fell? You'd get hurt. It's a long way. It's really scary. (33-34)

Do you think that McCarthy (or the father) might have read the sign in the parking area near the river above Dry Falls that says:

DANGER

Stream rocks are slippery. A slip above a waterfall can be FATAL. Stay off the rocks and away from the edge. People have died here.

We have to keep moving. We have to keep heading south. Doesnt the river go south? No it doesnt. (*TR* 36)

The Cullasaja River is to the northwest of the Eastern Continental Divide and indeed flows northwest into the Little Tennessee, Tennessee, Ohio and Mississippi Rivers to drain into the Gulf of Mexico. Highlands, North Carolina, is located on the Divide.

An ancient mapmaker indicated the end of the known world by stating, "Here be dragons." I will have to admit that I become lost after Highlands. However, there are some interesting clues to places that someone more familiar with the Carolinas might be able to identify. For example, after glassing the valley below them with binoculars the man and his son spotted a pale wisp of

smoke: "If it's a commune they'll have barricades" (67). According to their promotional material, the Boone-Douthit House, now the Rocky Retreat Bed & Breakfast in Pendleton, SC, served as a commune during the 1960's and 1970's (*Rocky*). Could this have been the commune that the father had in mind?

Well. I think we're about two hundred miles from the coast. As the crow flies. (TR 132)

One could draw a line parallel and two hundred miles from the coast to identify possible locations. That line would pass about forty miles south of Pendleton, South Carolina. (Pendleton to Charleston = 244 miles.)

He found a telephone directory in a filling station and he wrote the name of the town on their map with a pencil. They sat on the curb in front of the building and ate crackers and looked for the town but they couldnt find it. He sorted through the sections and looked again. Finally he showed the boy. They were some fifty miles west of where he'd thought. (153)

This town that they cannot find on the map may well be either Ellenton or Dunbarton, South Carolina. During the period 1950-1951 the Federal Government condemned or bought land consisting of some 300 square miles for the Savannah River Project that completely eliminated these two towns as well as a number of other unincorporated communities. Some 6,000 people and 6,000 graves were relocated in the process. If they continue south, keeping near streams and rivers and traveling generally downstream, they would eventually reach the South Carolina coast. The mention of the Piedmont reinforces that speculation.

Now to the question of when the novel is set. Following Mr. McGuire's one word of advice in the film *The Graduate* (1967), the key to bounding the time frame of *The Road* may be "plastics." According to my research, the first disposable plastic safety razor, the "Good News!" razor, was introduced in this country by Gillette in 1976. Similarly, Kendall Motor Oil seems to have introduced the first plastic bottles of motor oil in 1978. Barring anachronisms, this would suggest that the road trip takes place at the earliest in the late 1970's.

The latest that the trip could take place, again barring an anachronism, would seem to be the late 1990's. On October 18, 1996, the Cumberland Gap Tunnel was opened and the old route (US 25-E) through the Gap was closed and eventually dismantled to return the route of the Wilderness Road to its early nineteenth century wagon road state. The pavement removal was completed in 2002. Since the father and son go over the Gap on a road rather than a trail, it would have to be before that date. Were the tunnel open, it surely

would be a shorter and probably a more attractive route for the pair since they are pushing a loaded grocery cart.

In 1998, Robert Droz took some photographs along the old US 25-E route through the Gap after the tunnel was opened but before the pavement had been removed (Droz). On May 27, 2002, the National Park Service opened the restored trail to the public.

Interestingly, there is a nearby railroad tunnel under the ridge to Cumberland Gap, Tennessee, built by the L & N Railway in 1892. That tunnel is still operational and might have been easily used by the walkers had they been aware of it. Why would the father choose this particular route to travel? The route chosen would hardly be the most direct way to the southern coast, and it is not accidental as the father has an oil company map that he frequently consults. Early on the father picks up a telephone and dials the number of his father's home. Why does he do that? Surely he is not expecting anyone to answer. It seems to me that he is planning the trip through Knoxville, and nearby places, as a way of acquainting his son with his roots. In The Road there are personal references to the father's childhood experiences at Norris Dam watching a falcon, (17) at his family home in Knoxville remembering Christmas, the yellow brick hearth, and his childhood dreams, (21-23) looking into a pool below a stone bridge in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park where he watches the trout's shadow on the stones beneath them (25), and at Newfound Gap where he once stood with his own father (28-29).

It seems to me that the importance of the route is that McCarthy is fictionally returning once again to his own roots in Knoxville and the southeast, to some of the places where the author spent the earlier years of his life. I believe that it is no accident that these places are the ones that are described in the most detail. Observations such as these would seem to make other autobiographical interpretations of the text more plausible.

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The Post-Southern Sense of Place in *The Road*

Chris Walsh

ormac McCarthy's most recent novel makes another significant contribution to his imaginative construction of the South. His work has always had a complex relationship with the foundational myths of Southern literature, typified by his interest in history and community, and his attachment to (and depiction of) place, which is such a pronounced theme of the region's literature. Far from signaling an exhaustion of such characteristically Southern and, for that matter, American mythic and imaginative categories, I maintain that *The Road* succeeds in re-invigorating them, albeit in keeping with the dystopian ideological moment of the novel's composition and publication.

The Road is a typically paradoxical McCarthy novel in that it both invites and frustrates interpretation, operating on various aesthetic, ideological, allegorical and stylistic levels. I must also address an irony which arises out of attempting to frame a post-apocalyptic, dystopian novel in such potentially mythic terms. The ideological determinants for such an imaginative vision are simply too vast to be addressed in this paper, but there are causes aplenty—the dystopian sensibility which has informed the nation's imaginative consciousness in the aftermath of September 11th, the sorry mess of a war in Iraq which constitutes a grim episode in the history of American exceptionalism, the specter of global warming and ecological disaster, and the implications of economic globalization and trans-nationalism. And yet in *The Road* McCarthy reclaims a sense of mythic space for Southern and American literature, especially with regard to his inscription of the myth of the frontier.

In order to establish the mythic concerns of *The Road*, I will focus on the work of Brian Jarvis who, in *Postmodern Cartographies*, explores the continued geocentric preoccupation of much American literature. I will also model my discussion of post-Southerness around the definition of the term provided by Martyn Bone in *The Postsouthern Sense of Place in Contemporary Fiction*. Far from suggesting an exhaustion with the fundamental mythic concerns of Southern literature, Bone reveals how many contemporary [post] Southern novelists are deeply concerned with them, and how they go on to offer complex meditations on such ideas. In order to further explicate such concepts, I'd like to offer a comparative analysis of a novel which conforms to the post-Southern paradigm which Bone offers, namely Richard Ford's *The Lay of the Land*, the final instalment of the Frank Bascombe trilogy.

In his seminal study *Postmodern Cartographies*, Jarvis is essentially concerned with establishing whether the traditional geocentric concern of much American literature, film and cultural theory in the postmodern phase represents a decisive break with previous imaginative and critical offerings. Jarvis

maintains that space is, and always has been, of paramount importance to the American imagination, and that this spatial concern is mirrored by an increasing emphasis on geographical analysis within the academy, as evidenced in the work of such figures as Jean Baudrillard, Frederic Jameson, David Harvey and Edward Soja (all of whom Jarvis deals with).

Jarvis maintains that America's literary offerings mirror the utopian or dystopian sensibility of their historical moment of production, and he goes on to note that although "the lenses may have altered considerably . . . all subsequent observers have been obliged to observe American landscapes through some kind of ideological eyeglass" (2).

Jarvis explores how much American literature has always had a deep fascination with space, even during the post-industrial phase where this mythic space has been colonized, fenced-off and commodified. As Jay Ellis has so insightfully acknowledged, much of McCarthy's fiction details this transformation of American physical and imaginative terrain from boundless space to confining place, a crucial distinction. Somewhat ironically perhaps, *The Road* actually reverses this process, going from a distant, settled sense of place to a new mythically terrifying sense of space following the global disaster that has occurred. This is very much in keeping with Jarvis' notion that the history of the representation of space in American fiction tends to "gravitate towards utopian and dystopian extremes. It was the best of places, it was the worst of places, but always the land itself loomed large in the imagination of America" (1). Jarvis goes on to observe the following:

What is essential . . . is a recognition of the following: the central role that geography plays in the American imagination and the way in which that imagination bifurcates towards utopian and dystopian antipodes. Many of the key words in the discourses of American history and definitions of that nebulous entity referred to as "national identity" are geocentric: the Frontier, the Wilderness, the Garden, the Land of Plenty, the Wild West, the Small Town, the Big City, the Open Road. The geographic monumentality of the New World inspired feelings of wonder and terror. (6)

Although Jarvis fails to mention the South at all in his categorization of the geocentric entities that have been the focus of much American fiction, it is clear that McCarthy's latest effort can be read within such conventional patterns of mythic American cultural narratives even if, as one should expect of his work by now, they are problematized throughout. Although one must always be careful in applying such reductive genre-readings to his fiction, I believe that *The Road* is fundamentally concerned with many of the mythic cornerstones of the American imagination. It has a savage other haunting the

woods and trails, it is unsettled and thoroughly undomesticated, it is as violent and bloody as the landscapes McCarthy has explored in his western works, as the father and son forge out into a new, unknowable terrain; they may not "ride on" here, but they do keep trudging on with their shopping cart. In keeping with its dystopian ideological moment, this is not some Arcadian, pristine landscape, and the novel "lights out" not for the West but for the South this time, a crucial distinction, in terms of the pattern of McCarthy's novelistic conclusions and for the mythic narrative of the frontier itself. Finally, and as indicated by the novel's title, the work is another unsettling road narrative, with the road itself representing one of America's "mythological heartlands" (176), as Jarvis outlines.

It is clear then that *The Road* exhibits a concern with geocentric and mythic narratives which are uniquely American. What, though, of the South in all of this? What kind of relationship with place or non-place does McCarthy maintain throughout the narrative? Can we even attempt to claim the novel as a Southern work, especially when one considers that this is, after all, a world in which everything is "uncoupled from its shoring" (*TR* 11).

To help us address these questions, I'd now like to turn our attention to the work of Martyn Bone, a critic who explores how such concerns play out in contemporary Southern letters. Bone's primary concern is related to establishing how contemporary Southern literature establishes its traditional sense of place. Specifically, Bone examines how contemporary writers such as Richard Ford adhere to or deviate from the practice of literary construction of the South as outlined in Agrarian philosophy, especially in relation to how "the Agrarians increasingly conceived southern place as agricultural real property, apotheosized in the subsistence farm" (viii).

Much like Jarvis, and Jay Ellis when it comes to McCarthy scholarship, Bone charts the passage from a pronounced (and perhaps entirely imagined) sense of space in Southern literature to the depiction of Percyean non-places in what he refers to as post-Southern fiction. As Bone goes on to state, he is attempting to "try to understand how people live in a world in which the usual platitudes of 'place'- whether as precapitalist proprietary ideal, or literary-critical image-no longer hold" (50). The traditional sense of place has therefore been subsumed by the ubiquitous non-places of post-industrial America, where all organic connections to place have been ruptured and entirely commodified, and where it is virtually impossible to return to or imagine a sense of the foundational South.

Post-Southern novels therefore have an intense relationship with place, as opposed to mythic space, a crucial distinction. Perhaps nowhere is this better highlighted than in Richard Ford's series of Frank Bascombe novels, which concluded with the final installment *The Lay of the Land*, which was nominated alongside *The Road* for the 2006 National Book Critics Circle Book of

the Year award. The opening and closing Bascombe novels conclude at opposite ends of the continent, one in Florida, the other in the Midwest, both of which are suitable Percyean non-places, one famed for its Baudrillardean simulated tourist locations, the other renowned for its robust and decidedly anti-pastoral industrial output. Yet as with *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day* Ford, through Bascombe, continues his self-reflexive inquiry into the South as a grounding historical centre, familial and imaginative refuge, and cultural and economic space.

Bascombe can be read as the nemesis of Agrarian thought, the aggressive land speculator who likes nothing more than the "view of landscape in use" (36). Bascombe offers a neatly sealed off and commodified version of the corrupted pastoral dream, located in suburbia, secure in its tax base and zoning district, and a million miles away from the small tenant farmer whose subsistence is a form of resistance against the encroaching forms of late industrial capitalism. Such a dream was long cherished by the Agrarians, and it is one that, to an extent, McCarthy has also depicted as ossifying and disappearing, especially in *The Orchard Keeper* and *Child of God*.

Although he returns again and again to his Southern history and the sense of place and the attendant melancholia it bestows, Bascombe never suggests that the South could represent an alternative, counter-hegemonic spatial potential, as the father does in *The Road* for example. Instead it is held up for continued ridicule and scorn, as captured in one conversation with his daughter where he states the following; "Do you ever think that you were born in New Jersey and thanked your lucky stars, since you could've been born in south Mississippi like me and had to spend years getting it out of your system?" (126).

In one of the most striking examples of what Scott Romine calls "conspicuous southerness" Bascombe outlines how a wealthy Kentucky-based horse breeder relocated to a prosperous New Jersey suburb, bringing with him his mock-plantation style home. Furthermore, Bascombe's knowledge of the real estate deal hints at a vast nexus of transnational capital exchange of a kind which is completely absent from McCarthy's novel:

But the Koreans instantly cashed in the lot for two million to a thoroughbred breeder from Kentucky with big GOP connections. In a year, he'd put up a lot-line to lot-line three-quarter size replica of his white plantation-style mansion in Lexington, complete with fluted acacialeaf columns, mature live oaks from Florida, an electric fence, mean guard dogs, a rebel flag on the flagpole and two Negro jockey statues painted his stable colors, green and black. "Not Furlong" is what he called the place, though the neighbors have found other names for it. (48)

Yet despite Bascombe's skepticism about the potential for the South to offer a counter-narrative or alternative space materially or culturally, and despite his repeated ironic depictions of the region, his deepest yearning is that he will be able to find such a space. As we leave Bascombe at the novel's close as he is flying into America's post-industrial Midwestern heartland he speaks on behalf of the other cancer-ridden patients on his flight when he states that, "None of us would mind that much if our ship went down or was hijacked to Cuba or just landed someplace other than our destination-some fresh territory where new and unexpected adventures could blossom, back-burnering our inevitables till later" (470). This longing for fresh territory, for a sense of boundless, uncontaminated space gets to the very heart of the geocentric urge of Southern and American literature, and it means that we can frame both Ford and McCarthy within such overriding mythic narrative paradigms. Bone is quite right when he states that "although Richard Ford's fiction critiques the production of postmodern capitalist geographies, it never returns to a foundational 'South'" (135). However, it is exactly this foundational, mythic South that McCarthy returns to in *The Road*, as we follow an unnamed father and son as they journey through an ash-laden and savage wasteland, along the blacktop of the novel's title that is one of the mythological cornerstones of the American cultural and literary imagination. The landscape traversed here is not some pastoral sanctuary, nor is it one of the "gardens of the world"; rather it is a bleak, lifeless and threatening post-apocalyptic horror-scape which is entirely in keeping with the ideologically dystopian moment of the novel's composition and publication.

The landscape traversed in the novel is one in which Bascombe would be completely stranded. We have learned that Ford's narrator likes nothing more than to view the landscape in use, and one of the most noticeable differences between the two novels is the sheer absence or lack of materiality in McCarthy's text. Phone books, maps, states and even nations have no signifying purpose in the fictional world presented to us here, and road signs advertising the tourist attraction of Rock City stand isolated where all signifiers of previous order, place and supposed security lack any kind of signifying purpose. Aside from the relatively minor benefit of the child's not knowing what the once global force of Coca-Cola is, this is a world that is "shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities" (*TR* 88).

One of the most symbolic themes of the novel is that the South—as physical space, imaginative entity and narrative focus—acts as a redemptive agency when all else seems to have vanished. The motivation behind this may be that the father believes that the climate will be marginally better there or that some kind of life may have prevailed, but it is also heavily influenced by a Southern, pastorally sublime memory from the father's childhood. Recalling a day spent fishing with his uncle, the father remembers that this was "the perfect day of

his childhood. This the day to shape the days upon" (13). Furthermore, the scene where the pair bathe in a waterfall and find morels growing nearby (most probably located in North Carolina, as Wes Morgan has so convincingly pointed out) is perhaps the closest approximation to a pastoral or sublime moment in the whole novel.

In the novel's otherwise utterly dystopian setting, the South not only functions as a physical frontier and goal, but also as an imaginative refuge; quite simply, the father starts to tell, and the son longs to be told, about the South. Narrative and story-telling is perhaps all that these two have left, and from an early stage in the novel the son pleads with his father to read him a story (7), and the father obliges, recounting "[o]ld stories of courage and justice as he remembered them" (41). At one stage the child starts to develop his own fantasies about "[h]ow things would be in the south" (54), where he even dares to imagine a community of sorts, perhaps one including other children. The father even falls back on the heroic stoicism that we find in some of McCarthy's other Southern characters, as he implores his son to keep trying as "This is what the good guys do. They keep trying. They dont give up" (137), all the while trying to stave off the knowledge and reality of the "crushing black vacuum of the universe" (130), which perpetually threatens to destroy these two sorry pilgrims. One can even locate a handful of examples of Romine's "conspicuous southerness" in the novel, although they are free of the ironic and knowing treatment offered by Bascombe. In one instance the father and the son wander through the ruins of a plantation house replete with their "tall and stately white . . . Doric columns" (105), failed pretensions to order and stability from another era. Elsewhere McCarthy evokes the gothic and grotesque sensibility evident in his earlier Southern works, especially when we learn that the "long concrete sweeps of the interstate" on the approach to Knoxville resemble "the ruins of a vast funhouse" (24), which is reminiscent of the grotesque and carnivalesque descriptions of the city one finds in Suttree. We learn that the city is populated with "the mummied dead everywhere," appearing "[s]hriveled and drawn like latterday bogfolk" (24), whilst McCarthy continues to employ such grotesque imagery later in the narrative as we encounter "[f]igures half mired in the blacktop, clutching themselves, mouths howling" (190), pitiful figures that resemble victims of the devilish triumvirate in *Outer* Dark.

In conclusion, we can see how *The Road* is a novel deeply concerned with the geocentric myths and narrative patterns that have long been the domain of much American literature, especially literature of the South. The dystopian view it offers is very much in keeping with the ideological eyeglass, so to speak, of its time of composition and publication, yet it also re-habilitates the myth of the frontier in the American literary imagination.

In No Place for Home: Spatial Constraint and Character Flight in the

Novels of Cormac McCarthy, Jay Ellis notes that each of McCarthy's novels ends in a linear westward pattern, as each of his protagonists "lights out" for the frontier in an attempt to counter its "dissolution into the realities of history" (37). Much of the profound melancholy generated by McCarthy's work can be attributed to the fact that history catches up with and supercedes myth for his characters, rendering their existence obsolete. Ellis also makes the deeply insightful point that this is due to the transformation of the American land-scape from boundless space to confining place, and there seems to be no remedy for the "dwindling [sense of] space" that haunts his characters (315).

However, I believe *The Road* offers something of a corrective to this pattern, and it does so by freeing itself of the knowing, self-reflexive enquiry into "conspicuous Southerness" that we located in Richard Ford's archetypal post-Southern novel *The Lay of The Land*. Whilst Bascombe appears to revel in his role as the nemesis to Agrarian thought, safe in his role as a realtor in the suitably Percyean non-place of New Jersey, we learn at the close of the narrative that he yearns for a sense of boundless space that one can find in McCarthy's novel. That he cannot locate such a space accounts for the tragic element that prevails at the close of the novel, as we leave Bascombe longing for the sense of the foundational myths of the South, as Martyn Bone would put it, which we have identified as functioning in *The Road*, and which could potentially rescue Bascombe from his classically Southern melancholic introspection.

Although ashen, wasted and ostensibly dystopian, *The Road* succeeds in reviving the most cherished geocentric American myth of the frontier, of a new physical, imaginative and spatial beginning. In what is a major symbolic gesture McCarthy re-inscribes this national myth; in so doing, he reverses the westerly spatial movement of his own characters, and we leave the boy as he continues to carry his light into the South.

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The End of the Road: Pastoralism and the Post-Apocalyptic Waste Land of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

Tim Edwards

n an article titled "A Thing Against Which Time Will Not Prevail: Pastoral and History in Cormac McCarthy's South," John M. ■ Grammer writes, "it is hard to imagine Cormac McCarthy on some platform in Stockholm [sic], assuring us [as William Faulkner did] that man will survive and prevail" (19). McCarthy's latest novel, The Road, addresses that very issue of survival—not just humankind's survival but that of life as a whole. The Road concludes with an enigmatic but pastoral image of "brook trout in the streams in the mountains. . . . On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes" (241). Such a pastoral coda suggests an almost Emersonian sense of Nature as sacred text, a book to be interpreted, a hieroglyphic, as Walt Whitman would have it, that means. It is, in fact, one of many texts we find embedded or interpolated within the narrative, and we will concern ourselves with a number of these. However, to return briefly to the sequence at hand, this passage is not only pastoral but elegiac, for those brook trout are gone, those mountain streams barren of life in the post-apocalyptic waste land of McCarthy's stark and disturbing novel.

Landscape imagery in Cormac McCarthy's novels has never been far from the minds of McCarthy scholars. Those such as Georg Guillemin have urged us to read McCarthy's larger canon through an ecocritical or ecopastoral lens. The title of Grammer's article, referenced above, indicates the pastoral thrust of his reading of McCarthy. Others working in the field of McCarthy studies have found a naturalistic impulse in works such as *Blood Meridian*, where we find an appropriately naturalistic western landscape devoid of pastoral beauty, "blasted . . . by eons of natural violence . . . into terrifying, sublime postures," as critic Barcley Owens has observed (7). This paper aims to navigate the gulf between the naturalistic landscape of Blood Meridian and more pastoral landscapes of some of McCarthy's earlier fiction by concentrating on the landscape images of *The Road*—for McCarthy's most recent novel offers a landscape blasted not by natural violence but by human violence. Furthermore, McCarthy's text of nature offers not solace and comfort in the traditional romantic sense but a dire warning indeed. But other texts—equally haunting, equally gothic in their own ways—also inscribe McCarthy's novel.

The Road, it seems to me, recalls Leo Marx's discussion of a "variant of the machine-in-the-garden trope" (380), a variant Marx sees arising in texts published some years after his now classic study of American pastoralism, The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America. In

his afterword to the thirty-fifth anniversary edition of his book, Marx recognizes how the voices of the environmental movement of the 1960s and beyond seem to echo many of the ideas he presented in his 1964 publication. In the twentieth century, Marx observes (and certainly he would agree in the twenty-first century also), the machine in the garden has become much more threatening than the steamboat or the locomotive, those harbingers of industrialism that haunt the works of so many nineteenth-century American authors: no, the machines have grown deadly, even universally deadly, having taken on new shapes in the form of chemical waste, air and water pollution, and of course, nuclear technology and all of its attendant dangers. In fact, in *The Road* the machine in McCarthy's garden is in fact "The Bomb" itself, whose apocalyptic arrival as "[a] long shear of light and then a series of low concussions" (45) leaves behind a cauterized world, frozen in nuclear winter—and, significantly, a landscape (deathscape, really) bleak and decidedly unromantic, a landscape, in a sense, without meaning: "Barren, silent, godless" (4).

By way of clarifying procedure here, we should refer briefly to a foundational text of one variety of American pastoralism—Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Nature*. For Emerson's transcendentalist manifesto, perhaps surprisingly, in a sense provides a framework for discussing McCarthy's novel. First, we should consider how McCarthy's novel seems to present landscape as text. Emerson for his part, of course, sees the natural world as an edifying text, even a sacred text, a source of poetry and metaphor and truth. And as nature is a text of sorts, Emerson quite naturally privileges the sense of sight, rejoicing in the clarity of vision—literal, metaphorical, and spiritual—that man finds in his interaction with Nature, a complex relationship Emerson symbolizes with the image of the transparent eyeball. And an associated image is that of the sun, which Emerson references repeatedly in the early passages of his essay, noting that "The sun illuminates only the eye of the man, but shines into the eye and the heart of the child" (487). Both of these tropes, too, are important features of The Road, which is also threaded through with a network of ocular references as well as significant references to the sun, the dawn, and so on. Finally, of course, among the many nature images Emerson's essay conjures are those of the earth itself—"the woods", "the distant line of the horizon", those "plantations of God" where the flowers nod to us and seem to acknowledge our presence and where man finds "reason and faith" by gazing upon and meditating upon the "uncontained and immortal beauty" of the wilderness (Emerson 487-88). In McCarthy's novel, the earth, blistered by nuclear blast and withered by nuclear winter, presents us, of course, with a very different kind of landscape, one that seems stripped of meaning, "shorn of its referents" (75).

On one level, then, McCarthy's landscape resists interpretation, for the landscape itself is largely mute, darkened, clouded, its color palette stripped of beauty and diversity and reduced to variations of gray. The visionary clarity

of Emerson's nature is notably absent from the blasted environment of McCarthy's world in *The Road*. Nevertheless, the opening sequence of the narrative establishes several image motifs that return in one form or another throughout the novel. One such motif is that of darkness. McCarthy's unnamed main character, referred to simply as "the man," awakens, as he so often does in the narrative, in the woods—not from any desire to commune with nature but rather in an effort conceal himself and his son from their fellow men, most of whom have turned to cannibalism, cultism, and savagery. Inevitably, it seems, the man awakens to a darkened nature: "Nights dark beyond darkness and the days more gray each one than what had gone before. Like the onset of some cold glaucoma dimming away the world" (3). That first ocular reference— "some cold glaucoma dimming away the world"—is followed hard upon by other similar references to sight, or more correctly, impaired sight. The man recalls a dream of a subterranean beast "with eyes dead white and sightless as the eggs of spiders" (3). And, cautious as he is with his precious son in this unforgiving world, the man is constantly scanning the landscape with his binoculars, seeking out threats. What he finds most frequently is a sort of tabula rasa—a landscape erased of many of its previously defining features: "he glassed the valley below. Everything paling away into the murk. . . . Looking for anything of color. Any movement. Any trace of standing smoke. . . . Then he just sat there holding the binoculars and watching the ashen daylight congeal over the land" (4). Indeed, all too often, the result of his surveillance yields the same result: "Nothing to see. . . . Nothing" (7). The sun—variously described as "alien," "lost," and "banished"—is notable chiefly for its absence. The theological implications of a sunless sky are underscored by the man's frequently looking to the heavens and finding "there was nothing to see" (87). Not only the landscape, then, but the very heavens themselves seem expunged of all referent and meaning.

Other texts within the novel—disturbing ones, to be sure—are more easily accessed. For what can be read in McCarthy's landscape tells a terrifying tale indeed. The old text of the world is virtually lost, a dead language preserved only as fading memory. The new text of this post-apocalyptic world proves to be a tale of terror, a gothic nightmare rather than a transcendental dreamscape. An especially powerful passage is introduced with a description of one of many orchards that the two pilgrims encounter: "They followed a stone wall past the remains of an orchard. The trees in their ordered rows gnarled and black and the fallen limbs thick on the ground. . . . The soft ash moving in the furrows" (76). In this former domain of pastoral beauty and order, the man finds evidence of the chaos that has broken loose in the ruined garden of the world: "He'd seen it all before. Shapes of dried blood in the stubble grass and gray coils of viscera where the slain had been field-dressed and hauled away" (76). What is more, these horrors are presented to us as a

kind of language, as a text: "The wall beyond held a frieze of human heads" (76), their skulls tattooed with "[r]unic slogans, creeds misspelled," some "painted and signed across the forehead in a scrawl" (76). This is a text the man can in fact interpret: "He'd come to see a message in each such late history, a message and a warning, and so this tableau of the slain and the devoured did prove to be" (77).

Finally, the text of memory is one that presents itself again and again to us. The man is in fact haunted by memories of his past life and his past world, a world sometimes, but not consistently, regarded as Edenic. On the other hand, *The Road* looks squarely and unflinchingly at the horrors of the ruined garden in the wake of man's most precipitous Fall yet. As we have seen, several key images from Emerson's essay—the eye of man, the sun shining benevolently from above, the sympathetic landscape and its flora, all essential elements of what Leo Marx calls "romantic American pastoralism" (230), also constitute the core around which McCarthy's narrative is shaped, though in a startlingly debased and mutated form. We might say something similar about McCarthy's use of memory in the novel. The romantic poet, for instance, is after all the poet of nostalgia, of memory, of emotions recollected in tranquility. In some ways, *The Road* is both romantic and anti-romantic in this respect, for so much of McCarthy's novel juxtaposes past and present—though perhaps in a gothic rather than a romantic or transcendental sense.

Significantly, most (though certainly not all) of the memories and dreams that haunt the unnamed man in McCarthy's novel are pastoral, even romantic or transcendental. A key dream sequence, one of several dreams or memories that focus on the man's wife, is especially startling: "In dreams his pale bride came to him out of a green and leafy canopy. Her nipples pipeclayed and her rib bones painted white" (15). We should note how the underlying gothicism of the passage here counterpoints the more romantic imagery of the leafy canopy, and the entire image is undercut by the closing lines of the vignette: "In the morning it was snowing again. Beads of small gray ice strung along the lightwires overhead" (15). This passage rehearses in miniature what McCarthy's novel as whole accomplishes: a juxtaposing of a seemingly Edenic past with a clearly hellish present; yet that Edenic past seems to carry in it, somehow, the seeds of its own destruction. The mixed nature of this lost past is further indicated in another memory sequence, an extended description of a day on the lake with the man's uncle: "This was the perfect day of his childhood. This the day to shape the days upon" (12). Yet even this passage is undercut with vaguely gothic images: dead fish, gnarled and weathered trees, and birches described as "bone pale" (11). The man also recalls on at least two occasions observing brook trout much like those that reappear in the enigmatic coda I refer to at the beginning of this article, not only foreshadowing the novel's somber closing sequence but extending this network of connections between past and present,

between a once beautiful and abundant planet and a now charred, ice-bound rock.

But perhaps the most revealing of these passages emerges as yet another dream sequence, one that depicts the man and his son strolling beneath a cloudless sky with Emersonian Nature beautifully and bountifully enfolding them:

He dreamt of walking in a flowering wood where birds flew before them he and the child and the sky was aching blue but he was learning how to wake himself from just such siren worlds. Lying there in the dark with the uncanny taste of a peach from some phantom orchard fading in his mouth. . . . Like the dying world the newly blind inhabit, all of it slowly fading from memory. (15-16)

The "aching blue" sky alive with birds, the "flowering wood" framing this scene—these images seem lifted right out of Emerson's essay; and the ocular reference of a darkening, dying, myopic world underscores just how lost the paradise of old truly is, reduced to torturous, siren-like memory, haunting phantoms of a world forever lost. In fact, this phantom orchard reference prefigures a later incident in which the man and the boy discover a dead apple orchard and feed upon the dried and withered fruit. The Edenic allusions in both of these scenes take on greater urgency when we recognize that the man, if not the child, seems to be a sort of anti-Adam, who literally sees his world being uncreated before his eyes, a process rendered in terms of language, or more properly, the loss of language: "The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true. . . . The sacred idiom shorn of its referents" (75). The man's world has been reduced, it seems, to a tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing.

How and why Cormac McCarthy constructs such a tale of nothingness is suggested by Michael Chabon's review of *The Road* in the February 15, 2007 issue of *The New York Review of Books*:

The only true account of the world after a disaster as nearly complete as searing as the one McCarthy proposes, drawing heavily on the "nuclear winter" scenario first proposed by Carl Sagan and others, would be a book of blank pages, white as ash. But to annihilate the world in prose one must simultaneously write it into being.

And indeed, somehow McCarthy achieves that extraordinary feat: to both create and destroy the world—through language—simultaneously. But to what end? As some reviewers have noted, a storyline that just a few short years ago

would have seemed more naturally suited to the Cold War era has taken on a greater urgency in a post-9/11 world. Indeed, Alan Warner, in his review of the novel, worries that *The Road*'s "nightmare vistas [could] reinforce those in the U.S. who are determined to manipulate its people" through fear of terrorism. For Warner, "[t]his text, in its fragility, exists uneasily within such ill times." But politics aside, McCarthy tells a tale that needs to be told, one that warns us that the "[m]aps and mazes" of the world's becoming, once lost, cannot be recovered, despite the man's insistence to his son that everything will be "okay." Though the man's son, in the end, seems indeed to find "goodness," we cannot ignore how that closing coda undercuts whatever hopeful ending the boy's rescue has promised: Like the man's dreams and memories, those maps and mazes are of a world that "could not be put back. Not be made right again" (241). In that sense, "the blank pages" of Cormac McCarthy's novel are all too clearly legible: *The Road*, in the end, is a prophetic hieroglyphic of horror, an American jeremiad more terrifying than even the Puritan imagination could conjure.

Notes

1 John M. Grammer actually sees Cormac McCarthy's fiction as antipastoral in its impulse. For Grammer, McCarthy, in the tradition of writers such as William Byrd, works hard to dismantle the pastoral myth so often associated with American and, in the context of Grammer's study, Southern Literature and History.

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Full Circle: The Road Rewrites The Orchard Keeper

Louis Palmer

[T]he novel form is, like no other, an expression of transcendental homelessness.... Artistic genres now cut across one another, with a complexity that cannot be disentangled, and become traces of authentic or false searching for an aim that is no longer clearly and unequivocally given; their sum total is only a historical totality of the empirical, wherein we may seek (and possibly find) the empirical (sociological) conditions for the ways in which each form came into being.

-- Georg Lukács, The Theory of the Novel (1914)

Tereen Bell describes McCarthy's use of language as "dense and portentous" (2). "Portentous" seems to me to be exactly right. Unlike other authors who use language in such a way as to be suggestive or symbolic, deploying it so that it points the way to meanings and interpretations, or semiotic, where one thing stands in for another, McCarthy seems to have a knack for portent, for language that exudes signification without calling for the semiotic substitutions of metonymy nor for the more fragile symbolic structures of metaphor. This is not to say that his body of work cannot be productively read in these ways, but that the work always seems to exceed the reading. This essay explores the elegiac in *The Road* and *The Or*chard Keeper, acknowledging a tension between a personal model of mourning based on Freud and a broader historical model. These two works not only frame McCarthy's career at present, but demonstrate a larger circle that returns not only to McCarthy's roots in late modernism, but also to the origins of the novel itself in the episodic form of the romance. This paper proposes that McCarthy's latest novel rewrites his first, or, if you will, that *The Road* can be read and interpreted in a context generated by The Orchard Keeper. I read both novels as elegies with a focus on loss that occludes other thematic material. Both narratives are built around a generational dynamic expressed in father/son terms. Both essentially exclude other relationships and appear to be driven by the implication that this is the central human relationship.

The elegiac tradition in literature provides one model of mourning. Traditionally, the elegy allows the speaker to commemorate and confront the lost one, to express grief and loss, and to move toward a resolution; what John Vickery, in his recent study *The Elegiac Temper*, refers to as "the conventional elegiac triad of lamentation-confrontation-consolation" (1). Vickery contends that this form, once clearly defined and bounded by a series of conventions and subtypes, has metastasized in the literatures of the twentieth century, to become a central trait of modernism. It is not difficult to imagine the twentieth

century's cultural products coming out of states of post-traumatic stress brought on by the horrors of the Great War, the Depression, the twentieth-century Holocaust and the nuclear threat, among others. In Freud's terms, what was a form of mourning has become a cultural melancholia, a pervasive cultural exploration of loss, expressed on a variety of levels: historical, communal, familial, interpersonal, and psychological. Vickery attributes this elegiac expansion to "the decline in a rhetoric that provided a series of clearly defined sub-kinds of poetry together with the occurrence of large-scale historical events that created a distinctive cultural attitude affecting the modern Western world" (2). He attributes the cultural expansions of the elegiac to modernism's recurrent fascination with bygone eras.

Vickery's argument has real potential, but his study has, in my view, two major weaknesses. The first is his tendency to authorize the usual suspects in the Anglo-American canon of modernist texts. A more significant failure is his dismissal of key modernists such as Faulkner and Lowell as "regional," in a pejorative sense. In his search for grand narratives, as well as in his overwhelming emphasis on poetry rather than fiction, he neglects to acknowledge that one of modernism's major defining losses is that of specific regional cultures; indeed, of the sense that the entire Western cultural matrix is in decline, that the West is, one might say, in the redness of evening. Vickery's hierarchy of loss tends to privilege the philosophical, downplaying the fact that philosophy can have a grounding in regional culture. Despite these shortcomings, the concept of an elegiac temper as a defining context of twentieth century modernism is apposite, and McCarthy's fiction can be seen to appropriate this context, as it does so many of modernism's *donneés*, as a starting point for a step beyond modernism's pieties towards new potentialities.

One type of traditional elegy is that of the pastoral, a form set in an artificial, neoclassical rural world, often exemplified by Milton's mannered and controlled Lycidas, and by Shelley's somewhat more free-flowing Adonais. McCarthy scholarship has tended to emphasize the pastoral over the elegiac, resulting in such studies as John Grammer's "A thing against which time will not prevail: Pastoral and History in Cormac McCarthy's South" and Georg Guillemin's masterful book-length study, The Pastoral Vision of Cormac McCarthy. Both acknowledge the primacy of material nature in McCarthy's fiction and suggest a value-system that sees all forms of life as equal—a biotic democracy. I agree that what Guillemin calls ecopastoralism, or a bioethic, informs McCarthy's perspective, even to the extent that, in *The Road*, he sets himself the challenge to write nature out of a fictional world, to eliminate an aspect of the equation which has loomed large in all of his other work. Another way of saying this is that he has expanded the object of grief to an almost unthinkable level—to an ecopastoralist, what is a world without nature? Looking at McCarthy's first and latest novels, I want to compare their use of the elegiac voice, an expression of mourning at the social level. An elegy of any kind is an attempt to express and communicate grief at loss within a broader context than the therapeutic or personal one. However, since elegy must start with personal loss, I start with Freud's basic distinction between mourning and melancholia, states of mind that relate to, but are not coterminous with Guillemin's stylistic use of the term melancholy.

Sigmund Freud's Mourning and Melancholia argues that the basic point of mourning is to individuate the mourner by allowing him or her to leave the mourned object behind.² Melancholia, what clinicians today refer to as depression, occurs when the subject transfers his grief to himself through identification with the dead person. This recreates a self-destructive structure from an early stage of development, what Freud calls the "oral or cannibalistic" (249) phase of identification with the lost object. The subject thus individuates too far and fixates back on himself, creating a sort of pathological feedback loop. In this way, the melancholic subject figuratively devours himself, and demonstrates "an extraordinary diminution in his self-regard, an impoverishment of his ego on a grand scale" (246) that results in a self-perception that occludes the past, resulting in a denial that he has ever been different. This feeling of worthlessness is not accompanied by shame; indeed, it is characterized by an "insistent communicativeness which finds satisfaction in self-exposure" (247). Melancholics are often manic and are sometimes suicidal. Melancholia, to Freud, is mourning run amuck, a temporary state transferred into a permanent pathological condition by this shift in object-identification. Mourning is a temporary state, one that need not concern the analyst, but melancholia cries out for intervention.

Unexpectedly, Freud does not deal directly with the Oedipus complex in this essay; instead it serves as a kind of deep structure to the discussion of the pathology of regression brought on by loss. McCarthy's fictional world has been widely acknowledged to be masculine-centered, defined by male relationships and patterns of homosociality. Given this focus, women tend to have temporary, idealized, or ghostly roles, so it is not surprising that both of these novels focus on father/son relationships. In this context, loss always has the tendency to bring the Oedipal fantasy to the fore. Any mourning thus brings on the issue of the death of the father, at least at the level of the unconscious. The Road presents us with a father and son mourning a dead mother. In The Orchard Keeper, John Wesley, the fatherless child, tends to ignore his hysterically fundamentalist mother in favor of the teachings of two substitute father figures, Sylder and Ownby, who present him with contrasting ways to deal with loss. Even though the father's death occurs at the beginning of one novel and at the end of the other, the loss of the father is the central event in each, and the process of teaching the son to deal with that loss—directed mourning—takes up the bulk of each narrative.

Each novel deals with the process of mourning and provides a child mourner and an adult melancholic father. We can also contrast John Wesley's process of mourning, where, in Freud's words, "time is needed for the command of the reality-testing to be carried out in detail" (252) after the death of a father he barely remembers, with his mother's melancholia, which expresses itself in her violent, obsessive, insistence on revenge. Both her inability to let go of Rattner's loss and her projection of her own traits onto Rattner (with no evidence) signals that she is trapped in her identification with the lost object. Much has been made of Ownby's mentoring of John Wesley, but we can see that Ownby's mental processes are also melancholic, clinging to his memory of a past trauma—the loss of his wife—which is connected to a nostalgia for his youth and results in a variety of manifestations, including his obsessive tending of Rattner's body, his fear of a childhood bogey, and his suicidal actions against the authorities. What saves him, keeping him from being engulfed in his melancholia, is his caretaking—of John Wesley, of the body, of his blind dog. In like fashion, in The Road, the child provides a focus that keeps his father from falling into the suicidal melancholy that took his wife. When he has two bullets left, he cannot bring himself to kill the child and then himself, to go against the order of how things should be even for a brief time. This is the significance of his obsessive creation of a "dummy" bullet out of wood when he should be using his energies for survival. It is not only there to fool the enemy—what enemy will ever see it?—but to fool the child should he try to kill them both. The dummy bullet is for the child, to keep him alive, to keep things right.

Perhaps Freud's schema needs a new category, a directed melancholia, to describe these mentor-fathers. In each case, we have a young mourner paired with an adult melancholic who is held back from full melancholia by enabling the mourning process of "reality-testing" for the child. This is signified by the fire of which the man is keeper, and by the body in Ownby's pit. When the child's mourning process is over, the father's melancholia takes hold, and the expected and appropriate death of the father follows.

This may provide some insight into the characters' motivations, but what do we make of the larger historical context of the lost world? In "The Lay of the Land in Cormac McCarthy's Appalachia," K. Wesley Berry makes the prescient statement, "McCarthy's prose implies a vision of ecological holocaust, as if the collapse of the earth as we know it lurks in the near future." He adds "Destruction to life is overbearing" (55). *The Road* certainly provides us with multiple ways of looking at loss. The father and son are both mourning the lost mother, but their loss is much greater; they have also lost most of the necessities of life, and live in a world that has lost its ability to reproduce life. At one level they are mourning Nature itself. One wonders, in such a radically transformed context, if the rules that govern such processes as mourning should

survive. The novel's answer seems to be yes, that humans persevere in their basic orientations even in the absence of rational reasons for doing so. In a way, the natureless world of *The Road* literalizes the lost world described in the ending of *The Orchard Keeper*, where a still-burgeoning Nature presides over the bones of a lost people. The unexplained force that took Nature down in The Road is prefigured by the iron fence "[g]rowed all up in that tree" (3) like cancer, as well as by the broken boundary imagery. Guillemin points out that the "they" in the last paragraph, whose names have become "myth, legend, dust" (246) may only refer to the novel's main characters, since the natural world of the mountains is in such an unthreatened state. We can see that the culture that Ownby, the Rattners, and Sylder share is threatened, however, if we remember the events of the early sixties when the book was written. The story refers a variety of traditional cultural practices, such as hunting, trapping, cooking, ballad singing, and subsistence living that were fast disappearing. This was the era of the Johnson administration's War on Poverty. Expectations were high that the Appalachian region would soon become just another part of the uniform American mainstream. In 1963, Appalachian scholar Cratis Williams had just completed his encyclopedic study, The Southern Mountaineer in Fact and Fiction, which he reportedly referred to as "putting the mountaineer to bed." This was years before the Foxfire books and the Appalachian cultural revival brought Appalachian culture to a broad audience, and before cycles of governmental attention and neglect caused the War on Poverty to be a short-lived phenomenon. So the loss lamented here can certainly be seen as a mourning for the old ways, as the novel can be read as a tempered celebration of them.

Comparing the style of the novels, we can see that McCarthy has become minimalist in plot and setting as well as in characterization, removing the distractions and compensations of a democratically-rendered natural world which have been present in all of the proceeding works. But *The Road*'s world is not only an experiment in style. It demonstrates that mourning and melancholia, keeping the fire and putting it out, are activities appropriate to bioethical relations as well as internal and interpersonal ones.

Finally, what are the historical implications of *The Road*'s odd conclusion? The novel's final, prelapsarian image of trout in a clear mountain stream burns itself into the reader's consciousness, in sharp contrast to the scorched and dusty sterility of the novel's setting. It is like a breath of fresh air, as the cliché suggests, or a drink of fresh water. If we had any doubts, here is the fire. This final image is an icon of hope, a recognition of what we have not yet lost, but still may. Instead of the vague regret for lost possibilities that closes *The Orchard Keeper*, here we have a concrete emblem, a chilling reversal of *The Orchard Keeper*'s "et in Arcadia ego." The final stage of mourning is consolation, and both endings eschew consolation, except, perhaps, to suggest that we

have certain personal, cultural and historical responsibilities. Perhaps McCarthy is an activist after all?

Notes

1 Guillemin points out that McCarthy goes beyond even this in *Blood Meridian*, with his notion of "optical democracy" in which "all preference is made whimsical and a man and a rock become endowed with unguessed kinships" (*BM* 247). This concept goes beyond "all forms of life" to the material world as a whole where, "no one thing...could put forth claim to precedence" (*BM* 247). This represents a universal or extra-human perspective, whereas I am arguing that McCarthy's "biotic democracy" in *The Orchard Keeper* and *The Road* presents a model for a moral stance that is appropriately human in perspective. I want it to suggest a more political emphasis than Guillemin's term "bioethic."

2 In this account, I use the masculine pronoun because Freud does so, noting that he presented it as representing a universal.

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Hospitality in Cormac McCarthy's The Road

Phillip A. Snyder

It's snowing, the boy said. He looked at the sky. A single gray flake sifting down. He caught it in his hand and watched it expire there like the last host of christendom. (McCarthy, *The Road* 13)

To wait without waiting, awaiting absolute surprise, the unexpected visitor, awaited without a horizon of expectation: this is indeed about the Messiah as hôte, about the messianic as hospitality, the messianic that introduces deconstructive disruption or madness in the concept of hospitality, the madness of hospitality, even the madness of the concept of hospitality. (Derrida, "Hostipitality" 363)

Hospitality Structures

hese two epigraphs, the first from Cormac McCarthy and the second from Jacques Derrida, represent the impossibility of this **L** essay's project: to deconstruct *The Road* according to Derridian notions of hospitality and by so doing to recover ethics in McCarthy's fictional post-apocalyptic world of desperate wanderers moving through nuclear winter toward inevitable death. In such a world—one that bears pervasive, ashen testimony of the absolute, continuing failure of ethics, of religion, of government, of diplomacy, of humanity, of everything-could hospitality possibly reassert itself as a ground for human identity and relations? Could Derridian deconstruction-viewed by many in the current literary theory marketplace as rather passé and still considered by its critics to be the nihilistic philosophical equivalent of nuclear proliferation—open the novel to unforeseen, uninvited, and even unexpectedly hospitable readings? Could we, as readers following the narrative progression of McCarthy's father and son protagonists, obvious latter-day doubles for Abraham and Isaac, discover some figurative ram caught up in the textual bushes that might relieve the father of his constant readiness to sacrifice his son and thus also finally bring them both to rest? To paraphrase Derrida, we shall have to see what comes.

In his article "The Lost Commandment: The Sacred Rites of Hospitality," Peter J. Sorensen defines hospitality as a "sacred duty that demonstrates how the host and guest should treat each other...[with] certain reciprocal responsibilities" (5). He adds that in the ancient world "merchants or travelers needed a host who would not only give them a place to stay but would also take legal responsibility for them....Hosts became essentially agents for these strangers. Hospitality, therefore, became a powerful bond of trust and even a contractual agreement" (5-6). Further, he suggests that the cultural formalities attendant

to hospitality took on the status of social ritual even to the point of embodying a "sacred ethos that both the guest and host, if they were honorable, were careful to follow" (6). Sorensen's main argument is that world cultures have lost this sacred sense of hospitality as a fundamental responsibility for the Other, figured in the Judeo-Islamic-Christian tradition as the "wandering stranger" or the "stranger in the gates" whose very presence proclaims the ethical demand to be made welcome. Indeed, he references examples of hospitality as an ethical imperative from a number of world cultures and literatures with figures including, among others, the Bedouin, Abraham, Lot, Odysseus, Demeter, Hamlet, Jesus, Peter, and Joseph Smith. He also underscores hospitality's pervasiveness by laying out a brief etymology of the word:

[T]he Anchor Bible Dictionary, under "Hospitality," gives us the Greek philoxenia, that is, love of strangers or foreigners. Equivalent to philoxenia is the European and Latin hospes, which can stand for either guest or host, resulting in the Latinate hôpital (French), hospital (English), hôtel (French), hospice, hospitable knights or hôpitaliers (Knights Templar, who created the way stations for pilgrims for safety, banking and exchange affairs, food, clothing, and healing). (9)

The etymological breadth apparent here underlines Sorensen's main assertion that "no matter the situation, no matter the culture, no matter the name of the god . . . penalties for inhospitable behavior are great . . . and the rewards of genuine hospitality, despite the risks, are deeply satisfying and represent the highest order of reverence possible" (7). McCarthy, like Sorensen, reverences hospitality-especially given its inherent risk, namely harm and death -because such humane generosity in an inhumane world where self-preservation seems paramount may constitute McCarthy's essential notion of goodness and grace. Although the hospitality motif abounds throughout McCarthy's writing, perhaps nowhere else does it figure so fundamentally as in *The Road*, a travel narrative where the dangerous, primal hospitality drama of meeting or being the stranger looms imminently within an environment already rendered utterly lifeless and where what knights there be are desperate roadrats who welcome every pilgrim as a potential meal. The father and son are torn regularly by the dilemma inherent in the ethical call to responsibility for the Other that frames every encounter they experience because, as the "good guys. . . carrying the fire" (109) so deeply emblematic of hearth and home, they feel the weight of an impossible hospitality mandate. Ethical behavior is never easy to enact in McCarthy's fictional worlds, but here its possibility seems far, far beyond the pale, and Sorensen's traditional model of hospitality seems inadequate to get us very far down McCarthy's road, particularly because extending hospitality usually implies that the host is somehow master of the situation. That mastery comes very rarely in the novel and is always temporary and limited.

Derrida, especially as influenced by Emmanuel Levinas, may have just the philosophical structure we need to construct a productive model through which we can interrogate hospitality's ethical dilemma in *The Road* and reveal its pervasiveness throughout the novel. Levinas lays the foundation for hospitality as the fundamental ontological necessity by defining subjectivity *a priori* in terms of responsibility for the Other. This responsibility comes before subjectivity because, for Levinas, "[e]thics . . . does not supplement a preceding existential base; the very node of the subjective is knotted in ethics understood as responsibility" (95). In addition, this responsibility comes without our ever having acknowledged or accepted it, either consciously or unconsciously, as Levinas argues in the following:

[S]ince the Other looks at me, I am responsible for him, without even having taken on responsibilities in his regard; his responsibility is incumbent on me. It is responsibility that goes beyond what I do. Usually, one is responsible for what one does oneself. I say, in *Otherwise than Being*, that responsibility is initially *for the Other*. This means that I am responsible for his very responsibility. (96)

Further, this responsibility for responsibility remains "knotted" with the Other regardless of our ability to do anything to discharge it; in fact, it cannot be discharged at all but only welcomed as a gesture of openness to the Other by saying "me voici," or here I am (97). This "me voici" affirmation is a primary recurring motif in Levinas, alluding specifically to Abraham's response to God (Genesis 22:1) and to his son Isaac (Genesis 22:7) and to the angel who intervenes in the impending sacrifice (Genesis 22:11), as well as to other instances of divine call and response in the Old Testament such as Isaiah, responding to the Lord's call (Isaiah 6:8) and Samuel, doing the same (1 Samuel 3:4).

Levinas further underlines the sacredness of this relation with the Other, particularly with regard to the face-to-face, by arguing that the face "orders and ordains" us to service (97), which service is itself removed from any requirements of reciprocity because our responsibility encompasses all responsibility: "I am responsible for a total responsibility, which answers for all the others and for all in the others, even for their responsibility. The I always has one responsibility more than all the others" (99). Indeed, the "I" constitutes itself as an "I" solely on the basis of its relation with the Other and, in addition, on the impossibility of its substitution with regard to what Levinas calls its "exclusive" and "unique" (101) responsibility for the Other: "I am I in the sole measure that I am responsible, a non-interchangeable I. I can substitute

myself for everyone, but no one can substitute himself for me. Such is my inalienable identity of subject" (101). Levinas radically raises the stakes within the play of this Self/Other welcoming relation by connecting it with God, the Divine or Infinite: "When in the presence of the Other, I say 'Here I am!', this 'Here I am!' is the place through which the Infinite enters into language, but without giving itself to be seen" (106). Further, Levinas argues that this declaration by the subject "*testifies* to the Infinite" and that "[i]t is through this testimony, whose truth is not the truth of representation or perception, that the revelation of the Infinite occurs" (106). Thus, Levinas is able to conclude that his reconfiguring of subjectivity within the Self/Other relation which invites and testifies to the Infinite—this "otherwise than being" of Levinasian ontology—represents "the glory of God" (109).

While Derrida does not share this Levinasian sense of the Infinite embedded in the ethical relation–Robert Smith quotes Christian Delacampagne as generalizing, "'Derrida, c'est Levinas moins Dieu'" (113)-he nevertheless readily acknowledges his debt to Levinas in the development of his own sense of ethics. John D. Caputo, editor and commentary author of *Deconstruction in* a Nutshell, the most accessible overview of Derridian philosophy available, notes that, "As this Levinasian dimension has grown stronger and stronger over the years-'Before a thought like that of Levinas, I never have any objection,' [Derrida] would say in 1986-the ethical and political dimension of deconstruction became more and more explicit" (127). Derrida himself enacts the ethical relation in his publications, many of which come out of face-toface teaching and presentation settings, to dramatize his willingness to be made accessible and to be made responsible for his philosophy to his audience, especially as he welcomes being called into question by saying, in effect, "Here I am!" Of Hospitality and "Hostipitality," for example, both come from a series of seminars he gave on hospitality, and Deconstruction in a Nutshell comes out of a roundtable discussion he had with the philosophy department at Villanova University on the occasion of the inauguration of their new doctoral program.

For Derrida, hospitality revolves around the French term $h\hat{o}te$, meaning at once both host and guest, an aporetic binary figure whose very undecidability renders it desirable as a $kh\hat{o}ra$, defined by Caputo as "a great abyss $(ab\hat{u}me)$ or void which is 'filled' by sensible things" (85). As Gil Anidjar, editor of Derrida's Acts of Religion, puts it, "To translate this $h\hat{o}te$ as either 'host' or 'guest' would be to erase the demand made by hospitality as well as the violence that is constitutive of it" (356). This violence stems from the unethical audacity implicit in the presumption of enunciating a welcome, in Derrida's words, "thus appropriating for oneself a place to welcome the other, or, worse, welcoming the other in order to appropriate for oneself a place" (qtd. in Anidjar 356). In typical Derridean fashion, he coined another term for hospitality, the neolo-

gism "hostipitality," to underscore the impossibility of resolving this *hôte* aporia. Virtually every key term in Derrida's structure for hospitality functions in this same way as figures analogous to each other, their respective "meaning," if we can properly invoke such a concept in this context, oscillating incessantly between poles of possibility/impossibility: **Justice** (*le loi /le droit*); the **Gift** (*le cadeau/le don*); the **Messianic** (promise of future), the **Yes/Yes** (Joycean double affirmation), the **Invitation** (hospitable openness); and **Forgiveness** (beyond forgiveness).

Justice. The law exists within the realm of the possible, while justice exists beyond the possible in the realm of the impossible. Thus, we can deconstruct the law (*le loi*), but we cannot deconstruct justice (*le droit*). It is the pressure of justice that pushes us to deconstruct (critique, improve) the law as a system with a history. Because justice, as a fundamental ethical imperative, is without a history or a system, it cannot be deconstructed. Derrida argues that justice implies "non-gathering, dissociation, heterogeneity, non-identity with itself, endless inadequation, infinite transcendence. That is why the call for justice is never, ever fully answered" (*Nutshell* 17). Further, Derrida's definition of justice partakes of Levinasian ethics: "Levinas says somewhere that the definition of justice—which is very minimal but which I love, which I think is really rigorous—is that justice is the relation to the other. That is all" (*Nutshell* 17).

Gift. The present (*le cadeau*) is to gift (*le don*) what law is to justice. Like justice, the gift cannot be, in Derrida's terms, "reappropriated" in any way. He says, "a gift is something which never appears as such and is never equal to gratitude, to commerce, to compensation, to reward" (*Nutshell* 18). Like justice, the gift is canceled whenever it is acknowledged and brought to language. In this sense, we can never be just or give a real gift because neither can be conscious of itself as such. Derrida links justice and the gift even further by arguing that they both "should go beyond calculation" (*Nutshell* 19). He adds, however, that we need a rigorous calculation, but again warns that "there is a point or limit beyond which calculation must fail" (*Nutshell* 19).

Messianic. The messianic is always to come and represents Derrida's notion of faith in the promise of the future, particularly as it relates to discourse and experience. He sees this messianic structure as universal: "As soon as you address the other, as soon as you are open to the future, as soon as you have a temporal experience of waiting for the future, of waiting for someone to come: that is the opening of experience" (*Nutshell* 22). He adds that "Justice and peace will have to do with this coming of the other, with the promise" (*Nutshell* 22). He argues that we are constantly waiting for the Messiah's imminent coming while still deferring His actual arrival, which we may fear as much as we desire, so "there is some ambiguity in the messianic structure" (*Nutshell* 25).

Yes/Yes. Derrida gets this doubled Joycean affirmation from Molly Bloom's soliloquy at the end of *Ulysses*. Like the messianic, it partakes of the present and the future: "Nothing precedes the 'yes.' The 'yes' is the moment of institution, of the origin; it is absolutely originary. . . . When I say 'yes,' I immediately say 'yes, yes.' I commit myself to confirm my commitment in the next second, and then tomorrow, and then the day after tomorrow" (*Nutshell 27*). The initial affirmation, then, represents a commitment to its own infinite reiteration.

Invitation. Derrida differentiates between a regular kind of "invited" hospitality and a more radical kind of "uninvited" hospitality. He argues that we must create a culture of hospitality and, in fact, insists that every culture is, by definition, a culture of hospitality: "Hospitality—this is culture itself" ("Hostipitality" 361). We must be prepared for the guests that we expect, certainly, and extend to the Other all the accouterments of welcome such as food and shelter, but we must also receive that Other for which we cannot prepare: "one must say yes ... there where one does not expect ... let oneself be swept by the coming of the wholly other, the absolutely unforeseeable stranger, the uninvited visitor, the unexpected visitation beyond welcoming apparatuses" ("Hostipitality" 361-62). For Derrida, it is only this last kind of welcome that constitutes real hospitality.

Forgiveness. Derrida sees forgiveness as an essential part of hospitality as the *double hôte*, a figure that grants a necessary mutual forgiveness because to ask for or to extend hospitality is really a request and offer of forgiveness. The forgiveness associated with the welcoming host must come because welcoming the Other as an extension of the Infinite always falls short of hospitality, especially in the arrival of the "unforeseen, unforeseeable, unpredictable, unexpected" visitor: "I cannot ever give enough to the welcomed or awaited guest nor expect enough or give enough to the unexpected visitor or arriving one....Therefore, I have to ask for forgiveness" ("Hostipitality" 380-81).

Thus, for Derrida hospitality enacts itself when the limit of possibility is pushed up against the threshold of impossibility, driven by the desire of the deconstructible to brush up against the undeconstructible. As Caputo writes, "Hospitality really starts to happen when I push against this limit, this threshold, this paralysis, inviting hospitality to cross its own threshold and limit, its own self-limitation, to become a gift beyond hospitality" (111). Indeed, perhaps this pushing against possible limits, thresholds, and paralysis toward a crossing over to the impossible is just what our hospitable reading of *The Road* requires, especially if we figure our relationship with the novel according to Derrida's dual *hôte* structure and welcome the text even as it welcomes us.

Hospitality Encounters

All of the encounters in McCarthy's novel demonstrate in one way or another the various elements of the Derridian model of hospitality, beginning with the establishment of the father/son relation as the primary Self/Other relation. The son functions for the father as an important "third" in his encounters, literal and figurative, with the Other, an undeconstructible kind of khôra imprinted with ethical traces (Caputo 85), as well as the source of the father's most essential and infinite call to responsibility. The boy, who has known no other world because he was born just after the nuclear destruction, represents the ethical center of the novel, not just as the face of the Other but also as the receptacle of his father's previous teaching. McCarthy establishes this relation very early on in the novel when he describes the father scanning the horizon with binoculars looking for danger while the boy sleeps, and thinking about his responsibility toward his son: "He knew only that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God, God never spoke" (4). Here McCarthy means much more than the son gives the father the divine right to do whatever he deems necessary to protect his progeny. Rather, McCarthy invokes a Levinasian testimonial of the Infinite, both directly in the father's immediate speech and proleptically in the boy's subsequent speech, as the father welcomes his responsibility to his son as the ontological ground of his identity. The father always associates the son with the divine, calling him "God's own firedrake" (26) as he watches the boy stoke the fire, for example, and likening his washing the roadrat's gore out of the boy's hair to "some ancient anointing" (63). According to Levinas, the face of the Other represents and articulates the demand for responsibility, the foundation of ethics as well as ontology, and, by so doing, the face also reflects a connection with the Infinite: "In the access to the face there is certainly also an access to the idea of God" (92). Thus, this father/son relation, particularly in instances of literal face-to-face interaction, partakes of the Infinite.

McCarthy reinforces this sense of the Infinite entering into Self/Other discourse at the end of the very next paragraph, when he describes a ritual reaffirmation of the father/son bond in a morning greeting between them after a pattern that reoccurs in various forms throughout the novel as a version of the welcoming "Here I am!" declaration:

The boy turned in the blankets. Then he opened his eyes. Hi, Papa, he said.

I'm right here.

I know. (5)

This ethical "me voici" moment also circumscribes the personal world of

the father/son relation within the larger world of the novel, which relation must be maintained as the prime directive of their existence whatever other relation might present itself. As they prepare to move off down the road on this same morning, they re-enact a "me voici" exchange which, again, reaffirms the primacy of their relationship: "Are you okay? he said. The boy nodded. Then they set out along the blacktop in the gun-metal light...each the other's world entire" (5). This exchange also reflects Derrida's notion of the Joycean double affirmation, the "Yes, Yes." For the rest of the novel they will experience everything as if reflected in each other's face, even though, as the boy later remarks, "I wont remember it the way you do" (147), because their pact, which goes far beyond their mutual promises, binds them together as beings constructed according to relation and responsibility, well before any promises are even possible. In Derrida's terms, they will push each other beyond self-limiting thresholds toward an impossibly mad kind of hospitality. In his essay "Golden chalice, good to house a god': Still Life in *The Road*," for example, Randall S. Wilhelm explores the still life elements of the breakfast scene that is an extension of this morning father-son ritual of mutual affirmation. Wilhelm argues that in the father's spreading the meager meal of cornmeal cakes he "performs the centuries-old ritual of preparing the meal as a sign of civilized humanity" (132) which act represents a daily insistence on well-mannered order as set against the chaos of the post-apocalyptic world. Certainly, this artistic meal-presentation ritual represents one of the most fundamental aspects of hospitality-providing nourishment for the traveller in a formal setting. Further, Wilhelm connects this scene with two later scenes of equally artistic meal presentation, in the well-stocked bunker and at the dining room table of the abandoned house, arguing that the father, as caretaker and (I would add) host, enacts an aesthetic of hospitality in his meal preparation and presentation.

McCarthy underlines the ethical depth and power of this father/son relationship with analeptic references to the absent mother, who commits suicide before the bleak hopelessness of the future she anticipates, doubting that her husband can protect them: "They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us and you wont face it" (48). Here she misreads her husband because he does, in fact, "face" everything that is to come, deeply and directly and ethically. Her suicide demonstrates, according to Levinasian and Derridian notions of subjectivity, that when one loses the sense of responsibility to the Other, one also loses one's self. The mother commits suicide, not simply because she rejects her responsibility toward her husband and son, but because the impossibility of fulfilling that responsibility necessarily overwhelms her. "As for me", she says to her husband before going off into the dark, "my only hope is for eternal nothingness and I hope it with all my heart" (49). She wishes to be relieved of responsibility and, because responsibility is infinite, the only way she can

discharge herself of it is by destroying herself physically, hoping she will also be destroying herself psychically; yet even in her suicide plan, she articulates a very limited hope of what may be to come. McCarthy calls the "coldness" of her going—refusing to tell her son goodbye and leaving her husband with these parting words in response to his pleas, "No. I will not. I cannot"—"her final gift" (49). A straight hospitable reading of this cold parting as "gift" moves beyond the obvious reading of the term as ironic because it opens our reading to the possibility that her parting might truly be a gift (*don* rather than *cadeau*): to relieve her husband and especially her son of their responsibility toward her, their responsibility for her responsibility, possibly because in the Derridian sense her gift does not appear as such. Her parting as a gift certainly seems to exist beyond her consciousness and calculation. Nevertheless, she largely refuses the messianic, or the future, here with her triple negation. She imagines her best future as annihilation and sets out to accomplish it herself, done with waiting for whatever will come.

Also, in uttering her refusal of the face-to-face with her son, the mother is already halfway gone as a subject. Death, even as her figurative "lover," cannot substitute as an Other for whom she has responsibility. Still she seems to understand the profound necessity of the Other for the survival of the self and articulates it to her husband in the following way:

Maybe you'll be good at this. I doubt it, but who knows. The one thing I can tell you is that you wont survive for yourself. I know because I would never have come this far. A person who had no one would be well advised to cobble together some passable ghost. Breathe it into being and coax it along with words of love. Offer it each phantom crumb and shield it from harm with your body. (49)

Of course, she ends up being wrong about her husband's capacity for managing an ethic of survival; he is certainly "good" at it, almost impossibly so, but she is absolutely right about the necessity of his son as the Other and the third who keeps his selfhood intact. Indeed, in figuring Death as a lover, she is cobbling together just such a ghost, one she coaxes along right to the point of her going off into the night of her anticipated slashed-wrist suicide. Although McCarthy relegates the mother to the margins of the novel's action, he haunts its mood and setting with her absence, which is embodied in a startling simile of poignant and lost maternal hospitality: "By day the banished sun circles the earth like a grieving mother with a lamp" (28). In this metaphor, McCarthy also reaffirms her continuing presence and, by reversing the orbiting relation of the sun and the earth, harkening back to an archaic astronomy, refigures the mother as both the archetypal wanderer searching for welcome and the host searching for that wanderer to offer that welcome. In this way, she embodies

the dual nature of Derrida's *hôte* and underscores the necessity of continuous invitation and forgiveness, both of which, like justice, may exist beyond earthly realms.

The Road possesses a certain repetitious monotony of action and setting and conversation, punctuated only by the high drama of each human encounter the father and son experience on their journey south, all of which bear a certain ritualistic resemblance to each other. Such encounters do not portend what Sorensen calls the "sacred rites of hospitality," however; these seem to belong solely to the pre-apocalyptic world that has disappeared, along with anyone able to function as a host within Sorensen's model of hospitality. This post-apocalyptic world features a different set of meeting rituals which mock this model of mutual responsibility. As the father thinks to himself, "On this road there are no godspoke men. They are gone and I am left and they have taken with them the world" (27). In other words, no one but the father and son speaks or acts within the divine rituals of hospitality which had defined the pre-apocalyptic world. Not counting the myriad of burned, dismembered, and desiccated bodies the father and son confront almost as a matter of course, their dramatic encounters with others on the road are of two kinds: those with humans who are literally present and those with humans who are absent, made figuratively present only by their traces. The literal encounters tend to be fraught with immediate danger, each one a threat to their lives and the goods upon which those lives depend, while the figurative encounters tend to be full of anxiety and hope as, for example, whenever they enter an abandoned house to see what they can scavenge, never sure what they might find.

There are nine significant literal encounters the father and son have with live humans which have ramifications regarding the demands of hospitality. These encounters occur at different levels of intimacy and interaction, but each represents a direct challenge to ethics.

Lightning-Struck Man (41-43). They track and observe this man, who acknowledges them, but doesn't speak with them. Nevertheless, his mute demand for hospitality remains clear, so the boy keeps asking, "Cant we help him? Papa?" (42) to which the father responds, "No. We cant help him. There's nothing to be done for him" (43). Although the father pragmatically refuses to take action here, he still feels the pressure of his responsibility to the man, but most especially to the boy, to do something hospitable. In obeying the fundamental law of this post-apocalyptic world—survival—the father still cannot banish the demands of justice. Later, the father asks forgiveness of his son just after they look back and observe that the man has toppled over. Here, as in later parts of the novel, the forgiveness the father seeks pertains not so much to any particular act, but to everything about the situation in which father and son find themselves, including the impossibility of ameliorating either the general condition of the world or the specific horrors that typify it: "I'm sorry for what

happened to him but we cant fix it" (43). The boy initially refuses the father's invitation to engage in conversation, ostensibly to reaffirm his understanding of his father's rationale in refusing hospitality to the burned man, until the next day when he finally gives his father the double affirmation his father seeks:

So when are you going to talk to me again? I'm talking now.
Are you sure?
Yes.
Okay.
Okay. (44)

Roadrat Shot by Father (51-56). As part of a large group of scavengers, this roadrat, who discovers them accidentally when he moves into the trees to relieve himself, represents the first real threat in the novel to the father and son's survival. The father seizes the initiative in this encounter with the Other by demanding a face-to-face with the roadrat. "Look at me" (53), he commands, as if his gaze could control the threat this man represents. The roadrat and the father engage in some negotiating discourse before the man pulls a knife, grabs the son, and is subsequently shot in the forehead by the father, using his next-to-last bullet, the one he has saved for himself. In this scene, the father refuses the roadrat's empty offer of hospitality and keeps the man's eyes from engaging the boy's-"If you look at him again I'll shoot you" (55)-as if to spare the boy the demand inherent in the gaze of the Other. He violates the prime ethical command of the face-"Thou shalt not kill!"-knowingly and directly with his forehead shot when his negotiation to spare the roadrat fails. The aporia, or dilemma, of hospitality does not exempt the father from decisive action. As Derrida notes, violence can come from hospitality's demands. Here, as in the aftermath of other such hospitality dramas, the boy is silent, refusing the affirmation of talking with his father, until a few days later when he speaks up to protest being left alone while the father does some scouting to find the shopping cart they had abandoned in making their escape from the scavengers. However, even when separated, they are always careful to stay within earshot of one another to affirm their conversational connection.

Phalanx of Marchers (77-78). From their hiding place they observe these red-scarved marchers with a company of women and assorted slaves. Although the father and son are not in immediate danger of discovery, the father fears the boy's face-to-face engagement with these scavengers because he does not want his son drawn into any relation whatsoever with anyone who will greet the boy with hostility rather than hospitably. He immediately commands his son, "Keep your face down. Dont look" (77), as if the boy's gaze on them had

the power to draw their gaze to him, or as if his averted gaze could shield him from their sight. He also wishes to save his son from laying eyes on the evil beings that humans have become, even though the boy's survival may depend on his ability to identify the "bad guys" (78). The martial organization and discipline of this group of scavengers implies a kind of order and law not present in the previous group, which, as the father says, "[is] not a good sign" (78), because it portends additional groups like this one, communes no longer able to survive in one location, traveling along the road, thereby increasing the likelihood of the father and son's contact with them.

Plantation House Ambushers (89-98). This plantation house represents the antithesis of hospitality with its perverse welcome-to-the-larder orientation, complete with a lookout system which warns its decidedly inhospitable inhabitants of the approach of visitors and with a basement full of captives waiting to be slaughtered and eaten. The boy has learned to be fearful of exploring places that could harbor people because he understands viscerally, if not intellectually, that hospitality has been abandoned. Ironically, however, the basement dwellers do welcome the father and son as their rescuers, imploring them for succor: "Help us, they whispered. Please help us" (93). Again, there is nothing they can do for these prisoners without sacrificing themselves to no purpose. The two barely escape, but not before the father reminds his son of how to commit suicide should he be caught (95) and realizes in the intensity of the moment what it would require of him to sacrifice his own son (96), a Messianic moment which seems imminent throughout the novel and always to come. The earlier firing of his own suicide bullet to save his son from the roadrat adds a poignant undercurrent to this father/son conversation because it represents the sacrifice of his own failsafe method of escape from a fate, as the cliché goes, worse than death. Later that night as they huddle together, hidden but within earshot of the house, the father tries to keep his son from hearing the screams of the basement people, although later the boy communicates his complete understanding of the situation when he demands that his father reaffirm their commitment to be the "good guys ... carrying the fire" (107-09). This reaffirmation coming right after the troubling encounter at the plantation house exemplifies again the impossible nature of the call to hospitality and the Derridian insistence that the term hôte signify at once host and guest to underscore hospitality as an inherent part of culture. The father, representing the *hôte*, has a double responsibility to offer and accept welcome within a face-to-face drama over which he has virtually no control or power. He cannot enact justice for anyone. Further, as a critical aspect of the hospitality invitation, the forgiveness he must extend from and to himself as hôte mitigates his failure and circumscribes the double affirmation his son demands of him for the future.

Half-Blind Old Man (136-48). The hospitality the father extends to the

half-blind old man they encounter fulfills in some measure the Messianic promise he has made to his son earlier. After determining that the old man is not a decoy for an ambush and assuring him that they are not robbers either, they feed him and invite him to spend the night. The father makes a "deal" with both his son and the old man in extending this limited hospitality, which he attributes all to the boy. The old man-another incarnation of McCarthy's recurring mad prophet figure, a "starved and threadbare buddha" (142), a "storybook peddler from an antique time" (147)-provides the father an opportunity to engage someone in a philosophical conversation about the nature of hospitality in the world. In addition, by giving his name as Ely–reminiscent of Elijah, the promised passover guest for whom there is always a door open and a place set at the table–and by observing that "I knew this was coming" (142), the old man takes on an enhanced aura of wisdom and vision. The Elijah figure, fed by ravens and a widow in a time of famine (1 Kings 17), functions as an archetypal *hôte* who both receives and dispenses hospitality in a Levinasian reflection of God. He reciprocates the widow's hospitality, for example, by miraculously endowing the barrel of meal and the cruse of oil with constant replenishment and by raising the widow's son from the dead. As a kind of Elijah figure, the old man seems to be a being set apart from the world, one whose identity and survival remain a mystery. In response to the father's query about "how you're still alive," he says, "People give you things" (143). Then, when the father challenges that statement with "No they dont," he replies simply, "You did" (143), implying that hospitality may still be a force in the world. Around the campfire they discuss how one would know if he were the "last man on earth" in connection with the question of the existence of God. In response to the father's comment that God would know, the old man asserts that "[t]here is no God and we are his prophets" (143), a kind of existential rejoinder, but later when he asks the old man, "What if I said that he's [the boy's] a god?" the old man responds, "It's better to be alone. So I hope that's not true what you said because to be on the road with the last god would be a terrible thing so I hope it's not true" (145). What may be terrible about travelling with this boy/god revolves around the ethical pressure he always brings to bear on his father. When the old man refuses to thank the boy for the hospitality at the request of the father, who wants the goodness of his son acknowledged, he asks, "Why did he do it?" to which the father responds, "You wouldnt understand....I'm not sure I do" (146). This refusal by the old man to thank the boy who acts solely out of a pure kind of ethical empathy reflects the Derridian notion that real hospitality exists without acknowledgment and without reciprocation; it exists as a gift, beyond anyone's ability to articulate it.

Four-Person Group (**164-67**). Their brief, indirect encounter with this group of four people, one a pregnant woman, offers little threat to them but features perhaps the most egregious example of inhospitable action in the novel.

When the father and son force them to abandon their camp, they find "a charred human infant headless and gutted and blackening on the spit" (167). The sight of this horrific object, which the son notices first, causes the father again to invoke the forgiveness of his son, not for himself, but for the inhospitable world for which he feels responsible: "I'm sorry, he whispered. I'm sorry" (167). Later, the boy remarks that they would have taken the baby with them (168), expressing a hospitable willingness to spare the child even though nothing can undo what has been done already. Also, it would be highly unlikely that a newborn would be able to survive with them. In re-imagining the situation, the boy creates a hypothetical space that allows them to reaffirm their commitment to ethical action by articulating what they would have done to save the baby. The boy's affirming to his father also breaks the silence the father had feared would go on forever and signals the reassertion of their mutual relationship.

Thief (215-19). When they catch up to the thief who has stolen their shopping cart full of goods, the father makes him, on threat of death, strip off his clothes and then leaves him in the road, despite his son's persistent protests. Later, when the boy convinces the father to return to the spot with the thief's clothes, they find no one there. When the father assures his son that he wouldn't have really killed the thief, the boy answers, "But we did kill him" (219), taking responsibility for what his father has done. When the father tries to explain his actions to his son he says, "You're not the one who has to worry about everything" to which the son replies, "Yes I am I am the one" (218). He understands that he is responsible for the father's responsibility as well as his own and that his responsibility goes beyond being an advocate for ethics. The son also understands that he is responsible as an agent for himself his father cannot substitute for him. The son's sense of hospitality reasserts itself again here by calling his father and even his protection into question. The thief and the father both articulate a Law of Moses kind of justice when the thief asserts "You'd have done the same," to which the father responds, "I'm going to leave you the way you left us" (217). This simplistic kind of eye-for-an-eye justice closes itself on the Other, rather than opening itself to the Other and the possibility of hospitality's gift. As in the aftermath of other such inhospitable encounters, it takes some time before the boy will again talk to his father.

Bowman, Sniper and Woman (221-25). Soon after the episode with the thief, while they are walking through an abandoned town, they are ambushed by a bowman shooting from the upper window of a house, who wounds the father in the leg as he throws his body over his son to protect him. When the sniper steps back into the window to fire another arrow, the father shoots the flare gun at the sniper, severely wounding him. By the time he makes it up to the room, the bowman has been deserted by the others who were with him,

with the exception of a woman who cradles him in her arms and who curses the father for presumably wounding him critically. Her loyalty, at the risk of her own life, enacts a moving, albeit desperate, kind of hospitality as she refuses to leave the man, possibly her son, behind. Her cursing parallels the father's earlier cursing at his being wounded and underlines another parallel between the two as parents protecting their sons. This parallel makes it difficult to read this inhospitable ambush too neatly and narrowly, suggesting that there is more to the story of the sniper and woman than this act of violence.

Shotgun-Toting Stranger and Family (237-41). After his father's death, the boy finally comes face-to-face with the Other for whom he and his father had been searching: another good guy carrying the fire. The fulfilment of this messianic expectation justifies the dying father's faith in the future as well as his refusal to use his last bullet on his son. With his dying words he pushes right up against the undeconstructible limits of hospitality, reaffirming its ethic as having been passed on to the next generation: "You're the best guy," he tells his son, "You always were" (235). The shotgun-toting man and his family, who have been watching the father and son, represent an unexpected surprise ending for the novel's quest for hospitality, although the father does prophesy with his very last words that "[g]oodness" will find his son (236). This goodness is embodied in the family who had decided together to take the boy into their midst without any kind of request other than the demand inherent in responsibility for the Other as a true gift. The man responds affirmatively to the boy's face-to-face inquiry regarding whether he is "carrying the fire" (238-39), although he does not initially understand what this metaphor means. The man's offer of hospitality requires the boy's messianic faith. The man and the boy both function within the dual-identity of the *hôte* as they negotiate the boy's welcome into a new family, ending their conversation with the dual "okay" affirmation that echoes earlier affirmations in the novel (239). The woman welcomes the boy literally with open arms. The boy talks to his dead father, as the dying man requested, and also talks to God, although talking to his father was the "best thing" (241). The woman's affirmation of this practice seals for the boy the tripartite structure of Levinasian ethics—the son as self, the father as Other, and the Infinite as reflected in the Other-on which he and his father had been operating: "She said that the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all of time" (241). Regardless of whether this family can ultimately survive the destruction of the earth, the novel ends with a positive affirmation of hospitality as a meaningful continuing ethic.

In addition to these nine literal encounters with the Other, there are four significant figurative encounters that the father and son experience, each of which represents an ethical welcoming, especially for the boy as he acknowledges the extension of hospitality without invitation.

Apple Orchard Farm with Cistern (99-105). This episode occurs just after their encounter at the plantation house and, although the farm offers modest refreshment—hay seeds, dried apples, and fresh water—and minimal tools—a spoon, a boxcutter with extra blades, and a screwdriver—it nevertheless saves them. They accept the hospitality of these absent landlords who neither offered nor refused them these things as a true Derridian gift without any sense whatsoever of intent or reciprocation. This gift also reflects the messianic in that it represents the possibility of the future.

Bunker (113-31). The father's discovery of the hidden bunker full of food stuffs, clothing, toiletries, and other survival gear also represents the possibility of the future and the reality of a surprise invitation to hospitality without expectation. Despite the boy's fear of what they might find beneath the trap door, they remain open to possibilities in their desperation and are rewarded for their openness to the future. They even hesitate for a moment before accepting it. When the boy asks, "Is it okay for us to take it?" the father responds, "Yes. It is. They would want us to. Just like we would want them to" (118). The ethics of this imaginary exchange between the "good guys" who built and stocked the bunker and the "good guys" who will make use of its stores is extended by the boy's prayer of thanks before their first meal: "Dear people, thank you for all this food and stuff. We know that you saved it for yourself and if you were here we wouldnt eat it no matter how hungry we were and we're sorry that you didnt get to eat it and we hope that you're safe in heaven with God" (123). This prayer illustrates the boy's sense of responsibility as hôte as he acknowledges his hosting power in presiding over this first meal while understanding that he also remains a guest of the absent hosts.

Unpillaged House (171-80). Again, just when they are on the verge of going under they discover a source of food, shelter, clothing, and goods which offers them a respite from their travels and provisions for the road ahead. Although their evening meal at the dining room table evokes an archetypal domestic ritual, Wilhelm notes that the absent wife/mother figure in this still life undercuts its power, reminding us that the world of the novel remains irrevocably diminished despite hospitality's continuing presence in it. Wilhelm also interprets this dining room scene as a still life foreshadowing of the novel's conclusion, arguing persuasively that the boy's connection with the hearth fire and the father's connection with the table candle portends death and separation: "The boy resting in front of the warm hearth is nurtured by the (metaphorical) fire, while the father sits slumped at the table in the darkness of the spent candle flame suggesting his approaching death" (139). Certainly, the son will be left alone to carry the fire, emblematic of home and hospitality, after his father's death, but, significantly, the father will not take his son into the darkness with him, despite his promise to do so (209). McCarthy calls the place the two reach just before the father's death "the point of no return" but

clarifies the device by which that point is measured as "the light they carried with them" (236).

Ship (188-208). After their arrival at the coast, the ship provides them with needed food and supplies, especially the flaregun, which probably saves their lives later when they are ambushed. Their shooting the flare gun in the night over the ocean also represents a call for rescue, to God or to the good guys, who might need to know where they are, presumably so they can extend them some hospitality. Despite his experiences with all the people who would harm them, the boy remains open to relation with the Other and aware of his responsibility for that relation. Again, for example, he wants to be assured that the people who were on the ship are dead because he does not want to be "taking their stuff" (204). Still, when they catch the thief who has stolen what they have salvaged, the boy offers forgiveness in spite of the thief'ss having broken the ethical code by which the boy lives.

The ethic with which the father and son approach their scavenging conjures up the ghosts of those who have provided for them without any intention of doing so and also makes the two both host and guest to these ghosts as they welcome them back into their own domiciles. The father and son attempt to do justice where no justice is either demanded or even possible, but they nevertheless understand their responsibility to the absent Other, who has done real justice and extended real hospitality to them.

Hospitality Implications

Hospitality figures significantly in *The Road*, not just because it represents a pervasive motif in the novel, but because it supplies the ontological ground on which subjectivity enacts itself, in McCarthy's post-apocalyptic world as in any other world. It goes way beyond laying down historical laws and rituals of hospitality against which we might measure the novel's characters and their behavior, but, rather, it gives us a way to structure the impossible, incessant, aporetic demands of hospitality that constitute Self in relation with Other, so we can appreciate McCarthy's dramatic rendering here of an inherently ethical dilemma that is fundamental to the human condition. For Levinas and Derrida, the responsibility for the Other comes before history and culture and, as McCarthy shows us in The Road, it comes after history and culture as well. Human beings and human cultures are inherently structured according to hospitality, whether or not the infinite demands of hospitality are accepted or refused or even acknowledged. Hospitality is the condition of existence. As long as there is one person left alive in the world, one "last host in christendom," there will be hospitality, as he or she awaits the coming of an unexpected, surprising Messiah who must be welcomed with the mad declaration, "Here I am!"

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Mapping *The Road* in Post-Postmodernism

Linda Woodson

A thought is with me sometimes, and I say,—Should the whole frame of earth by inward throes Be wrenched, or fire come down from far to scorch Her pleasant habitations, and dry up Old Ocean, in his bed left singed and bare, Yet would the living Presence still subsist Victorious, and composure would ensue, And kindlings like the morning—presage sure Of day returning and of life revived. (Wordsworth, *Prelude* V.2: 29-37)

Then it comes to genre, readers of literature have the same urge as the boy in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*; we want to find ourselves on the map and feel justified: "The boy nodded. He sat looking at the map. The man watched him. He thought he knew what that was about" (153), that is, "everything in its place. Justified in the world" (153-54). Peter J. Rabinowitz argues that "texts are always seen as instances of broader or narrower genres, and genre placement determines how they are read, and to a certain extent, what readers will find in them" (63). Of genres, the priest tells Billy in *The Crossing* that the narrator "sets forth the categories into which the listener will wish to fit the narrative as he hears it" (155). Just as all of McCarthy's books have pushed the boundaries of the genres in which readers have placed them, so also does *The Road*. That, of course, is one of the significant features of McCarthy's writing. Not being able to fit *The Road* tidily into a genre, however, has not stopped readers from trying.

Many have placed *The Road* into the genre of post-apocalyptic literature, and it certainly fits there, in both its vision of the end of present civilization and in Wordsworth's sense of the heightened vision of the artist. (Wordsworth's apocalyptic vision is expressed in *The Prelude* and in "Salisbury Plain." It is no surprise that writing in the first years of the new century and new millennium, McCarthy's prose would be reminiscent of the Romantic poets' apocalyptic visions at the turn of another century.) As compelling as it is to argue that McCarthy wants us to understand the inevitable destruction of the world if humans continue to follow their present course (and certainly that is among the various effects the book has on its readers) or, on the other hand, to understand how closely we live to ultimate destruction through natural means, I would argue that that is not its principal genre. Although we can speculate that the setting of the book is a nuclear winter, because the specifics of the events that caused the "long shear of light" (45), the "low concussions" (45), and the

burning of the "distant cities" (50) are not given, the cause is only speculative. Indeed, some have argued convincingly for natural causes. Instead, whatever the cause, McCarthy's recent fiction since the atomic detonation in The Crossing (425) seems resigned to inevitability, or as it is expressed in *The Road* "the absolute truth of the world" (110). The last words of *The Road* speak of that consequence as they describe the brook trout: "On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again [italics mine]" (241). Often, too, post-apocalyptic fiction describes a future using elements of science fiction that can only be imagined in the present, yet the placement in time of this book is indefinite. The narrative voice speaks of that very indefiniteness: "Query: How does the never to be differ from what never was?" (27). The retention in the narrative of objects that have the feel of the mid-1970s, such as references to the tops of the mother's "stockings" (16), the "mae west" (189), and the wind-up toy penguin (31), and others, all suggest an earlier time, or at least confuse the time of the book.

The Road fits best in the genre of journey literature, particularly as that tradition has developed in American literature. Its closest predecessor, I would argue, is John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, and like that book, its principal journey is the journey into the heart. Like the Joads' journey, the journey of the father and the boy begins with dispossession and displacement, and both sets of travelers are seeking a promised land on an American coast: the Joads, California and its plenty, promising unlimited work; the father and boy, an indeterminate southeastern coast that they hope will be brighter and warmer. The cause of the displacement in both books is indefinite. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, although it is clear that the Joads are forced off of their land by the large landowners, nevertheless, the cause of the dust that has overtaken the land is acknowledged as a combination of humans' over-planting and of nature's long period of drought.

Like Tom Joad throughout most of *Grapes*, the father of *The Road* is the isolated individual, focused on the nuclear family and distrustful of the company of others. At the end of Steinbeck's book, Tom Joad seeks out the company of others, whereas in *The Road* the father maintains his isolation until his death when it is his son who joins others. In both books, characters leave, die, or disappear who are either unable to maintain faith in the journey or, perhaps, do not possess the stamina required of the journey itself: Grandma and Grandpa, Noah and Connie in *The Grapes of Wrath* and the mother in *The Road*.

In her commentary included as "Features" for the 2004 re-release of John Ford's film as a DVD, Steinbeck critic Susan Shillinglaw describes the Joads' truck as their new hearth, the place that holds the family together, a place anchored by Ma Joad. In *The Road* the father assumes all roles of protector, nurturer, and caregiver, and fittingly it is the shopping cart that becomes home

for him and the boy, fittingly because the shopping cart symbolizes the materialism and consumerism of contemporary society. Shopping carts are a stay against hunger, not just for the evening meal but for coming weeks, symbols of our power to maximize the moment, holding as they do not just immediate needs, but desires and potential needs. Like the books that the father says are an "expectation" of "a world to come" (158), so, too, is the shopping cart in our present world. In *The Road*, however, the shopping cart is stripped of that referent. Instead, it carries all that the man and boy have to hold them against death, and those supplies are limited and without a sure source of replenishment. Like a home, the shopping cart holds their clothing, their blankets, their food and water, the binoculars, the maps, the boy's toys, and, at least in the beginning, some books. It must be protected against thieves and covered with a tarp when they leave it (7), and it has to be repaired when one of the front wheels goes "wonky" (12). In addition to their home, the cart serves other vital purposes as well: it becomes a vehicle in which the boy rides (16), it is an anchoring place on which to steady a pistol (10), it provides recreation and amusement when they ride on it like a bobsled (16), and it serves as a shield from the arrows of the man with a bow (221).

In one last comparison between the two journeys, the endings offer ambiguous hope. In the *The Grapes of Wrath*, Rose of Sharon offers her breast to the starving man to extend a temporary stay against his death (455), and in *The Road*, the boy joins a family on the road who appear to be good people since the woman talks to him about God (241). Because in both instances the books offer little specifically upon which to build hope beyond these moments, readers are reminded that all are on the road "running from dark to dark" (*TR* 220). No reprieve from death can be lasting.

However, this book is unique in American road literature because it is a journey that takes place with postmodern understandings about language, but with its publication at the beginning of a new century, it offers a new position, a post-postmodern position. As Fredric Jameson asserts in his Preface to Lyotard's The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, the goal is "again and again to 'make it new" (ix). The priest in *The Crossing* speaks to Billy of the same goal: "The task of the narrator is not an easy one, he said. He appears to be required to choose his tale from among the many that are possible. But of course that is not the case. The case is rather to make many of the one" (155). McCarthy's fiction from Blood Meridian forward has had a thread running through it of metadiscourse or discourse theory. (I have traced this thread through Cities of the Plain in "Leaving the Dark Night of the Lie: A Kristevan Reading of Cormac McCarthy's Border Fiction" [Lilley 267-84].) It would be surprising not to find that thread in this book—a book whose very title alludes to the road of life on which the human journey is only distinguished from that of all other journeys by the complexities of human language and the capacity for the existence of the history of those journeys made possible by that language.

Postmodernism questions the role of language accurately to represent reality, at the same time positing that language is in fact all that humans have to record their concepts, yet Foucault asserts that even the desire inherent in that act makes the result an appropriation (219). *The Road*, however, is a postpostmodern book that ultimately answers a question posed early in the Border fiction of the McCarthy canon. In *All the Pretty Horses*, as John Grady Cole is saying goodbye to his former girlfriend, Mary Catherine, she asks, "Everything's talk isnt it?" John Grady's reply, "Not everything" (28), is the answer reinforced by *The Road*.

The first indication that *The Road* is McCarthy's answer to that provocative question appears in the initial dream narrated by the father on the first pages of the narrative (3-4). This cave dream alludes inevitably to the Platonic cave allegory that forms one of the Lyotardian metanarratives by which the story of human experience has previously been told (Postmodern 60). In the cave allegory, humans are chained to the wall in such a way that they can see only the shadows of the puppet figures moving above the wall behind them and lighted by the fire; that is, they can see only signifiers of other signifiers of the real (Republic VII 398-99). In the father's dream, however, the experience is quite different: these "pilgrims in a fable", father and son, enter the stone room where a creature is drinking from a "rimstone" pool. The sightless creature is described as "pale and naked and translucent, its alabaster bones cast up in shadow on the rocks behind it." In this case, the father can see not only the actual creature, but because of its translucency, he can see its "bowels, its beating heart" and the "brain that pulsed in a dull glass bell" (3). This translucency signals to the reader that the narrative that is to follow will attempt to probe beyond the knowledge that language can describe to that which humans can experience beyond language, the "not everything" that John Grady has asserted exists. To reinforce the significance of the cave dream, the father has another dream of the cave as he is dying at the end of the book: "Old dreams encroached upon the waking world." The two dreams form a frame for the road journey. In the second dream the boy carries a candle (235-36), and the two can see tracks "of unknown creatures" (235-36). In this dream, though, in marked contrast to the Platonic cave allegory, the light is supplied by the candle that they carry: "they had reached the point of no return which was measured from the first solely by the light they carried with them" (236). That is, the experience of the cave is their own, not that supplied by the puppeteers using signifiers of the real, and their understandings are their own.

The dreams and memories of the man also take him often to another narrative that he can ill-afford to long for, prelapsarian dreams of a time before the Word, before knowledge-making language that possibly has led to the destruc-

tion of the world as he has known it: "He mistrusted all of that. He said the right dreams for a man in peril were dreams of peril and all else was the call of languor and of death" (15). The first of these images is of his Eve: "In dreams his pale bride came to him out of a green and leafy canopy. Her nipples pipeclayed and her rib bones painted white. She wore a dress of gauze and her dark hair was carried up in combs of ivory, combs of shell. Her smile, her downturned eyes" (15). The image is also strikingly similar to Botticelli's Primavera with its depiction of Venus under the leafy canopy. Because Botticelli's painting was created for a wedding to remind the bride of her marital duties, the dream may be bittersweet, since it occurs after the wife has committed suicide. In addition, it alludes not only to the intermingling of Christian and pagan narrative, but also to the Neo-Platonism that will be discussed later.

In another prelapsarian image, the man remembers his favorite day of child-hood. In this memory he recalls a day spent with his uncle retrieving firewood at a lake in the fall. He and the man, alone, spend the day at their work, picking out a tree stump, tying it to the boat, and rowing it back across the lake (11), but significantly that day is spent without language: "Neither of them had spoken a word. This was the perfect day of his childhood. This the day to shape the days upon" (12). Later, the father once again warns of the dangers of holding onto past memories, dreams of "some world that never was or of some world that never will be" (160), like the repeated narratives with which human experience is often described. He suggests that the delusion of those dreams may bring happiness that diverts humans from their present reality, but "then you will have given up" (160).

As if to underscore how far humans have come down the road from Eden in the present story of *The Road*, another of the father's childhood memories alludes to the Garden, but only to remind of the consequences of the fall, the consequences of the desire for ever-greater knowledge. In this memory the man as boy watches at the edge of a field where a group of men have uncovered "a great bolus of serpents perhaps a hundred in number." The men set the snakes on fire, "having no remedy for evil but only for the image of it as they conceived it to be" and as the snakes burn, "they were mute" and "there were no screams of pain" (159). Certainly this memory evokes the destruction of the natural world by humans, but more than that, it demonstrates that language provides a signifier—the word evil—that both transforms the way humans understand reality and obscures the truth of that reality.

The Road, on the other hand, is a journey narrative that, as earlier stated, reveals to the man "the absolute truth of the world" (110), the inevitability of death, the knowledge that humans are in the world with "[b]orrowed time and borrowed world and borrowed eyes with which to sorrow it" (110). Therefore, one by one the narrative dismantles those human creations designed to avoid the truth of death, that which is created as a hold against death's inevitability

and a desire for immortality. In the words of the narrator, it presents "[t]he world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities" (75). Among the signifiers the narrative addresses and subsequently exposes as empty are consumerism (already explored in the metaphor of the shopping cart), ritual and celebration, music, art and architecture, scientific invention, religion, and above all else, written and spoken language. In a world where these exist as signifiers with no referents, they become meaningless: "[t]he last instance of a thing takes the class with it" (24).

The father attempts to create a ritual of their lives, to enact ceremony. After washing the dead man's brains out of the boy's hair, he holds the boy before the fire and tousles his hair "like some ancient anointing": "So be it. Evoke the forms. Where you've nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them" (63). He makes attempts at domestic ritual, as well, for example, setting a table in the bunker (119) and serving a meal in bone china bowls in the abandoned house (176). Toward the end of the book, in what seems to be a last effort to celebrate life, to celebrate existence, he shoots the flare into the night sky. (And, of course, it can also be argued that he shoots it to locate their position to the family at the end who appear to have been watching them.) But the flare is exposed as an empty signifier for the boy, unable to understand any purpose other than that intended: "They couldnt see it very far, could they, Papa?" (207).

The father makes a flute for the boy, but in a world without music, making his own music has no meaning, and the boy later throws the flute away (134). They pass a dam that the man explains will likely last for a long time, but the potential power it could generate, without civilization to need it, is useless in the present world (17). It is a signifier with no signified. They encounter abandoned trucks (37-39), cars, and finally, a train, again signifiers of a civilization with no referent in the present world.

Throughout the book abound vestiges of written and spoken words whose referents no longer exist. This state of language is described as "[t]he sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality" (75). The father tells the boy "stories of courage and justice as he remember[s] them," but the courage and justice that the stories describe no longer exist in the boy's world (35). The boy has abandoned his studies, including the alphabet (206). The man creates a lamp that will allow him to read the boy a story (7), but the boy is too tired to hear it read (8). The man finds old newspapers in a house with references to that which no longer exists (24). The two pass billboards that tout products that also no longer exist (108). The man enters a library whose volumes are soggy and useless on the floor (158). He asks the boy to tell him a story, but the boy refuses, saying that all of the man's stories have happy endings, and that he doesn't know any stories with happy endings (226), proof again that the boy lives in a world in which the signs have changed, and the old signifiers

no longer hold meaning.

Although the story contains images and references to religion and spirituality, these too are largely signifiers without signs in the existing world, empty like the holes in the mantle of the father's childhood home where tacks had formerly held the stockings as the family celebrated Christmas (22). The "godspoke men," itself a vague reference to religion, are gone (27). The woman at the end talks to the boy about God, but he finds refuge in talking to his father, whom he knows existed (241). Even the encounter with Ely, the only named character, contradicts the usual literary narrative of an encounter with an old wise man or prophet. The question that the man asks Ely, "How do you live?" (142), reflects the question that the speaker asks the Leech-gatherer in Wordsworth's "Resolution and Independence," "How is it that you live, and what is it you do?" (XVII.7). Unlike that aged man who inspires that speaker, in a despondent mood, to human strength, Ely does not inspire through his story of perseverance. His, instead, is just a story of survival, the details of which are all lies, including his name (144), and his pronouncement on that survival is a dark one: "Things will be better when everybody's gone" (145). Rather than presenting a prophecy or example of hope, his story suggests a condemnation to endure in a world where endurance is no longer desirable. His words to the man carry a postmodern distrust of language and its power to deceive, and his lies illustrate that power: "I dont want anybody talking about me. To say where I was or what I said when I was there. I mean, you could talk about me maybe. But nobody could say that it was me. I could be anybody. I think in times like these the less said the better" (144-45).

Other than in the philosophical passages, the narration and the dialogue reinforce these postmodern concepts with an avoidance of language that does not have immediate referent. Although the choice of words is rich and poetic, with few exceptions, the descriptive language calls attention to the immediate surroundings through which the man and boy travel, more an echo than a shaper of those surroundings. These descriptions generally avoid the extremely long sentences of some of McCarthy's former novels, the sentences that, in their complexity and use of metaphor, create a reality of their own. The substantive language is appropriate in a world where humans are reduced to the most basic struggles for food and shelter. The following passage serves as a representative example of this descriptive language:

They crossed through the sedge to a fence and climbed through, holding down the wire for each other with their hands. The wire was cold and it creaked in the staples. It was darkening fast. They went on. What they came to was a cedar wood, the trees dead and black but still full enough to hold the snow. Beneath each one a precious circle of dark earth and cedar duff. (80)

The absence of chapters reinforces the concept that the organization of stories written in books is a result of language imposed upon experience, not an intrinsic part of it. The represented dialogue between the man and boy concerns primarily their immediate reality: their needs for food and shelter, their safety, the boy's fears, their health. The oft-repeated phrase "okay" functions as a primal response, useful in many ways as agreement, understanding with or without agreement, reassurance, and end of discussion:

That's the best deal you're going to get.

Okay.

Okay means okay. It doesnt mean we negotiate another deal tomorrow.

What's negotiate?

It means talk about it some more and come up with some other deal. There is no other deal. This is it.

Okay.

Okay. (139)

When the boy is disappointed in his father's actions or horrified by what he has witnessed, he stops talking altogether. For example, after a night and day of journeying following the episode with the man who steals their cart, the father urges the boy, "You have to talk to me" (219), and the boy responds, "I'm trying" (220). When the boy uses language that he has heard in the past that no longer has any present use, the father is amused, as if the boy has spoken an archaism:

Do you think they died?

I dont know.

But the odds are not in their favor.

The man smiled. The odds are not in their favor? (204)

To this point, however, this discussion has considered how *The Road* is a postmodern work, a work affirming the assertion that language shapes reality and often obscures it, and, therefore, a work attempting to avoid those possibilities. What then makes this work a post-postmodern work is its essentialist nature. It is an experiment in fiction in which language has been exposed in its problematic relationship to reality, and yet, the book is an assertion that language does have the power to evoke that which can be known beyond language. We are reminded, after all, of authorship: "What will you say? A living man spoke these lines?" (220). The argument of the book is that language can convey more about the essence of living authentically, than the actual mean-

ing of the words in combination can describe, that nonverbal understandings accompany the words on the page. McCarthy began this argument in the Epilogue of *Cities of the Plain* when the power of the story that the storyteller tells Billy evokes momentarily a waking vision that makes an "ancient spanish mission" out of the dome of a radar tracking station and a row of figures dressed in robes out of "rags of plastic wrapping hanging from a fence where the wind had blown them" (289). The storyteller in that Epilogue affirms that essence which exists beyond language and to which language can sometimes provide testament: "At the core of our life is the history of which it is composed and in that core are no idioms but only the act of knowing and it is this we share in dreams and out. Before the first man spoke and after the last is silenced forever" (281). By example, *The Road* demonstrates that it is possible to tell a story of what is best in humans as reflective of all that can be described as a positive force in the natural world. In that sense it becomes an affirmation, an expectancy.

In *All the Pretty Horses*, the Duena Alfonsa describes courage as a performative noun, as used in Austin's speech-act theory: "[t]hat the desire was the thing itself" (235). When the boy asks the man near the end of *The Road* what is the bravest thing he has ever done, the man replies facetiously, "Getting up this morning" (229). That is, however, the essence of courage that is desire: desire to live, desire to protect, desire to keep going in the face of the insurmountable. When the boy expresses a desire to give up, the man encourages him to continue, "This is what the good guys do. They keep trying" (116). Courage as a quality then becomes the desire itself, not its enactment in the stories of others.

Love, too, is presented in its essentialist form, caring enough for another to keep trying for that other. The wife speaks some of the most significant words about the nature of love in telling the man that the boy will be the only thing that stands between him and death: "The one thing I can tell you is that you wont survive for yourself. I know because I would never have come this far. A person who had no one would be well advised to cobble together some passable ghost. Breathe it into being and coax it along with words of love. Offer it each phantom crumb and shield it from harm with your body" (49).

The boy also represents some of the qualities that are performative, desires that are the things themselves. He has a generous, altruistic nature that is represented in the book as being innate in a Wordsworthian/Neo-Platonic sense. As a possible Neo-Platonic allusion, when the man and the boy see themselves in a mirror, the man is startled, but the boy immediately recognizes their likenesses; as in Neo-Platonism, the mirror reflects the self, the inner Good: "They came upon themselves in a mirror and he [the man] almost raised the pistol. It's us, Papa, the boy whispered. It's us" (111). The boy wants to help all those they encounter who are in need, and the man tells the boy that he

is better than the man is, "You're the best guy. You always were" (235). It is with that meaning that the man tells Ely that the boy is a god (145); his desire to help others in spite of his own needs represents the good within. Finally, the boy possesses enough trust in a future and in others, in spite of all that he has witnessed that would teach him the contrary, to go out on the road alone at the end and await the approaching strangers (237).

Ironically, this revelation of the essential qualities that make up the best of humanness place *The Road* readily within the genre that we began tracing at the start: the journey narrative. Whether the story is of Rose of Sharon's offering her breast to the starving man (Steinbeck 455) or of the boy's wanting to share their food with strangers in *The Road*, the journey narrative often uses language to reveal with clarity that which does not require language to understand. The work itself, in that sense, is performative. Although McCarthy's dark vision cannot offer explicit comfort "[o]f day returning and of life revived" (Wordsworth, *Prelude* V. 37), it does illustrate Wordsworth's belief in the power of language to evoke that which is already understood at some deep level beyond language:

Even forms and substances are circumfused By that transparent veil with light divine, And, through the turnings intricate of verse, Present themselves as objects recognised, In flashes, and with glory not their own. (*Prelude* V. 601-05)

McCarthy readers will not be surprised, though, because as the gypsy tells Billy in *The Crossing*, "the way of the road was the rule for all upon it. He said that on the road there were no special cases" (414).

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Compassionate McCarthy?: *The Road* and Schopenhauerian Ethics

Euan Gallivan

he use of Arthur Schopenhauer's philosophy as an explicatory framework for the fiction of Cormac McCarthy is not without precedent. In "Everything a Hunter and Everything Hunted", published in 2003, Dwight Eddins discussed *Blood Meridian* in just such terms. While not wishing to challenge too forcefully what he judges to be the accepted view of McCarthy as a "practitioner of a sternly monistic realism" (26), Eddins maintains that examination of the categories of Schopenhauer's system reveals a deep affinity between the philosopher's "basic world view" and the "prevailing vision" of the novel (26). This affinity, writes Eddins, displays itself most clearly in that the fact that the "indiscriminate and endlessly repetitive carnage" which McCarthy presents "seems to belong to the ground of being itself, as for Schopenhauer it in fact does," and that such violence, in both novel and philosophy, is represented "as the prevailing nature of existence, not as an abominable extreme" (27).

Schopenhauer's pessimistic Idealism is founded on the premise that the world exists both as phenomenal representation and Kantian thing-in-itself. Where Schopenhauer believed that he had surpassed Kant, however, was in his identification of thing-in-itself as Will, a blind, aimless striving which is not subject to plurality but is nevertheless fragmented by the thinking subject into discrete parts or representations via the purely cognitive categories of time and space. What Schopenhauer terms the *principium individuationis*, or principle of individuation, is entirely illusory, yet as the thinking subject is unable to comprehend Will other than through these cognitive categories, the self is regarded as the centre of the phenomenal world, opposed to everything else. From this subject-object distinction arise egoism and consequently violence, as each individual attempts to wrest control from the others. Such is the vision that Eddins sees as being at the heart of *Blood Meridian*.

That novel is not, however, a complete anomaly in the McCarthy canon. As much as Eddins justifies his reading of the text on the grounds that the scholarly commentary it has given rise to "has tended to be of a wider philosophical and religious scope" (25-26) than that on McCarthy's other works, *Blood Meridian* does not stand alone and isolated. As far as concerns the "prevailing vision" of the novel, it is my suggestion that McCarthy's latest offering, *The Road*, stands firmly alongside the earlier piece; despite taking place in a post-apocalyptic future, *The Road* shares much of its imagery and many of its thematic concerns. Once again the reader is presented with a world ravaged, a landscape "[b]arren, silent, godless" (4); an "ashen scabland" (13),

desolate and, in a reiteration of that word which so evocatively captured the essence of the Western landscape in *Blood Meridian*, "cauterized" (12). As in the earlier novel, the wasteland which constitutes the world of *The Road* is one of seemingly hopeless suffering. Walking out into the thin gray light, the father sees this truth: "The cold relentless circling of the intestate earth. Darkness implacable.... And somewhere two hunted animals trembling like groundfoxes in their cover" (110). The world of *The Road* is a lawless one, through which stalk bands of thieves, murderers and cannibals, all intent on maintaining their own essentially futile existences at the expense of the weak and vulnerable. As Schopenhauer would put it, the novel presents us with the conflict of egos in its most distinct manifestation, the release of the mob from all law and order precipitating the Hobbesian *bellum omnium contra omnes*, the war of all against all (333).¹

Amid this destruction the father and son move towards a vague and elusive goal, journeying southward in hope of more favourable climes but certain of nothing save eventual death. The father has an indistinct notion of the vanity of life in the midst of this suffering. He wonders whether there is a cow somewhere being fed and cared for but arrives only at the unanswerable question, "Saved for what?" (102) He is equally unable to give an adequate explanation for the continued maintenance of his own existence, asserting that the bravest thing he ever did was "[g]etting up this morning" (229). Yet the justification of this bravery merely consists in the vague conviction that "the good guys . . . keep trying. They dont give up" (116).

Passing through the mountains the father and . . . son "ate sparely and were hungry all the time" (27), nourishing themselves in the most frugal manner. For Schopenhauer this is the nature of all attainment, akin to "the alms thrown to the beggar, which reprieves him today so that his misery may be prolonged till tomorrow" (196). In like manner, the father and son are referred to as "mendicant friars sent forth to find their keep" (106), dependent either on what meagre supplies they can scavenge, or on what is bestowed to them as a result of the misfortune of others. Hunger, their habitual state, not only forms a running motif throughout the *The Road* but possesses particular significance in Schopenhauer's system, being the most universal manifestation of that constant striving which is representative of the world's innermost nature. It is an iron command to nourish the body which is itself, as Schopenhauer explains, "nothing more than objectified will-to-live" (312). Moreover, the conflict inherent in all of nature rests on precisely this premise, for it is the same will which manifests itself in all phenomena, and since "every animal can maintain its own existence only by the incessant elimination of another's, [t]hus the will-to-live generally feasts on itself" (147). Just as the father likens himself and his son to two hunted animals, so others are likened to the animals that hunt, bestial in their savagery, as is necessitated by their environment.

"Becoming bestial," as Robert Brinkmeyer has argued, "is the fate of McCarthy's characters who cross the fragile boundary separating the civilized from the uncivilized" (39): such is the case of *Child of God*'s Lester Ballard, cutting "a misplaced and loveless simian shape scuttling across the turnaround" (*COG* 20), or Glanton's men in *Blood Meridian*, about whom there was little "to suggest even the discovery of the wheel" (*BM* 232). At every turn in *The Road* we are faced with the dehumanized: the "ragged horde" of the slave march, carrying "every manner of bludgeon. . . . Bearded, their breath smoking through their masks" (77-78); Ely, who "looked like a pile of rags fallen off a cart" (137); the thief, "raw and naked, filthy, starving" (216). With each struggling to assert his or her own will-to-live, which is only an individuated manifestation of the unitary Will, the conflict of egos necessarily arises. As Schopenhauer notes:

Since the will manifests that self-affirmation of one's own body in innumerable individuals beside one another, in one individual, by virtue of the egoism peculiar to all, it very easily goes beyond this affirmation to the denial of the same will appearing in another individual. (334)

Despite his seeming to offer a rationalization of violence and suffering, it would be wrong to assume that Schopenhauer's metaphysics promotes moral relativism or amorality more generally. In both *The World as Will and Representation* and the shorter *On the Basis of Morality*, the latter of which can be understood as a supplementary volume to his major work, Schopenhauer puts forward a coherent system of ethics inextricably bound to his metaphysics. In fact, Schopenhauer insists that all ethical systems demand a metaphysical basis in order to be satisfactory. In his own conception, Schopenhauer sees the denial of another individual's will as the basis for wrong (*Unrecht*), the doing of which "occurs either through violence or through cunning; it is immaterial as regards what is morally essential" (337). Both the murderers who stalk *The Road*'s charred landscape and the thieves who appropriate the scavenged possessions of others in order to maintain their own well-being are judged by the same moral categories in this system.

Moreover, the concept of wrong is in Schopenhauer's model "most completely, peculiarly, and palpably expressed in cannibalism . . . the terrible picture of the greatest conflict of the will with itself at the highest grade of its objectification which is man" (335). It is the picture of the greatest conflict of the will with itself not only because it represents the ultimate denial of the victim's will-to-live but also because it satisfies, albeit temporarily, that most universal manifestation of the will-to-live of the offender. McCarthy's world is one which is "soon to be largely populated by men who would eat your

children in front of your eyes" (152), and many of the most horrifying and disturbing scenes in *The Road* are those which feature cannibalism, implicit or otherwise: instances such as that of the infant, "headless and gutted and blackening on the spit" (167), and even more chillingly, those unfortunates locked in the cellar of the plantation house who are being kept as a human food stock, the man "with his legs gone to the hip and the stumps of them blackened and burnt" (93). This extreme manifestation of the denial of the will of others is rejected particularly by the son, who urges his father to promise that they would never eat people. And he replies that they never would, because they are "the good guys" (109).

In this exhortation to his father, the boy demonstrates the condition Schopenhauer deems necessary for an action to be considered right. According to Schopenhauer, the individual who never in the affirmation of his own will goes to the length of denying the will that manifests itself in another, performs a right action. As such, even the term "action" is not strictly appropriate, for right in this context is a fundamentally passive category. Simply refraining from eating other people can be viewed as right on the basis that the concept "contains merely the negation of wrong" (339). Thus an action "is not wrong the moment it does not encroach . . . on the sphere of another's affirmation of will and deny this" (339). For this reason, as Schopenhauer explains:

the person who refuses to show the right path to the wanderer who has lost his way, does not do him any wrong; but whoever directs him on to a false path certainly does. (338)

In his reluctance to help Ely and in his refusal, or as he sees it, his inability, to help the man struck by lightning, the father does no wrong; he does not encroach on another's affirmation of will, but in prioritizing his own well-being he does not affirm the will of others as if they were his own. In the former case, that of their encounter with Ely, he tells the boy, "[w]hen we're out of food you'll have more time to think about it" (147); in the latter, he tells him that the man is "going to die. We cant share what we have or we'll die too" (44).

In *On the Basis of Morality*, Schopenhauer posits three fundamental incentives for human actions: egoism, malice, and compassion (145). Insofar as the father gives his own well-being priority over that of others, his actions are driven by the first of these incentives, and the fact that he affirms not only his own will but that of his son in no way contradicts this. The narrator's assertion that "the boy was all that stood between him and death" (25) not only refers to the material purpose given to his life by protection of the boy, but also to the knowledge that since the individual does not endure, "everything therefore has to be staked on the maintenance of the species, as that in which the

individual's true existence lies" (WWR 2: 511). The father sees himself in the child, and in the affirmation of the child's will-to-live sees the extension of his own beyond death. Thus protection of the boy becomes of paramount importance in the quest for self-affirmation, even if the means by which this protection is assured is fraught with moral ambiguities.

Early in the novel, for instance, the father kills another man in order to protect the boy. This can be read as an action devoid of egoistic drives, as the father affirms the will of the boy as if it were his own. But given that the will-to-live of the father is inextricably bound up with that of the son, in terms of maintaining the family-species, his killing of the man can also be read as merely the affirmation of his own will, extending into the denial of the assailant's. As has been noted, however, Schopenhauerian right is simply the negation of wrong, and finds its principle application "in those cases where an attempted wrong by violence is warded off" (339). The initial threat of violence is an attempt to deny the will of the potential victim, and as Schopenhauer maintains:

I have a right to deny that other person's denial with what force is necessary to suppress it; and it is easy to see that this may extend even to the killing of the other person . . . It is . . . only a negation of the negation, and hence affirmation, not itself negation. (340)

The consideration of this scene in Schopenhauerian terms is useful as it relates to the later episode when the father punishes a thief who steals their possessions from the beach. There is an obvious discrepancy between the motives for the two reactions, analysis of which goes some way to explaining the rather discomfiting nature of the latter. On the father's instruction, the thief removes every last stitch of his clothing and is left in the road "naked, filthy, starving" (216). "Dont do this, man", the thief pleads. "You didnt mind doing it to us," replies the father. "I'm going to leave you the way you left us" (217). While the thief does deny the will (or wills) of the father and son, the father's punishment of him, although it is in one sense a negation of negation, constitutes not positive law, but negative. As Schopenhauer insists, "all right to punish is established by positive law alone, which has determined before the offence a punishment therefore" (347). As such, "[t]he law and its fulfilment, namely punishment, are directed essentially to the future, not to the past. This [is what] distinguishes punishment from revenge" and makes it certain that "apart from the State, there is no right to punish" (347).

Of course, in *The Road* there is no State, a fact which is crucial for an understanding of how the ethical system in question relates to the novel. For Schopenhauer, only the individual who accepts the moral boundary between right and wrong where no State or other authority guarantees it can truly be

identified as just (370). Where the State exerts its influence, it may well be the case that a citizen "promotes the well-being of all because he sees his own well-being bound up therewith" (349), but this is often conditioned by the threat of punishment, which exists as a counter-motive to the doing of wrong. In *The Road*, the disappearance of the governmental machinery of the states, or as the father puts it, "[w]hat used to be called the states" (36), has taken with it any judicial incentive for people to refrain from acting out wrong deeds. When by the campfire the father tells his son "[o]ld stories of courage and justice as he remembered them" (35), the reader becomes aware that it is not only the stories that exist purely in memory— in McCarthy's wasteland the ideals of courage and justice themselves seem to be disappearing.

Even the father is not immune to this moral disintegration. While it would be a stretch too far to suggest that the father acts out of malice, the second of Schopenhauer's fundamental incentives, his actions do exhibit a certain moral ambiguity. As has already been suggested, many of his actions, judged by Schopenhauerian standards, can be deemed right (in the negative sense, as in not being wrong actions), yet given that he acts in the interests of himself and his son, he is fundamentally egoistic. The father is aware that there is an ethical distinction between his treatment of the thief and the killing of the man who threatened his son earlier in the novel. The force of the boy's anguish over the fate of the thief leads the father to give his word that he "wasnt going to kill him" (219), an assertion which he believes justifies his behaviour, whereas he did not feel the need to justify the earlier killing. Initially believing that "an eye for an eye" constitutes a negation of a negation and is thus morally valid, the boy's reaction forces upon the father a change of knowledge which leads to remorse. Despite Schopenhauer's assurance that this appearance of right "distinguishes revenge from pure wickedness, and to some extent excuses it" (364), the fact that the father returns to the scene of the encounter, piles "the man's shoes and clothes in the road...[and] put[s] a rock on top of them" (219) is vitally important for the development of the relationship between man and boy and demonstrates the latter's emerging status as the moral centre of the novel.

"The absence of all egoistic motivation," writes Schopenhauer, is the absolute "criterion of an action of moral worth" (*Morality*, 140). In *The Road* the son, in contrast to his father, is most able to see through the illusory principle of individuation, with the result that he reacts with compassion (*Mitleid*) towards others. This is what Schopenhauer categorizes as the good character, present in that person who is induced "not to hinder another's efforts of will as such, but rather to promote them, and who [is] therefore consistently helpful, benevolent, friendly, and charitable" (360). Yet what moves such a person to "good deeds and to works of affection is always only knowledge of the suffering of others, directly intelligible from one's own suffering, and put on a level

therewith" (375). The boy is repeatedly referred to as being scared, yet as a consequence of his ability to perceive the affinities among all those who walk the road, he is able to identify and empathize with the fear of others. On encountering Ely, the boy tells his father, "He's scared, Papa. The man is scared" (137), a phrase which is reiterated a number of times. Upon catching the thief, the boy again exhorts, "He's so scared, Papa. . . . He's afraid to answer" (218-19).

In other words, the ability to see through the principle of individuation leads to the knowledge that for thing-in-itself there is no applicable distinction between interpresuppositional subject and object—the two terms reciprocally fill one another. This is often represented in fiction as a subject-object mirroring. Samuel Beckett, for instance, upon whom the influence of Schopenhauer has long been acknowledged, presents in his novel Watt (1953) a scene in which the subject-object mirroring of the eponymous main character and the narrator, Sam, is developed to such a degree that their identities appear to merge.² When this mirroring motif appears in *The Road*, however, the breakdown of the subject-object boundary is expressed in unusual terms. Searching an abandoned house and coming across his reflection in a mirror, the father almost raises his pistol, unable to reconcile this image of himself with those he is so wary of. It is the boy who alerts him: "It's us, Papa, the boy whispered. It's us" (111). The father is unable to see his connectedness to other individuals, but neither can he synthesize the double knowledge he has of himself – both as subject and as object amongst other objects. The boy, in recognizing both the subjective and objective aspects of the mirror image, draws attention to the fact that the other travellers on the road are merely mirror images of themselves.

Of course, as befits Schopenhauer's pessimistic world view, individuals who are able to come to such intuitive metaphysical-ethical knowledge are exceedingly rare. Such is the case in the world of McCarthy's latest fiction. The father admits he doesn't think they are "likely to meet any good guys on the road" (127), and the boy concurs, observing that "There's a lot of them, those bad guys" (78). So what is to be made of the novel's ending? It is my suggestion that *The Road*, while seeming to present a cautious sense of hope, does so in a most misleading way. On the verge of death, the father emphatically asserts that "Goodness will find the little boy. It always has" (236), and his prediction appears to be borne out when the boy is taken in by a family who have followed the pair into the woods. The boy really has no choice, however, but to blindly place his trust in the family, and even if they are, as they profess to be, "the good guys," there is nothing in the novel's narrative trajectory to suggest that their continued journey will be any easier than that which occupies the pages of the text. But how else could McCarthy have satisfactorily concluded such an already harrowing piece of work? Regarding dramatic poetry in general, Schopenhauer suggested that it:

can always present to us only a strife, an effort, and a struggle for happiness, never enduring or complete happiness itself.... As soon as the goal is reached, it quickly lets the curtain fall. For there would be nothing left to show but that the glittering goal, in which the hero imagined he could find happiness, had merely mocked him. (320)

Despite its apparently tentative celebration of humanity, and of the love between father and son, the end of the novel nevertheless exudes the same "kind of vital pessimism" (66) of which John Vanderheide recently has spoken as being representative of McCarthy's entire canon. In the first of his two interviews with Richard Woodward, McCarthy stated that "the notion that the species can be improved in some way, that everyone could live in harmony, is a really dangerous idea" (31), and this new novel does little to suggest that he has altered his stance. Just as the epigraphs to *Blood Meridian* famously point to a violence which has been ever-present in human history, *The Road* suggests that, despite the efforts of those rare, compassionate individuals, it will continue to be the hallmark of our human future.

Notes

1 Except where indicated otherwise, references are to *The World as Will and Representation*, Volume 1.

2 See also Martin Bidney, "Faulkner's Kinship with Schopenhauer: The Sabbath of the Ixion Wheel." *Neophil* 71 (1987): 447-59. Bidney employs this idea in his analysis of Hightower's vision at the end of *Light in August*.

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Sighting Leviathan: Ritualism, Daemonism and the Book of Job in McCarthy's Latest Works

John Vanderheide

Introduction

In 2006, Cormac McCarthy published two new works, *The Sunset Limited* and *The Road*. At first glance the two could not appear to be more different. *The Sunset Limited* (subtitled "A Novel in Dramatic Form," and originally produced as a play) forms a long one-act dialogue between a suicidal university professor and the religiously minded ex-convict who has just prevented him from jumping in front of a train. Their encounter, as the spare narrative prologue relates, is set inside the ex-con's apartment "in a tenement building in a black ghetto in New York City" (3). The Road, on the other hand, eschews all such claims to contemporaneous realism of setting. Rather, in a series of broken sentences and broken paragraphs, the novel narrates the months-long peripatetic journey south of a father and son in a harrowing post-apocalyptic American wasteland. As far as settings go, then, *The Sunset Limited* and *The Road* present incompossible fictional worlds. Closer inspection of the two, however, yields a payload of unobtrusive correspondences—syntactical similarities, phrasal repetitions, common rhetorical figures, convergent thematic concerns.

Such correspondences, as I will argue, point to the common origin of these works in a rigorously developed, yet discretely diffuse allegorical outlook. The relative inconspicuousness of the allegorical element in McCarthy's style is at least in part the obverse of the ostentatiousness of its mimetic complement. One could say that on the surface, the mimetic principle takes pride of place, but the infrastructure is all allegory . . . in much the same way that the bark of a certain graveyard elm conceals the wrought iron wire "[g]rowed all up" inside of it (OK 3). Indeed this inaugural image of The Orchard Keeper, in which the natural and the artificial are revealed as inextricably entangled, ably announces the aesthetic difference at the origin of McCarthy's art. Realistic yet symbolic (Jarrett), mimetic yet allegorical (Cant), this productive dichotomy accounts for both the descriptive power and the philosophical largesse of McCarthy's works. What follows is an exploration of two of the most prominent features of McCarthy's allegorism on display in The Sunset Limited and The Road—the ritualism of narrative structure, and the daemonism of narrative agency. The formal analysis of these features then modulates into a genealogical account of McCarthy's recourse to the theological-political allegorism of The Book of Job. What McCarthy finds in this authoritative antecedent, especially in its polysemous treatment of the figure of Leviathan, is a powerful critique of humanity's mis-measurement of itself and of its place in the cosmos. Such a critique, as McCarthy's texts indicate, serves as a precondition for the healing of the primordial pain of human existence, and the self-composition of a life resistant to fatal grievances against the Incommensurable.

Large-Scale Narrative Structures, Their Ritualism

It almost seems as if McCarthy consulted Angus Fletcher's monumental formalist treatise, *Allegory* (1964), when determining the overarching narrative structures of *The Sunset Limited* and *The Road*, for they present textbook examples of the two basic forms into which Fletcher claims allegorical narratives tend to resolve themselves—the so-called forms of "battle" and "progress." Just as *The Sunset Limited*, in the relative symmetry and stasis of Black and White's debate, forms an allegorical battle, *The Road*, with its relentless forward momentum, constitutes an allegorical progress.

Of the progress form, Fletcher writes that it "may first of all be understood in the narrow sense of a questing journey. There is usually a paradoxical suggestion that by leaving home the hero can return to another better home (151). As many scholars have noted before, McCarthy has deployed the quest form with great consistency at least since *Outer Dark*. But if *The Road* rewrites McCarthy's earlier narrative quests, it also signals its genetic relationship to the broader tradition of the allegorical progress. With its obscure dream vision (a stock beginning of allegorical narrative since the Middle Ages) in which the father and son are likened to "pilgrims in a fable" (3), *The Road* opens with an evocation of, among other things, Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, and in so doing declares the manner in which it is to be read. All of the ambiguities and inconsistencies that crop up when the narrative is subjected to mimetic criteria (regarding, for example, the cause of the catastrophe, or the absence of other forms of life) cease to matter when the fictional landscape is understood as an allegorical *paysage moralisé*.

But even as McCarthy's narrative establishes such a relationship and declares itself readable as progress allegory, it distances itself from its antecedent and signals a transformation of the mode. Bunyan's pilgrim flees from The City of Destruction prompted by a warning that it "will be burned with fire from heaven" (9). After a series of moral struggles, he reaches The Celestial City and thereby fulfills the promise of his allegorical name (Christian Salvation). McCarthy's filial dyad, on the contrary, not only receive no such warning about the "long shear of light and then a series of low concussions" (*TR* 45) that accompany the destruction of their world; their progression remains trapped within the immanent wasteland that emerged in its aftermath. The narrative delivers nothing outside the general destruction, and no absolute

transcendence to the pilgrims. The "better home" the boy finds at the narrative's end is only relatively better than the home he left in the beginning. At best, his rescue issues from the operation of a weak metaphysical goodness.

If McCarthy resists the impulse to the ostentatious thematization of transcendence characteristic of the Protestant progress, his narrative nevertheless displays what Fletcher suggests is a much more central feature of the progress form in general: the strict linearity or unidirectionality of narrative action. As Fletcher writes, "Progress involves a sequence of steps in one main direction, and, as with the steps we take when we walk in procession, while minor irregularities are the norm, an overall regularity is equally the norm and at last overrides the smaller irregularities" (159). Indeed this regularity of forward momentum, this linear, processional quality of narrative action, characterizes not only the way *The Road* unfolds, but the way practically all of McCarthy's novels do, especially since *Blood Meridian*.

For Fletcher, this unidirectionality of action reflects the origins of allegory in ritual and ceremonial oratory. Thus while mimetic narratives structure their actions according to rational probabilities of "natural growth and natural decay," allegories unfold theirs "according to ritualistic necessity" (150). Such ritualism manifests in *The Road* both at the structural level in the narrative's ostentatiously paratactic syntax and at the thematic level through the thoughts, words and deeds of the characters. Let us consider the latter first.

It seems that ritualistic necessity becomes immanent thematically in at least two ways. The first is in the overt impulse to ritual that the father expresses to himself in various ruminations and self-imperatives: "Make a list. Recite a litany. Remember" (27); "Evoke the forms. Where you've nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them" (63).¹ The second is in the ritualistic manner of the dialogue between father and son, which more often than not resembles the fixed form of a catechism in its repetitive question-and-answer format:

We wouldnt ever eat anybody, would we?

No. Of course not.

Even if we were starving?

We're starving now.

You said we werent.

I said we werent dying. I didnt say we werent starving.

But we wouldnt.

No. We wouldnt.

No matter what.

No. No matter what.

Because we're the good guys.

Yes.

And we're carrying the fire. And we're carrying the fire. Yes. Okay. (108-09)

There is nothing dialogical about such dialogue. Such exchanges serve rather to establish and buffer a common understanding, a single point of view on the world shared by both interlocutors. Their catechistic content, moreover, suggests how ritual functions to relate the immanent and the transcendent. Here the notion of transcendence must be understood as having two senses, temporal and extratemporal, historical and absolute. Temporally speaking, a ritual relates the present of its enactment to a lived past and to an expected future, commemorating what has been and anticipating what is to come. Ritual may also refer and relate the present moment of enactment to something which stands outside of time altogether. The exchanges between father and son tend to reflect both such senses of the transcendent. In the example cited above, the boy's questions prompt the reaffirmation of what the father has established in the past (their code of conduct); they also prompt the reaffirmation that that code will hold true for all possible futures, "no matter what"; and finally they also prompt the reaffirmation that the code itself is a necessary feature of their relationship to a realm outside of the historical plane. To eat human flesh would not only falsify the past and destroy the future (as figured in the infant roasting on the spit); it would sever their relationship to the Divine Kingdom and to its inhabitants, who, as the father tells the boy, "are watching for a thing that even death cannot undo and if they do not see it they will turn away from us and they will not come back" (177). Whatever this "thing" might be, it most certainly depends upon the will to ritual, the ceremonial delimitation and consistency of conduct in time.

The dialogue in *The Sunset Limited* reflects an entirely different narrative structure. Instead of the reciprocal buffering and formal elaboration of a single point of view, we find a collision of incompatible and opposing discourses that ends in an impasse. Fletcher writes that the effect of the allegorical battle "is not exactly one of ritual, but an effect of symmetry and balance. If these are not ritualistic qualities, it is only because ritual implies an unfolding sequence, whereas symmetry suggests stasis and conflict caught at a given moment in time" (159). Indeed in *The Sunset Limited* both parties are constantly arresting the movement of the other. Until the end at least, Black manages to thwart White's repeated attempts to leave the apartment. Conversely, White frustrates all of Black's efforts at pushing the dialogue toward the tropological end Black desires (i.e. White's spiritual conversion). But if the streams of their linguistic flow are not ritually canalized and united in the way those of *The Road*'s dyad are, the dialogue nevertheless bears a ceremonial quality that divests it of resemblance to casual conversation. This is not just a result of the dialogue's

paratactic rhythm. The ritual air of Black and White's encounter arises from the daemonic agency with which the narrative invests both parties.

Allegorical Daemonism

For Fletcher, the agency of an allegorical character is "daemonic" firstly on account of its ostentatious unfreedom. As he writes, "If we were to meet an allegorical character in real life, we would say of him that he was obsessed with only one idea, or that he had an absolutely one-track mind. . . . It would seem that he was driven by some hidden, private force; or, viewing him from another angle, it would appear that he did not control his own destiny, but appeared to be controlled by some foreign force, something outside the sphere of his own ego" (40-41). Complexity of character thus belongs more properly to mimetic narrative. Allegory tends rather to restrict its daemonic agents to narrow operative positions within a cosmos that embodies a hierarchical chain of command.

The daemonic agency of *The Road*'s paternal protagonist certainly manifests in his relationship to his son, whose protection he considers to be his sole, divinely appointed function. The narrative indeed ratifies the man's daemonism, both in the way it fulfills the man's promise that "Goodness will find the little boy" (236), and in the way that the boy's rescue retroactively lends reason to the man's obsessive plan to head south and reach the ocean, a plan that he himself thought to be "empty and [of] no substance" (25). In other words, the narrative proffers the man as a division of a higher power that operates through him, the aforementioned weak metaphysical goodness that leads him to the spot where the boy will be found. Like the leopard and poet of a Borges parable, the man thus dies having fulfilled his function without even realizing it.

The "roadagents" or "bad guys" of *The Road* seem no less daemonic than the protagonists. The narrative suggests this in the indirect association it draws between the "possessed" toy penguin of the boy's dream that moved even though "[t]he winder wasnt turning" and "nobody had wound it up" (31) and its description of the roadagents on the move: "They clanked past, marching with a swaying gait like wind-up toys" (77). The inability of the "bad guys" to capture the filial dyad suggests the lower place they occupy in the narrative's daemonic order of things. *The Road* constitutes an allegorical progress because the father's daemonic desire overpowers everything that would impede the ritual movement south.

Daemonic unfreedom defines the opposing parties of *The Sunset Limited* also. If Black has "no choice in the matter" (*SL* 9) except to live where he lives and try to help those whom he believes God puts in his path, White has "only the hope of nothingness" to guide his actions (141). The arresting of the narra-

tive movement into the symmetry and stasis of the battle form results from the relative equality in the amplitude of their respective single-minded desires. What the narrative presents the reader with is therefore something of an intersection of two otherwise autonomous ritual movements: White's ritual movement toward his own and the world's nothingness and Black's ritual movement toward what he hopes to be his own and the world's redemption.

How arbitrary can this intersection be? For Fletcher, the daemonic agent is always engaged in "fated actions" (151). Faced with the improbabilities that structure the encounter (i.e. how on the platform Black manages to evade being seen by White, how he manages to rescue him, how he manages to get him back to his apartment, etc.), the narrative asks the reader to consider the fatality or preformation of this encounter. But in what sense is their encounter, which in many respects violates mimetic decorum, fated or preformed? White would of course deny the allegorical fatality of the encounter altogether ("Everything that happens doesnt mean something else" [3]). Black would maintain that God preformed and fated it. Does the narrative leave the reader any instructions as to which of these reciprocally excluding perspectives to adopt?

An Interpretive Key

The reader must remember that the allegorical character is not a mimetic representation of a human being, but a personified complex of signs bearing iconographical meaning for the culturally initiated. Features that would be accidental from a mimetic perspective thus become indexical when read allegorically. Names are especially important in this regard. Proper names like Billy Parham or John Grady Cole seem mimetically arbitrary enough. But with "White" and "Black" we are immediately in an abstract realm. These color/race designations, moreover, attract other features to them by iconographic necessity. Looked at in isolation, such features may seem arbitrary. But they attain their inherent legibility the moment the reader properly arranges them into a constellation from which (s)he may read their allegorical meaning. This is a process that not only involves establishing their paradigmatic relationship with each other, but also their syntagmatic relationship with their literary antecedents.

Take the opposition between belief and atheism in *The Sunset Limited*. Why must it be distributed such that atheism pertains to White and belief to Black? Here White's unbelief seems primary, at least insofar as we recognize Melville's authoritative establishment of white as the emblematic "colorless all-color of atheism" (*MD* 212). This syntagmatic connection to *Moby-Dick* would remain capricious and impressionistic if not for other elements that shore it up and give it objective validity. In the "Extracts" that preface Melville's novel, the whale is repeatedly associated with the biblical monster, Leviathan.

Of course one finds the most sustained treatment of this strange creature in The Book of Job: significantly the only Biblical text White specifies he has read (15). Melville associates Leviathan with the whale based on 41.32 of the Authorized Version: "He maketh a path to shine after him; / One would think the deep to be hoary." But generations of scholars have used other passages (such as 41.30 of the same translation) to identify Leviathan with the crocodile. One needs to keep this in mind when White evokes a hypothetical third party's "crazy" perception of him as having "green skin and a tail" (11). When read in isolation, these elements—White's color, his atheism, his mention of The Book of Job, and his hypothetically imputed reptilian aspect—remain incoherent and arbitrary. But the moment the reader constellates them a singular iconographical meaning begins to coalesce: White's allegorical identification with the biblical monster, Leviathan. But what significance could this possibly have?

In Job, God introduces Leviathan at the climax of his long and blistering rebuttal to Job's passionate complaint, as the last and most impressive of the creatures He parades before the devastated patriarch for his rather humiliating edification. In a certain sense, however, Leviathan is not one of God's creations, or at least not of the same order as the other creatures. In the older Babylonian mythos from which it was imported, Leviathan was rather the personification of that "sea" of chaos and nothingness that the supreme deity struggled with and subdued as a prelude to Creation. (It is this "battle" that God proudly recounts in 38.8-11 and that He exhorts Job in 41.8 to "remember.") In The Book of Job, of course, a total monotheism has definitively superseded the theological dualism of Babylonian cosmology. As this monotheism piously attributes the world's evil to God as much as it does the world's good, it also revalues Leviathan as something like God's will to destruction.

In his landmark translation and commentary on the text, David Wolfers suggests that God's speech, which so many (including Jung) have thought psychotic, indicates a profound twofold intention that even today seems little understood. Firstly, Job's trial represents God's pretext for the unilateral deconstruction of the traditional covenantal relationship with His chosen people. The terrible irony of the trial is that Job's losses and afflictions (the theft of his livestock, the death of his children, the affliction of boils) are precise duplicates of the conventional punishments the Deuteronomic Moses promised to Israel if it would ever break its side of the bargain. Job is thus fully justified in contesting God's acts to such an extreme. From a covenantal perspective it is an outrage that Job should suffer the Deuteronomic curses despite his heartfelt adherence to all of the covenant's terms. Still, at no time does Job curse God in return or find his unmerited sufferings grounds to deny His existence. His conduct indeed affirms what "the Satan" (who represents, for Wolfers, the personification of God's self-doubt) deems unlikely: that Job reveres his Maker

"for naught." And this is the first harsh lesson the trial is to convey. As Wolfers writes,

the Book of Job emerges as the record of the eliciting from Jewish people of that genuine love of God which could never have been discovered or revealed as long as the covenantal relationship remained intact in unmodified form. It is a vital document in the history of religion, marking the first appearance of devotion as a free-will offering, and of the extension of the concept of the one national god to that of One God for all. (208)

However, the universalization of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob does not entail the universalization of covenantal law. This brings us to the second intention of God's speech. The vision God conjures for Job demonstrates the relative autonomy of each singular aspect of creation. Each creature, as it were, possesses its own nontransferable categorical imperative and pursues its desire without reference to anything outside of it. The ostrich no more asks the horse whether her poor nesting habits are ethical than the horse asks the ostrich whether his love of war is morally justifiable. Job is thus given, as Wolfers puts it, "a clear-sighted view of the true place of man, species and individual, in a necessarily interdependent and interacting matrix of non-empathetic parts" (214). It would seem then that in The Book of Job, God corrects His previous mismeasure of man, rescinding man's dominion "over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth" (Gen. 1.26).

Wolfers' painstaking philological analysis shows how all of the creatures in Job's vision do double duty as mimetic representations and as allegorical emblems of various middle-eastern nations with which the Divided Kingdom (Israel and Judah) was engaged economically and politically at the time of writing (early seventh century BCE). The most important of these nations in the Joban allegory is Assyria under the kingship of Sennacherib (705-681 BCE). The painful theological-political contradiction at the heart of The Book of Job, Wolfers argues, was Assyria's menacing dominion over Judah despite its then king Hezekiah's unshakeable adherence to the covenant. Hezekiah's real righteousness indeed led the Judeans to believe that God would be covenantally bound to assure them victory over the Assyrians. This foolhardy presumption is emblematized and critiqued by God in the encounter He describes between Behemoth and Leviathan. Confident of his own powers ("His bones are as strong pieces of brass / His bones are like bars of iron" [40.18]), Behemoth (=Hezekiah, =Judah) thinks he can easily seize and subdue Leviathan (=Sennacherib, =Assyria). But in a series of mocking questions and sobering answers, God paints a truer picture of the reality:

Canst thou draw out leviathan with an hook?
Or his tongue with a cord which thou lettest down?
Canst thou put an hook into his nose?
Or bore his jaw through with a thorn?
Will he make many supplications unto thee?
Will he speak soft words unto thee?
Will he make a covenant with thee?
Wilt thou take him for a servant forever? ...
He esteemeth iron as straw
And brass as rotten wood.
(41.1-4, 27)

The incoherence and obscurity of the figure of Leviathan in The Book of Job thus results from its polysemy, the fact that it simultaneously figures forth, mythically, God's restless will to destruction naturally; a reptilian or mammalian monstrosity; and historically, the Assyrian nation under Sennacherib at the time of Hezekiah's reign in Judah. But despite this necessary figural polymorphousness Leviathan's function is singularly clear: to cure Job of his daemonic single-mindedness. In his infinite desire to contest what befell him, Job is indeed the paradigm of the daemonic agent. Neither his three comforters nor the upstart Elihu can counter the force of Job's desire for justice, his desire to force God to reveal and explain Himself. Commentators such as Jung or Jack Miles view God's subsequent speech as a fascistic exercise in misdirection designed to silence the just protest of the disfranchised. But this noble misreading overlooks the real point of God's abusive sarcasm: to free Job from his obsession before it leads to a fatal encounter with an overwhelmingly greater daemonic force. God makes it clear that Job is Behemoth, and that Behemoth stands no chance against Leviathan. In His divine preview, God thus offers Job a way out of the whole web of daemonic fate. The price is steep, of course, and includes the relinquishment of the old understanding of the covenant as well as the displacement of Judah, as of any nation, and man, as of any species, from the center stage of nature and history. In other words, it entails the unfixing of Job's identity—a difficult and painful process for a daemonic agent, whose desire, as Fletcher would say, is always and already "to become one with an image of unchanging purity" (65).

We are now in a position to return to *The Sunset Limited* and consider the fatality or preformation of the encounter it dramatizes. As the narrative presents White as an avatar of Leviathan, it allots Black the place of Job/Behemoth. A host of characteristics suggests this, perhaps the most important of these being Black's thrice-noted, twice-denied "facetious" attitude, expressed,

for example, in his repeated use of the soft appellation "honey." If the narrative underwrites Black's perspective in suggesting the encounter's divine arrangement, it nevertheless overturns his presumption that the arrangement was made for the sake of White's redemption. On the contrary, the Joban angle of the narrative suggests that, if anything, God arranged the encounter with the express purpose of curing Black's daemonism. Black, however, fails to recognize this. Too far gone in his self-identification as a fisher of men, he is in fact unwilling to "let [his] brother off the hook" (*SL* 78). And though he accepts he is "in over [his] head," he cannot even "let [himself] off the hook" (134):

White: ... So why dont we just say goodbye and you can get on with your life.

Black: I cant. White: You cant? Black: No. (125-26)

This refusal to let White be, merely consolidates Black in his daemonism. Veteran readers of McCarthy will thus recognize Black as a replica of any number of other daemonic protagonists doomed by a misplaced sense of sympathy: Llewelyn Moss, John Grady Cole and *Blood Meridian*'s kid come readily to mind.³

The paternal protagonist of *The Road*, however, does not seem part of this fatal fraternity. His daemonism differs in kind, despite the fact that the narrative presents him, like Black, as another Joban avatar. If this seems contradictory, it is only until one realizes that in speaking of Job, one must always differentiate between three fundamentally different perspectives or worldviews enveloped by the character (roughly reflected in the formal distinction among the prologue, the poem and the epilogue). Before the multiple disasters struck, Job shared the same covenantal mentality as his three comforters. Hence to all involved, Job's fortune (the fortune of the righteous) reflected God's justness. In the terrible time between the disasters and God's appearance, Job's understanding is suspended between his knowledge of the insufficiency of the covenantal perspective and his ignorance of any positive alternative. Job's misfortune (the misfortune of the righteous) allows for the grievous possibility of God's unjustness. Finally, Job attains that positive alternative in the wake of God's revelation of the lack of a centre in Creation (and thus of the decentred place of the Jewish nation in history and the decentred place of the human species in nature). This revelation renders God incommensurable to any one part of Creation and thus altogether transcendent to any measurement (including that of justness).

As for McCarthy's Joban protagonists, Black's attitude resonates most strongly with the suspended worldview of the "second," daemonical Job. This

is especially evident in the indirect accusation of injustice buried in Black's closing questions to God: "If you wanted me to help him how come you didnt give me the words? You give em to him. What about me?" (142). Black seems unwilling even to let God off the hook (let alone his brother). *The Road*'s father, however, oscillates between the second and third Joban perspectives. We clearly hear the second Job in the solitary cry he raises early in the narrative:

He raised his face to the paling day. Are you there? he whispered. Will I see you at the last? Have you a neck by which to throttle you? Have you a heart? Damn you eternally have you a soul? Oh God, he whispered. Oh God. (10)

This can hardly be mistaken for an original thought. Not only is such an outcry a perfunctory recapitulation of the grievance that the Caborcan pensioner struggled with and overcame in *The Crossing*. It is an ostentatious reiteration of Job's complaint about the inhumanity of a God incommensurable to his creation:

Hast thou eyes of flesh?
Or seest thou as man seeth?
Are thy days as the days of man?
Are thy years as man's years
That thou enquirest after mine iniquity
And searchest after my sin?
Thou knowest that I am not wicked;
And there is none that can deliver out of thine hand. (10.4-7)

An even more interesting marker that figures the man in the image of Job bereft is that of the wife who deserts him. Significantly, the first time the narrative evokes the woman's image it emphatically associates her with the color white. "In dreams his pale bride came to him out of a green and leafy canopy. Her nipples pipeclayed and her rib bones painted white. She wore a dress of gauze and her dark hair was carried up in combs of ivory, combs of shell" (15). On its own this association would not be sufficient to establish a solid intertext between the figure of the woman and that of *The Sunset Limited*'s highbrow suicide. But McCarthy also puts the same words in their mouths, expressing the same desire. As the woman says, "my only hope is for eternal nothingness and I hope it with all my heart" (49), so White echoes and rejoins, "Now there is only the hope of nothingness. I cling to that hope" (141). This hope, moreover, leads both to personify death as a lover. So along with the figure of White, the figure of the woman likewise constitutes an avatar of

Leviathan, a personification of that destructive impulse that is part and particle of God. Moreover, as both figures are suicidal, McCarthy's narratives suggest that the esoteric kernel of Leviathan's desire is an absolute will to nothingness that would annihilate even itself.

Deserted by his wife, the man evokes the Job of the dialogue. But inasmuch as the wife personifies Leviathan's will-to-nothingness, the man, separated from such a will, evokes the Job of the epilogue, freed from the web of his previous incarnation's fate. It is in this light that we must consider the obscure dream with which *The Road* commences. While in the waking world of the diegetic action the man guides the boy across an ashen wasteland, in the dream it is the boy who leads the man—through a cave likened to "the inward parts of some granitic beast," to an encounter with "a creature" that with its "eyes dead white," its "alabaster bones" and its contiguity to a "black and ancient lake" overdetermines its status as yet another avatar of Leviathan (3). As the father considers the boy a metonymy of divinity, the boy's role as guide suggests the divine origin of this dream. The narrative that follows demonstrates that the father has grasped the dream's import, which boils down to the peril of trucking with the emissaries of an absolute will to nothingness. The minimal collisions between the filial dyad and the roadagents may make some readers decry the narrative's relative lack of dramatic conflict. But if this lack violates the conventions of the post-apocalyptic genre, it does so in the service of a specific allegorical intention.

The allegorical battle that Black wages with all his rhetorical force against his pale "brother" falters and comes to nothing. The Joban structure of the narrative strongly suggests that Black misinterprets the significance of the event, thinking "[God] wanted [him] to help [White]" (142). But at bottom of Black's desire to intervene stirs an aggressive grievance about the lack of justice in the world, about the weakness of metaphysical good, or the incommensurability of God to his suffering creation, all of which amounts to the same thing. Focused upon too singlemindedly, this grievance mortgages or expends the defenseless forces of the future for the dubious satisfaction of a present victory. In this respect, it seems allegorically necessary that Black, like Job, be a bereaved parent. While *The Road*'s father expresses the same grievance as Black, he does not let it overtake him. He does not seek to force God to intervene by putting himself in the path of Leviathan's agents. The relative lack of conflict between the filial dyad and the roadagents attests to the father's freedom from that web of fate, his correct interpretation of the narrative's inciting dream. The power of which he is a daemonic division, then, is that weak power, embodied in his son, of "some unimaginable future, glowing in that waste like a tabernacle" (230).

At a point midway through the narrative, the man remembers something of a profane illumination he had had once standing in the ruins of a library: He picked up one of the books and thumbed through the heavy bloated pages. He'd not have thought the value of the smallest thing predicated on a world to come. It surprised him. That the space which these things occupied was itself an expectation. He let the book fall and took a last look around and made his way out into the cold gray light. (158)

These words constitute something of a metafictional statement on the narrative itself: that *The Road*, too, occupies such a space of expectation, and orients itself toward "some unimaginable future" of which it is only the baroque shadow. This self-grasping of artistic function stands as a repudiation of the aesthetic of the self-contained artwork, the thing that is complete in itself and is in need of no witness, no interpretation, no future, no fulfilment. Is this stance not thematized and demonstrated in the paratactic fragmentation that confronts the reader at the level of syntax? Consider the following:

The ashes of the late world carried on the bleak and temporal winds to and fro in the void. Carried forth and scattered and carried forth again. Everything uncoupled from its shoring. Unsupported in the ashen air. Sustained by a breath, trembling and brief. If only my heart were stone. (9-10)

Every clause or fragment, incomplete in itself, gestures outside of itself, forwards and back, for the fulfilment of its sense. The syntax itself is allegorically demonstrative. What comes after depends on what comes before. What comes before depends on what comes after. As it is in the order of language, so it is in the creaturely orders.

The writer's occupation as a shelter or guardian of futurity indicates his or her strict dedication to immanence, to natural and historical life. It is an occupation that demands less the discovery of something new than the continuation of something that is to go on forever. But an occupation of this nature demands the writer's remove from and resistance to the present. In this the writer acts out a daemonic parody of the transcendent. The cool remove of transcendence in McCarthy's allegorical narratives—the silence that follows the pleas of the protagonists of *The Road* and *The Sunset Limited*—does not signify the cruelty of an indifferent God. There can be nothing indifferent about a Creativity whose essence is difference. Rather, McCarthy's narratives register the insight into divine power expressed by the poet of The Book of Job: that one cannot be certain that when summoned from the depths or the heights of being, it will not manifest as a pale and monstrous destructiveness. Immanence is that thin fold between the heights and depths. It is the daemonic place of humanity and its others, their consecrated respite from transcendence.

Notes

1 This happens in many of McCarthy's narratives. One might recall, for example, Magdalena's ritualistic divestiture of the world while she headed toward the site of her ritual murder. "She said goodbye to an old woman in a black rebozo ... and she said goodbye to three girls her age... and she said goodbye to dogs and to old men ... and to vendors ... and to the women She said goodbye to the small birds strung shoulder to shoulder along the lightwires overhead who had slept and were waking and whose name she would never know" (*COTP* 224).

- 2 See the list of curses in Deuteronomy 28, and the second chapter of Wolfers' study, "Job and the Deuteronomic Covenant."
- 3 Robert Jarret explores this ever-present motif in relation to *No Country for Old Men* in his essay "Genre, Voice and Ethos: McCarthy's Perverse 'Thriller'."
- 4 John Cant has explored McCarthy's allegorical disposition to personify death. See "Oedipus Rests: Mimesis and Allegory in *No Country for Old Men*."

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"The lingering scent of divinity" in *The Sunset Limited* and *The Road*

Susan J. Tyburski

I will show you fear in a handful of dust. (T.S. Eliot, "The Waste Land")

In 2006, Cormac McCarthy published two works that strip the human condition to its bones. *The Sunset Limited*: A Novel in Dramatic Form, involves a stark dialogue between two characters named Black (a "born again" African American ex-con) and White (a nihilistic Caucasian college professor) about the viability of faith in the face of an apparently Godless world. *The Road* dramatizes the same issue through a post-apocalyptic parable involving a man and a boy struggling to survive in a ravaged land-scape filled with roving bands of cannibals. Both works reveal, in the midst of their respective wastelands, a surviving spiritual spark—a human hunger for "[t]he lingering scent of divinity" (*SL* 13).

In *The Sunset Limited*, a character named Black, who has just prevented a second character named White from throwing himself in front of a subway train, describes the necessary role that God plays in his life: "If it aint got the lingerin scent of divinity to it then I aint interested" (13). This "scent of divinity" suffuses Black's world with divine significance (10, 37-41, 78-79). The use of the word "scent" by Black suggests that, for him, "divinity" cannot be ascertained by reason, but rather is something more basic and elemental, even sensual. In contrast, White relies on "the primacy of the intellect" to make sense of the world (96). These opposing modes of apprehending reality inform the debate at the core of this play.

White attempts to convince Black that his instinctive faith is based on fantasy (10-13). In contrast to Black, White can find no evidence of God in the world. He has lost faith in "the value of things . . . Books and music and art. . . the foundations of civilization" (25). White seems to have grounded his existence in the higher expressions of human culture, and explains:

The things I believed in dont exist any more. It's foolish to pretend that they do. Western Civilization finally went up in smoke in the chimneys at Dachau but I was too infatuated to see it. I see it now. (27)

All that is left for White to believe in is "The Sunset Limited"—a metaphor for his suicidal impulse in the face of the meaninglessness of human existence. He ironically calls himself "a professor of darkness. The night in day's clothing" (140). White claims that his only remaining hope, to which he clings,

is "nothingness" (141). Black responds: "all this culture stuff is all they ever was tween you and the Sunset Limited" (27). He asks White, "... what is the use of notions such as them if it wont keep you glued down to the platform when the Sunset Limited comes through at eighty mile a hour" (26). Embedded in this dialogue is the question—what "notions" can keep suicidal despair at bay? What can keep us reliably grounded in the world of the living? For Black, it appears to be "the lingering scent of divinity." Black describes "[t]hat thing that helps to keep folks nailed down to the platform when the Sunset Limited comes through" as "the pure ore" at "the deep bottom of the mine." Black describes this "pure ore" as "[t]hat forever thing. That you dont think is there" (95). Black concedes, in response to questions from White, that this "pure ore" is known to Christians as "Jesus," but "Jesus" seems to be a metaphor for something much larger than one person--or even one Messiah. As Black suggests, "there aint no way for Jesus to be ever man without ever man bein Jesus" (95). This mysterious "ore," a spiritual essence we all share, allows us to connect, and to empathize, with other humans. Without a belief in this shared spiritual essence, White is left bereft at "the edge of the world. The edge of the universe...starin at the end of all tomorrows and ... drawin a shade over ever yesterday that ever was" (87). This description sounds a lot like the wasted world of The Road.

In response to White's plight, Black comments, "Sometimes faith might just be a case of not havin nothin else left" (118). In fact, Black's faith is born of desperation and violence —a brutal prison battle described, in typical McCarthy fashion, in compellingly graphic detail (45-49). The sensual specifics of this violent episode are a colorful shock in the midst of the abstract debate between Black and White. While Black lies in the infirmary recovering from his near-fatal wounds, he hears a "clear" voice say: "If it was not for the grace of God you would not be here" (49). We can't help but be reminded of the interchange between John Grady Cole and Lacey Rawlins in *All The Pretty Horses*, where they both agree that God must "look out" for people (92).

Black spins his prison tale to keep White from walking out the door for another suicide attempt. But White remains unconvinced, and rejects Black's faith as make-believe, affirming, "Evolution cannot avoid bringing intelligent life ultimately to an awareness of one thing above all else and that one thing is futility" (136). He sees each man as "[a] thing dangling in senseless articulation in a howling void" (139). White rejects the vision Black offers, and ironically proclaims, "Ich kann nicht anders [I can do no other]" (109), echoing a famous statement made by Martin Luther, father of the Protestant Reformation, rejecting reconciliation with the Roman Catholic Church.

The "landscape" of *The Sunset Limited* is, in its way, just as barren as the cadaverous world of *The Road*. The characters spend most of the play seated in "two chrome and plastic chairs" at a "cheap formica table" (3). Their ab-

stract debate about the existence of God and the meaning of life occurs in Black's dreary tenement apartment, behind a strangely barricaded door. The opening stage directions state: "The hallway door is fitted with a bizarre collection of locks and bars" (3). This "bizarre collection" symbolically keeps White's nihilistic vision--the deadly Sunset Limited--at bay.

Black's door remains locked until the end of the play, when White forces him to undo the "chains" which "rattle to the floor" in the manner of Jacob Marley's ghost. White crosses the open threshold, free of the shackles of illusion, into his "hope of nothingness." Black "stands in the doorway" looking after him (141). In despair at failing to save White from suicide, Black instinctively turns to God in prayer:

If you wanted me to help him how come you didnt give me the words? You give em to him. What about me?...If you never speak again you know I'll keep your word Is that okay? Is that okay? (142-43)

The play ends—and, presumably, the stage lights go dark--on Black's unanswered pleas (143).

Both Black and White, in their own ways, struggle with the terrible "darkness" at the core of human existence—a theme that runs through all of McCarthy's works. Several early Christian mystics argued that God could only be encountered by stripping away the physical and mental trappings of this world, and immersing oneself in darkness or a "cloud of unknowing." The sixth century Syrian monk referred to as Pseudo-Dionysius describes "the topmost height of mystic lore which exceeds light and more than exceeds knowledge, where the simple, absolute, and unchangeable mysteries of heavenly Truth lie hidden in the dazzling obscurity of the secret Silence, outshining all brilliance with the intensity of their darkness" (36). Pseudo-Dionysius advocates "abso-lute renunciation of yourself and all things... and so shall you be led upward to the Ray of that divine Darkness which exceeds existence" (37). He urges seekers of the Divine to "... plunge into the Darkness where truly dwells, as the Scripture says, that One which is beyond all things" (37), and calls that place "the Darkness of Unknowing" (38).

In a similar vein, the anonymous fourteenth century English author of "The Cloud of Unknowing" describes contemplative prayer as "a kind of darkness about your mind" in which "[y]ou will seem to know nothing and to feel nothing except a naked intent toward God in the depths of your being" (104). The author urges us to "learn to be at home in this darkness. . . . For if, in this life, you hope to feel and see God as He is in Himself it must be within this darkness and this cloud" (104). This dark avenue to the divine is echoed by another fourteenth century mystic, John Tauler, who wrote, "[I]f thou wouldst find the Divine generation thou must quit all men, and go back to the source

from which thou hast sprung" (129). Tauler describes a necessary experience of darkness as "thy soul reduced to a state of pure and simple receptivity, which alone can fit thee to attain to perfection" (130). For these Christian mystics, immersion in "divine gloom" (Pseudo-Dionysius 36) provides a doorway to divinity.

Although White calls himself "a professor of darkness" (140), this darkness is not one in which God is revealed; instead, it obscures any sense of divinity. Black tells White, "The light is all around you, cept you dont see nothin but shadow. And the shadow is you. You the one makin it" (118). Because White cannot look beyond his disillusionment and pain, he is trapped in darkness and driven to self-destruction. At the end of *The Sunset Limited*, White walks off stage, presumably to throw himself in front of another train.

In contrast, Black seems to experience a similar darkness as a descending "cloud of unknowing" described by Christian mystics, in which he expresses "a naked intent toward God" (Psuedo-Dionysius 36). In despair at failing to save White from suicide, Black instinctively falls to his knees in the doorway, weeping and praying (142-43). The play ends with Black's unanswered questions hanging in the air before God and the audience, leaving us to ponder the fate of both characters, as well as the basis of our own faith—whatever that might be.

The Road seems, in many ways, to pick up where The Sunset Limited ended—immersed in darkness. In the opening scene of The Road, the man wakes up in a bleak and darkened landscape: "Nights dark beyond darkness and the days more gray each one than what had gone before. Like the onset of some cold glaucoma dimming away the world" (3). The "blackness" of the nights is described, in an image which merges the modes of sensual apprehension, as "sightless and impenetrable. A blackness to hurt your ears with listening. . . . No sound but the wind in the bare and blackened trees" (13). By mixing metaphors, McCarthy suggests that this dark night confounds the man's senses, as he desperately casts about for any hint of divinity in the barren landscape. Even the "noon sky" is "black as the cellars of hell" (149). The man is surrounded by a "cauterized terrain" (12), an "ashen scabland" (13), with

[t]he ashes of the late world carried on the bleak and temporal winds to and fro in the void Everything uncoupled from its shoring. Unsupported in the ashen air. Sustained by a breath, trembling and brief. (9-10)

At one point, the man

walked out in the gray light and . . . saw for a brief moment the abso-

lute truth of the world. The cold relentless circling of the intestate earth. Darkness implacable. The blind dogs of the sun in their running. The crushing black vacuum of the universe. (110)

This hellish epiphany echoes the naked nihilistic truth described by White in *The Sunset Limited* (136-39.) It also suggests the "darkness of unknowing" discussed by Christian mystics as a pathway to the divine. Like the character of Black at the end of *The Sunset Limited*, in response to this "cloud of darkness," the man drops to his knees in the ashes and whispers to God: "Are you there?...Will I see you at the last? Have you a neck by which to throttle you? Have you a heart? Damn you eternally have you a soul? Oh God" (10). Like Black, the man voices "a naked intent toward God." But in the midst of such utter and absolute darkness, where can any hint of divinity be found?

In *The Road*, "the lingering scent of divinity" can be found in the man's son. The man's first instinct, when he wakes, is to reach out and touch the boy, to make sure he is still breathing. He is reassured when he feels "each precious breath" (3), and counts "each frail breath in the blackness" (12). These scenes set the tone for the relationship between the man and the boy; throughout the novel, the boy serves as a moral and spiritual touchstone. In contrast, the surrounding landscape is "[b]arren, silent, godless" (4). The man and the boy encounter "secular winds . . . in howling clouds of ash" (149), and the road on which they travel is bereft of "godspoke men" (27). They traverse a "sweeping waste, hydroptic and coldly secular" (231).

The man refers to the boy as "the word of God" (4), which of course, is how Christ is described in the New Testament (John 1.1-3; Heb. 4.12-13; II Pet. 3.5; I John 1.1-3; 5.7), and how the Messiah is described in the Old Testament (Ps. 138.2). Towards the end of the novel, the man sees the boy "in the road looking back at him from some unimaginable future, glowing in that waste like a tabernacle" (230). In the Jewish faith, the tabernacle traditionally houses the Torah, the word of God (Exod. 25-28).

The man also refers to the boy as his "warrant" (*TR* 4), which sanctions the man's use of violence to defend the boy. He explains, "My job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God. I will kill anyone who touches you" (65). After rescuing the boy from a cannibal, the man cleans the cannibal's remains off the boy, and recites the following litany: "This is my child....I wash a dead man's brains out of his hair. That is my job" (63). Later, he comments:

All of this like some ancient anointing. So be it. Evoke the forms. Where you've nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them. (63)

Unlike Black, the man does not have a front door with a bizarre collection of locks to keep out the threatening darkness surrounding him. Instead, he grasps at remembered fragments of the former world, and "evokes" rituals to keep the darkness at bay. The man continually reassures the boy that they are "carrying the fire" on their journey along the road (70). Near the end of the novel, he explains that the fire lies within the boy, and says he can "see it" (234). As the man lies dying, the boy brings his father a cup of water. As the boy approaches, the man sees "light all about him." When the boy moves away, "the light move[s] with him" (233).

The recurring images of breath, light and fire suggest the Holy Spirit, which has been described as "the breath of God" (Gen. 2.7, 7.22), and as the tongues of fire appearing on Pentecost (Acts 2.1-4). The man believes he is transporting the breath of God incarnate in the boy through the waste land, referring to the boy as a "[g]olden chalice, good to house a god" (64). The boy's holy "breath," the breath of life and divinity the man has passed down to his son, contains a spark of hope for the future of the human race. As the woman at the end of the novel tells the boy, "the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all of time" (241).

In addition to "carrying the fire," the boy seems to have instinctively tapped into the "pure ore" described by Black in *The Sunset Limited*, "[t]hat thing that makes it possible to ladle out benediction upon the heads of strangers instead of curses" (*SL* 95). The boy's natural impulse to reach out, and be merciful, to other human survivors shines like a beacon in this demonic world, and is only enhanced by the surrounding atrocities. In contrast, the man attempts to negate the boy's empathy as a threat to their survival, even as he grudgingly recognizes its value. Like a Knight Templar, the man's fierce purpose—his "warrant"—is to protect the boy at all costs—even from his own impulse to put the boy out of his misery. But the boy is not dissuaded from his empathetic responses to others. His faith in his connection to other humans grows stronger, even as his journey with the man grows more desperate.

As the man and the boy continue along the road, their roles gradually shift. The boy begins to question the stories the man tells him, and challenges his ethical decisions (147). During an argument about leaving a thief, who threatened their survival, starving and naked in the road, the man says, "You're not the one who has to worry about everything." The crying boy looks up at the man and says, "Yes I am....I am the one" (218). This Messianic declaration signals a fundamental change in their relationship. Shortly after this argument, the man wakes and walks out to the road, and suddenly feels the earth rumbling beneath him, "[s]omething imponderable shifting out there in the dark" (220). This scene suggests a mysterious force, perhaps even a hint of divinity, lying shrouded in darkness, about to make a move.

As the man becomes sicker and weaker, the boy becomes the caretaker; he

becomes the one who listens for the man's breath in the dark (230). Like White in *The Sunset Limited*, who rejects Black's stories, the boy ultimately must leave his father's stories behind and make his own way in the world. Unlike White, however, the boy receives a kind of benediction from his father before he dies. As the boy is fretting about another little boy they have had to leave behind on the road, the man responds to his son's obvious concern about losing his father: "Goodness will find the little boy. It always has. It will again" (236). In his final desperate hours, the man seems to express faith, not only in the boy, but in the benevolence of God to lead "the good guys" to the boy. It can also be seen as the prayer of a dying man asking God to watch over his son.

In his essay "McCarthy and the Sacred: A Reading of The Crossing," Edwin Arnold argues "that Cormac McCarthy is a writer of the sacred should be beyond dispute" (215), and suggests that

[w]e might rightly identify McCarthy as a mystical writer...a spiritual author who venerates life in all its forms, who believes in a sense of being and order deeper than that manifested in outward show and pretense of human individuality (216)

According to Arnold, this mysticism "demands of us another state of understanding altogether, something beyond the rational or symbolic or psychological" (216). Both of McCarthy's new works require such a reading, as they sift among the charred remains of barren worlds for traces of God, for a "lingering scent of divinity." Like Black in *The Sunset Limited*, or the man in *The Road*, as the darkness descends at the end of these narratives, we are left breathing in desperation on the remaining embers of our faith. McCarthy demonstrates that, where there is no apparent evidence of the divine, we will create "a naked intent toward God," even out of abomination and ash.

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"'Golden chalice, good to house a god': Still Life in *The Road*

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n the conclusion of his ecological study The Song of the Earth Jonathan Bate requests that the reader "hold in your mind's eye a **L**photograph of the earth taken from space: green and blue, smudged with the motion of cloud . . . so small in the surrounding darkness that you could imagine cupping it with your hands. A planet that is fragile, a planet of which we are a part but which we do not possess" (282). Such a portrayal of earth, a photographic object study viewed as if from an orbiting spacecraft, has been used repeatedly, according to Stephen Yearly, "to evoke Earth's isolation in space, its fragility and wonder, and the sense the beings on it share a restricted living space surrounded by an unwelcoming void" (65). In Cormac McCarthy's new novel, *The Road*, we see perhaps the endgame of earth's ecology, as an unnamed father and son make their desperate journey toward the southern sea, shrouded pilgrims witnessing the seeming death throes of the race. It is an apocalyptic narrative, participating in an ancient genre, getting its name from the Greek apo-calyptein, meaning to "un-veil." As Damian Thompson has suggested, these narratives frequently take "the form of a revelation of the end of history. Violent and grotesque images are juxtaposed with glimpses of a world transformed; the underlying theme is usually a titanic struggle between good and evil" (13-14).1

In *The Road*, as in all McCarthy novels, the presence of evil is palpable and serves as a primal force in the world with which characters must in some way contend. McCarthy's use of visual structures and tropes often function as signs to guide the reader toward understanding this narrative violence, especially with regard to characters' vision and the text's framing of specific visual scenes. Several scholars have noticed the prevalence of McCarthy's extended landscape passages, those rhetorically opulent spaces that often double as characters and reveal crucial thematic and tonal information.² The physical landscape of *The Road* is certainly no different, a terrifying picture on a grand scale, complete with its blackened valley of ashes, roaring winds and burned out stalks of trees amid endless miles of catastrophic devastation. And yet, this narrative landscape is also significant for its littering of material objects, its broken and abandoned artifacts scattered across this bleak wasteland, remnants shorn of their previous functions in a post-apocalyptic world. In accordance with the ancient narrative of the Apocalypse, many of these objects are represented in such a way that they resemble still lifes, that often overlooked genre frequently relegated to the bottom tier of fine art hierarchy, considered mere formal exercises incomparable to majesterial portraits or grandiose landscapes. And yet, as Rosemary Lloyd has argued, still life offers a unique voice in written texts, a *sotto voce* that nevertheless speaks volumes despite its humble and familiar pedigree.

John Hollander, in his analysis of *ekphrasis*, ³ argues that certain literary passages mimic painterly genres such as the still life and thus "exploit deeper rhetorical design . . . [through] the emergence of some explanatory or interpretative agenda" encapsulated in the narrative image or scene (90). These textual images can be read through a variety of critical lenses that imbue the scenes with a multi-voiced presence depending on how we look at them, whether we see them as "purely narrative, iconographical, formal, or . . . structurally semiotic" (90). In *The Road*, still life passages demand a variety of interpretive strategies to uncover their potential messages, for these scenes function as focal points in the construction of narrative meaning and foreground the apocalyptic narrative's emphasis on vision and unveiling as central metaphors of the novel. In this regard, *The Road* emphasizes the visual through isolated images and material objects that, like the precious blue and green orb seen from outer space, register as object studies where the novel's central tensions are dramatized.

Guy Davenport asserts that the still life genre, with its origins in ancient Egyptian and Hebrew cultures, has always encoded its objects as metaphorical transactions regarding issues of time, agency, power and metaphysical speculation. Long before the prosperous Dutch merchants would adorn their northern homes with impeccably rendered images of exotic fruits and material abundance, ancient peoples offered still lifes of sustenance to their cherished dead. In Egypt, devout mourners would place sacred objects beside baskets of fruit, and even paint a picture of a meal on the tomb wall, so that the Ka, or soul, would have sustenance "until the coming forth day of Osiris, [when] time will stop, and the righteous dwell forever in the eternal July of the redeemed Egypt" (Davenport 5-6). In the Book of Amos the eighth century BCE shepherd and prophet was given a vision by God: "Thus hath the lord God shewed unto me, and behold, a basket of summer fruit. And he said, Amos, what seest thou? And I said: a basket of summer fruit. Then said the Lord unto me, The end is come upon my people of Israel; I will not again pass by them any more" (8:1-2). Later developments in the genre, particularly the vanitas and memento mori motifs with their hollow-eyed grinning skulls⁴ and their emphasis on the brevity and uncertainly of life further contributed to the still life's history as "a symbol of what we shall have taken from us" (Davenport 7). Sustenance and annihilation, hope and belief, beauty and death, the elements of ancient still life cohere around a central dualism that embraces both the present physical state of one's existence and the haunting specter of future oblivion, immediacy in the present and ultimate disintegration in the void, and thus has traditionally performed as a contested site that registers anxiety regarding one's mortal existence and the troubling questions regarding spirituality and an afterlife.

In *The Road*, the violent and macabre images of this bleak new world are juxtaposed not with glimpses into a glowing utopian afterlife, but either with haunting dream passages or with framed images that often display material objects in a constructed space for a viewer's contemplation. Even in their stripped-down form,⁵ many of these visual passages mimic traditional still lifes or still life elements, either through physical description or metaphor. These scenes encourage visualization on the part of the reader and focus on the power of observation as a means of reading the world. If these characters—the boy in particular—are indeed those for whom the "veil of history" will be rent in accordance with apocalyptic prophesy, then visual acumen assumes extreme importance with regard to the narrative's obsession with vision as a means of unveiling.

In fact, McCarthy uses two visual cues stressing this sensory metaphor to begin the novel, the first a harrowing dream vision of an interior cave-like world complete with slobbering beast and impaired vision, "eyes dead white and sightless as the eggs of spiders" (3), and the second when, after waking, the father scopes the valley below through the lens of the binoculars. Together, both tropes produce a crucially thematic interior/exterior structural motif which will continue throughout the text: in this case, the inner landscape of the tormented human mind and the burned and blackened physical landscape they must navigate on their quest to the sea. And both are intimately connected—structurally, metaphorically, symbolically—as the father tells the son, "Just remember that the things you put into your head are there forever" (10).

One of the central ironies in *The Road* is that unlike castaway narratives, especially those concerning castaways marooned in the South Seas where there is usually some type of sustenance but no advanced material objects, everywhere in McCarthy's novel we find the detritus of a broken civilization abandoned gas stations and homes, burned out shells of buildings and cities, rolls of metal roofing, barrels of tools, jack-knifed tractor trailers and even a sylvan locomotive—but little to no food with which to sustain life. In this new no country for old men, perhaps on its way to becoming no country for any men, women or children, the procurement and use of material objects often rivals the search for food itself as determinants of the characters' survival. In many ways, the plastic blue tarp, the binoculars, the cigarette lighter, the pliers, the pistol, the map, and the shopping cart are as essential as the random stores of canned goods or other foodstuffs for which the father and son continuously search. Objects become, then, intimately connected with the protagonists' very existence, some even to the point where they become psychologically embodied, and when they are lost or left behind, engender in the mind anxiety and something akin to the human sense of loss.

The photograph of the wife is the most obvious example, and one to which I will return shortly, but the father also seems to imbue other artifacts with agency, linking these objects to ancient still life elements as ritual helpers along the route of this nightmarish journey towards an afterlife. After a "ragged horde" passes by—possibly one of the new world cannibalist creed—the father acknowledges that "It's not a good sign" and that they "need to get the map and take a look" (78) for an escape route [emphasis added]. Later, somewhat lost and becoming disoriented, the father again relies on a material object for succor. Freezing and bereft of their provisions, he emphatically tells the boy "[w]e have to find the cart" (83) [emphasis added]. The shopping cart, one of their most treasured material helpers, is also both physical and symbolic container. Its core function in the once prosperous society by which it was created was to carry groceries in abundance, foodstuffs of such quantity one literally had to cart them away. Now, it remains as a stark reminder of plenty, but like so many of these objects it is an unstable sign, for fitted with a sidebar motorcycle mirror, the cart also functions as post-apocalyptic roadster, its "trunk" loaded with the precious items necessary to their desperate existence, and serves as a testament to human creativity and determination in the face of catastrophe.

In *The Road*, objects used as containers and passages suggesting still life compositions often function as ironic registers, frequently composing themselves through contradictory images that suggest layers of meaning. In fact, the first physical action of the novel is the father's preparation of a meal, striking for its display as a still life of objects framed for visual consumption. Waking to the first gray light of a barren world, the father gathers some of their few provisions and returns to their overnight camp "with their plates and some cornmeal cakes in a plastic bag and a plastic bottle of syrup. He spread the small tarp they used for a table on the ground and laid everything out . . ." (4-5). This is a highly significant gesture on the father's part, for despite their condition as scavengers in a seemingly cataclysmic world, he performs the centuries-old ritual of preparing the meal as a sign of civilized humanity. Claude Levi-Strauss has argued that "in preparing food for . . . consumption, by symbolic understanding of the ritual character of eating, and by the evolution of table manners, we crossed over from the wild to the tame, from nature to culture" (Davenport 11). Since "culture" has been destroyed in this narrative and belongs to the void in a sense, the father's replication of the civilizing function of still life seems a strategic attempt to maintain a sense of dignity and a meaningful connection to human history as a means of surviving in this raw new world, where barbarity and the threat of cannibalism continuously loom.

Despite this bleakness, the day should properly begin with breakfast, the

still life says. The cornmeal cakes will be eaten with the syrup as something of a delicacy in this barren world. But this initial still life features a more threatening object, for after the father sets the food on the improvised table, "he took the pistol from his belt and laid it on the cloth and then he just sat watching the boy sleep" (5). The natural and the material merge in this object composition, one we could label "Still Life with Cornmeal Cakes, Syrup and Pistol," but the passage is important here at the beginning for more than evoking the symbolism of life and death. All these elements—the cakes, the bottle of syrup, the plastic bags, the pistol—perform as containers, an aesthetic strategy developed throughout the narrative with pockets and clusters of other images replicating this spatial metaphor. Bill Brown, in his study A Sense of Things, contends that all material objects contain "variant levels of significations," such as the "place things occupy in daily life; the place they occupy . . . in the history of human-being; the pressure they exert on us to engage them as something other than mere surfaces" (12). In this sense, the cakes, made from cornmeal and water and laid out flat on a stone or, wrapped in a cloth or cabbage leaves, directly into a fire itself, contain the history of the region, for it was standard Cherokee practice to cook in this manner what they called "ash cakes" (Rehder 209-11). The image lends a subtle nod to the generations of humanity who have come before, but this positive connection is undermined through its linkage to the billowing clouds of ash that blow incessantly across the now blighted landscape and from which they protect themselves with face masks. The pistol contains two bullets, even though the father will later add fake wooden ones as a ruse, and as a material object figuratively contains death. And yet it is also an ironic symbol, like the cakes, for although it offers protection and serves as a weapon for disposing of evil in the world, it is also an iconic image that encapsulates the mindset of the violent culture of dominance from which ostensibly the world-threatening catastrophe has originated.⁸ For Brown, the surface of objects leads to our efforts "to penetrate them, to see through them, and to find ... within an object ... the subject" (12). Within the elements of this initial still life passage, McCarthy encodes the "subject" of the text, which unblinkingly asks the question: In a world bereft of order, without the civilizing structures of generations of human history, a world seemingly in its last stages of existence, what should be the ethical behavior of a human being—to himself, to others, to higher humanistic or spiritual values?

Although *The Road* (and *No Country for Old Men* as well) may be seen as deviating from McCarthy's previous writings, in many ways these are questions he has been posing all along. While most scholars have understandably focused on the overarching violence and apparent nihilism in McCarthy's work, others have viewed McCarthy in more humanistic terms, suggesting that despite the "exuberant violence . . . there is also evident in his work a profound belief in the need for moral order, a conviction that is essentially religious"

(Arnold 46). William Prather has argued for McCarthy's Camusean existentialism, while Steven Frye posits that McCarthy's novels occupy a middle ground between the utter darkness of nihilist extremism and the comforts of structured religious faith. Frye's thesis regarding McCarthy's imagery, particularly his use of religious and classical iconography, bears special notice for a reading of *The Road*, for Frye considers such passages wrapped in "a tortured ambiguity" that makes reading the images difficult, if not impossible (185, 191). As a visual writer, McCarthy's texts all seem to overload the senses with dizzying arrays of images and clusters of signs which often seem enmeshed in ambiguity, and yet the moral message of *The Road* asks us to look more closely, to think more deeply, and to consider from an extreme point of view the condition and purpose of humanity as a species. In this regard, the photograph of the wife presents a particularly difficult problem, for it shares a similar function as other still life elements positioned throughout the text as a surface that contains layers of narrative meaning; but what exactly are we supposed to see? The photo is presented to the reader as part of a larger ensemble of personal items that the father lays out for reflection: "He'd carried his billfold about till it wore a cornershaped hole in his trousers. Then one day he sat by the roadside and took it out and went through the contents. Some money, credit cards. His driver's license. A picture of his wife. He spread everything out on the blacktop. Like gaming cards" (43).

Unlike most of the passages in the novel that feature a variety of different meals (there are forty such scenes involving eating and drinking), this still life functions more as an object study that resembles something of a self-portrait. Lloyd has argued for a reading of still life passages in texts as performing analogously to the "Italian maxim ogni dipintore dipinge se (all painters paint themselves and thus each portrait of the Other is a portrait of the self)" (92). While the father is obviously not an artist, he nevertheless repeatedly frames images and collections of objects for contemplative reflection, and this "Still Life with Wallet, ID Cards and Photograph" is yet another example of this tendency. The billfold is another container image, one that had previously supplied the father with all the certainties built into generations of human history surrounding the rise of modernity—money, credit, a spouse and an official identity marked in time, stamped and approved by the State. The billfold symbolically registers that former self, a realization that the father recounts in this scene, one of several inset memory fragments that haunt the first movement of the novel. Taking one last look at this "sweatblackened" shell, he pitches it into the woods, but cannot let go of the image of his wife so easily, and he "sat holding the photograph" (44), alone in the road.

The character of the wife in *The Road* presents one of the more difficult interpretive problems of the novel. McCarthy's representation of women has been widely criticized, and the wife's brief appearance in *The Road* will not

allay such attacks, but if we view the wife's role in light of the novel's apocalyptic narrative we can begin to see why McCarthy represents her as he does. While it remains unclear why McCarthy chooses the husband over the wife, the novel demands that one of the child's parents die, so that the entire burden falls on the individual and not a family structure. Although the wife's reasons for committing suicide and merciful murder may seem logical, even rational, given the potential threats of rape, torture and cannibalism, McCarthy seems to drive the point home here that such a philosophy is untenable, even immoral in the face of human suffering, whether there is a God or not. At night, the father still dreams of the wife, her beauty entrancing and otherworldly, a Botticelli-like vision he learns not to trust: "In dreams his pale bride came to him out of a green and leafy canopy. . . . She wore a dress of gauze and her dark hair was carried up in combs of ivory, combs of shell" (15). Ostensibly, this is the type of image the father has captured in the photograph, a beauty shot of earthly love and sensuality, which he has carried with him since she abandoned them. His gesture of laying the photograph "down in the road" (44) is not an angry rejection of the past, but a renunciation of sensuality, a farewell to previous conceptions of romance, neo-platonic love and the selfabsorbed attitude this union can represent. That McCarthy places the burden of this theme on the wife may seem unfair, but as a trope she embodies the human mentality that succumbs to fear and doubt and deprivation because it cannot think beyond the limited scope of the self, one that too readily relinquishes the duty of life, an obligation to which the father so desperately clings. Mere physical beauty has no place in this new world, the father's gesture implies, and the leaving of the photograph frames a fundamental feature of the father's personality, for he will suffer himself no distractions in his sacred guardianship of the boy.

Despite the barrenness of this ashen gray landscape and most of humanity's acquiescence to the bestial under these conditions, beauty plays a profound role in *The Road*. One could even make a strong case that the entire narrative is swathed in the Sublime, the terrifying vision that rends the veil of physical reality and offers the human mind a glimpse of the absolute in all its boundless glory. But while terror may be the crucial component of the Sublime, the father's repeated descriptions of the boy register as the ancient ideal of the beauty inherent in moral goodness. The classical doctrine regarding beauty is grounded on the fundamental tenet that what is regarded as beautiful is equated with the good. Although Greek thought was notoriously ambivalent regarding the physical aspects of beauty (Plato, for instance, famously rejected mimesis as a mere illusory copy of actual Truth), Socrates' theory of functional beauty is of particular importance regarding the father's guardianship of his son in *The Road*. For Socrates, "all things capable of being used by man are considered at once beautiful and good with respect to the things they happen to be

useful for. . . . If, therefore, a thing is well-suited to its purpose, with respect to this it is beautiful and good" (Plato, Dialogues 1133). While this line of thinking is based on material objects, the concept also applies to mental images and metaphors as long as they are "well-suited" to their purpose. In perhaps the most tender scene in the novel, the father gently washes the boy's hair, literally rinsing away the splattered brains of one of the "bad guys" who had briefly held the child hostage. The father muses, and characterizes the boy as a still life element that evokes Grail imagery: "He sat beside him and stroked his pale and tangled hair. Golden chalice, good to house a god" (64). In extending the still life metaphor to unite material objects with humans, the father conceptualizes the son as an icon of religious significance and suggests the potential sacredness of the human mind. After all, he has previously revealed that his mission is divinely inspired, that "[h]e knew only that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke" (4). As a still life element, the chalice echoes the treasured cup of the Eucharist, and "the head as fate" echoes similar classical and religious busts often included in still lifes which imply philosophical and religious dimensions.¹⁰ Thus, the boy's head, like other still life imagery throughout the novel, is shaped as a site of intense significance, performing as the narrative's supreme container motif, the core of ethical and religious values. The boy's innocence, coupled with the father's mental imagery, combine to evoke a sense of divine goodness, with language and metaphor serving as a functional beauty that allows the father moments of determined faith that buoy his protection of the child from danger.

Although a reading of all the novel's still life imagery is outside the scope of this study, two passages linked to the initial breakfast scene lend insight into reading the father and son relationship in *The Road*. Structurally, the initial still life breakfast is echoed twice in the narrative in different settings, the bunker episode with its spoils of abundance and the scene at the dining table in an abandoned house later in the novel. The bounty in the bunker seems to be a godsend for the father and son as it affords them all the trappings of a sustainable existence, with its two cots and mattresses, gas burner plate, extensive stores of food and even a chemical toilet. Davenport has argued for an appreciation of the still life's facility for puns and double meanings, and this bunker scene is replete with them. When initially seeing the bunker's contents, the father, who is viewing the room as the child holds the lamp above him on the steps, mutters "Oh my God. . . . Come down. Oh my God. Come down" (116), but he is talking to the boy. The father says he has "found everything" (117), but the bounty of physical sustenance (which would eventually run out given time) suffers in comparison with the previous statement suggesting incarnate spirituality. But the supplies do offer temporary food and shelter for the exhausted, and the father is clearly moved to emotions approximating joy at the sight of such bounty: "Crate upon crate of canned goods. Tomatoes,

peaches, beans, apricots. Canned hams. Corned beef. Hundreds of gallons of water in ten gallon plastic jerry jugs. Paper towels, toiletpaper, paper plates. Plastic trashbags stuffed with blankets. He held his forehead in his hand. Oh my God, he said" (117).

At first, the father is stunned, like Amos viewing the basket of summer fruit, as he thinks to himself "... he had probably not fully committed himself to any of this. You could wake in the dark wet woods at any time" (119). In contrast to their previous sufferings and near starvation, the bunker does indeed seem providential, especially considering their mutual fascination with the crate of pears, a heavily encoded symbol in still life tradition. The father asks the boy "Can you see? . . . Can you read it?", to which the boy replies "Pears. That says pears" (117). Apple and pear have been semiotic partners in still life iconography for centuries, a doublet of images that often evokes both husband and wife as well as temptation and forgiveness. Medieval and Renaissance painters included the fruits in their portraits of Madonna and Child with the "apple symbolizing the fall, pear the redemption" (Davenport 56). Of all the potential meals in the bunker, the father asks the boy which he would prefer for supper. The boy says "Pears," and the father answers "Good choice. Pears it is" (118). However, not surprisingly, McCarthy isn't following this symbolism de rigor; after all, this is temporary salvation at best, and when they leave four days later the bunker is described as "a grave yawning at judgment day in some old apocalyptic painting" (131). And yet the rotting and decayed apple orchard the father and son visit before stumbling into this bunker scene along with the characters' eating of the pears suggests McCarthy is aware of the potency of such thematic connections to specific fruits, especially when working within an apocalyptic tradition. In fact, the symbolic pears are equally important as puns and double entendres in this scene. Pears becomes "pairs," as in the two-person team of father and son, a structure that noticeably excludes the mother/wife and emphasizes the bond-like relationship of parent and child. Pear can also be read as the French pere (father), with the plural form referring to both physical and spiritual fathers, a pun that takes on greater meaning during the ensuing meal.

The dinner on the footlocker is of central concern in this extended passage of material and sustenary abundance. Like the first still life meal, the scene is framed and emphasizes vision as a corollary component to its meaning: "He dragged a footlocker across the floor between the bunks and covered it with a towel and set out the plates and cups and plastic utensils. He set out a bowl of biscuits covered with a handtowel and a plate of butter and a can of condensed milk. Salt and pepper. He looked at the boy" (122). Still life compositions are based on relationships—spatial, formal, textural and symbolic—and in this regard the father and son become elements themselves in this passage with both the offering of food and the exchange of gazes serving as intimate con-

nections on either side of the improvised table. The father is serving the boy, fork[ing] "a piece of browned ham onto the boy's plate and scoop[ing] scrambled eggs from the other pan and ladl[ing] out spoonfuls of baked beans and pour[ing] coffee into their cups. The boy looked up at him" (122). The simulated domestic space of this interior is foregrounded in this scene and contrasts with the previous outdoor breakfast spread on the tarp and accompanied by the pistol. Whereas the initial meal had emphasized the father as protector, watching over the boy as he sleeps, this scene shows the father as teacher through the contents in the boy's head that the father has been self-consciously shaping. The father has tried to shield his son's vision from the world's horrors, sparing him the frieze of human heads, the charnel house of the tractor trailer and various other scenes of horrific human depravity. And he has tried to fill the boy's mind with stories of "courage and justice" (35) where they were "always helping people" (225), stories of goodness and beautiful things, symbolized by the literal and metaphorical fire they carry. Although the child may not know how to butter his biscuits, he does have within him the knowledge of prayer, charity and gratitude, qualities that must have been embedded in the stories the father has told him. And even if the father forgets sometimes, the boy remembers—and this is a key point. Staring at his plate, the boy leads the father in prayer: "Dear people, thank you for all this food and stuff. We know that you saved it for yourself and if you were here we wouldnt eat it no matter how hungry we were and we're sorry that you didnt get to eat it and we hope that you're safe in heaven with God" (123).

In many respects, this is a beautiful scene and contrasts sharply with the father's leaving of the wife's photograph on the road. In fact, the type of beauty on display here shines a brilliant light through the otherwise pervasive gloom of the text. There are some comparatively happy moments like this one, most significantly associated with food and still life imagery—the many small frugal repasts, the dinner of morels by the waterfall in the mountains, the can of coke from an overturned soft drink machine, the bundles of apples and cold water deep from an untainted cistern. As ancient and medieval philosophers have argued, we apprehend the moral good through our recognition of the beautiful, and in many cases we define as good not only what we like, what we are pleased by, but also what we should like to have for ourselves, not in the materialist notion of possessing particular objects, but in admirable emulation of specific qualities.¹¹ The father's struggles throughout the narrative, both in dealing with the loss of his wife and the annihilation of the world he used to know, as well as being forced into the role of sole guardian, protector and teacher of the boy, evoke the sense of the beautiful implicit in human sacrifice for moral ends. Often, we describe someone's good deed as "doing a beautiful thing," so that the good often conforms to some ideal principle, one that usually demands human suffering, like the death of a parent who sacrifices himself for his child.12

The scene at the dining room table in an abandoned house later in the novel reinforces the father's duty as caretaker. As in the sequence preceding their finding of the bunker, the father and son have run out of food and have begun to despair, a situation made even worse by their stumbling upon the novel's most disturbing stilled life, the charred baby on a spit in the woods. The sight has nearly devastated the boy, and in his weakened state he is silent and still, gestures that evoke a child's potential fate without guardianship in this brutal world. Whereas the bunker meal mimicked a domestic interior but ultimately revealed itself as a grave, "the long Empire table in the center of the room" (175) is an actual domestic space, devoid of its past function and lacking significant elements such as the wife/mother. And yet, the father strips the table of its cloth and wraps the boy in its folds as a means of reviving him, placing him in front of the roaring fire which the man has just enkindled in the hearth. The meal that follows is eaten in silence: "They ate slowly out of bone china bowls, sitting at opposite sides of the table with a single candle burning between them. The pistol lying to hand like another dining implement" (176). Lloyd argues for an appreciation of the nature of light in still life scenes, especially how light "can suggest particular emotions or desires, . . . evoke anxiety, reflecting the state of mind of whichever character arranged [the lit objects] ...or suggest change and impermanence" (77-8, 89, 86). The two sources of light in this scene—one, a roaring fire in the hearth and the other a thin spark from the tapered candle—evoke all these functions, suggesting the father's increasing anxiety regarding his role as protector and the looming specter of his deteriorating health. Symbolically, the hearth's fire is related to the metaphorical fire the father and son carry throughout the narrative and, like the first still life breakfast, suggests the civilizing and moral nature of these two "good guys." The candle, however, seems to offer a different reading, a diminishing light pooling its former shape into a puddle of wax at its base suggesting the human figure in dissolution, a fate that awaits the father shortly after the pair's arrival at the coast. The transaction between these two lit spaces, the hearth and the table, prefigures the novel's conclusion, for as the boy eats he succumbs to exhaustion: the father "carried him to the hearth and put him down in the sheets and covered him with the blankets" (177). Of all the various still life meals and scenes in The Road, this is the only one where the father and son separate, for after the father leaves the boy by the hearth, he returns to the table and later wakes "in the night lying there with his face in his crossed arms" (177). The boy resting in front of the warm hearth is nurtured by the (metaphorical) fire, while the father sits slumped at the table, the darkness of the spent candle flame suggesting his approaching death, a fate that has concerned the father all along for if he dies then the boy will be left to fend for himself with only the knowledge the father has imparted to him as defense

in this darkened world.

As the father's health ultimately fails, the imagery of still life and a certain quality of light again emphasize the particularly equivocal symbolism of tragedy implicit in all beauty. The father's wracking cough has worsened; he now sits "bent over with his arms crossed at his chest and coughed till he could cough no more" (233), a gesture mimicking his slumped figure in the table scene as well as the sputtering candle flame. When the son kneels over him with a cup of water, "[t]here was light all about him", a light that seems otherworldly and legitimates the father's earlier description of the boy as a golden chalice and as the word of God, as he thinks to himself: "Whatever form you spoke of you were right" (233). Light, of course, provides the foundation for all beauty, regardless of cultural ideologies, because through light the world's form and coherence is revealed.¹³ The mysteries of optics led ancient and medieval thinkers to imbue light with spiritual properties, as a creative force operating in the world like the unseen hand of God. Medieval scholars such as Bonaventure of Bognoregio argued that light was fundamentally a metaphysical reality that "shall illuminate souls in glory" (Eco 129), while the ninth-century Irish scholar John Scotus Eriugena contended that divine light would "reveal the pure species of intelligible things [so that one could] intuit them with the mind's eye, as divine grace and the help of the reason work together in the heart of the wise believer" (Eco 104). McCarthy's use of a mysterious light that bathes the child in the father's eyes is certainly an arresting image, and whether we read the light as divinely-inspired or as a familiar neuraesthenic trope in near-death experiences, the symbolism—in conjunction with the father's deeds—offers readers some hope amid the darkness. Although the father has had his moments of doubt and despair, he has continued to struggle to believe—after all, that's "what the good guys do. They keep trying. They dont give up" (116). Imparting last instructions to the boy, the father tells him to keep the fire with him at all times, but the boy responds by questioning the father's meaning. "Is it real? The fire?" The father's answer is decisive: "Yes it is. . . . It's inside you. It was always there. I can see it" (234). Guardianship, sacrifice, beauty, light, a sacred container, and the metaphysical fire synonymous with goodness cohere in this liminal scene as inextricably linked elements fundamental to the narrative design of the novel.

Structurally, the father's final vision repeats the novel's first visual episode, the dream vision of the blind slobbering beast in the cave. This time, however, the child carries the light from "a candle which the boy bore in a ringstick of beaten copper," a light that marks "the point of no return which was measured from the first solely by the light they carried with them" (236). The passage is enigmatic, refusing to hold either to a purely negative or positive reading, but the son's previous immersion in light suggests at least a potential for salvation. The father's succeeding conversation with the boy (whether

part of the death vision or his last words to his son) also posits some type of beneficence at work in the world, for the father tells him that "Goodness will find the little boy. It always has. It will again" (236). And in the textual world of *The Road*, he seems to be right—the comment certainly does prefigure the man "in a gray and yellow ski parka" (237) who appears, *deus ex machina*-style, right out of the blue, as if on cue after the father's death during the night. In the end, the father becomes a still life himself in the literal sense of the French *nature morte*, or dead matter, his body wrapped in a blanket, and laid out in the woods. Although the father's end can be seen as tragic and suffering, an ugliness that seems all too at home in this apocalyptic landscape, it is the father's deeds that remain beautiful, that engender in the reader a sense of moral goodness and trenchant humanity that make *The Road* McCarthy's most spiritually-concerned text.

It is fitting that the final passage of the novel mimics so many other still life elements, the description of the trout the father has told the boy of through stories. Fish, whether dead or alive, have been a staple of still life iconography for generations. 14 The block of text itself, coming after the characters' departure from the novel, frames itself as an image to be viewed and contemplated beyond the narrative's temporal dimension. The text says "[o]nce," and seems to indicate the past, and could be the father's memory existing in a non-physical timeless space, and yet it also resembles the conventional storytelling opening, and could be the boy relating the father's story to a new audience in the future, replicating the father's actions of filling others' heads with goodness. We cannot be sure. But the passage does leave us with a final image to consider, despite its torturous ambiguity. Even though the world may "[n]ot be made right again," the brook trout, beautiful in the amber current, live in "deep glens where . . . all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery" (241). The image is, of course, a staple of Christian iconography, but the fish is also a synecdoche for the planet itself, the life-sustaining ball that has served as the stage for humankind's actions throughout the ages, a world shaped by a mystery far superior to mortal human life, the passage suggests. The father's actions in the novel, along with the various still life images, register a number of crucial concerns—ecological, ethical, philosophical, spiritual—that offer a thinly-veiled political stance on human stewardship of the physical world as well as the codes of human conduct.

In this regard, *The Road* reads as one of McCarthy's "moral parables," as Arnold has called them, for, as Stephen O'Leary has argued, there are two options for protagonists in apocalyptic narratives, the tragic or the comic. The tragic protagonist "has little to do but choose a side in a schematically drawn conflict of good versus evil" and his actions are "likely to seem merely gestural in the face of eschatological history" (Garrard 87). However, the comic protagonist "conceives of evil not as guilt, but as error; its mechanism of re-

demption is recognition rather than victimage, and its plot moves toward sacrifice and the exposure of human fallibility" and the attendant human responsibilities implied in such moral recognition (Garrard 68). McCarthy seems to be offering a darkly rendered caveat for the contemporary age, a call to recognize the dangers implicit in human violence and the will to power, concerns readers continue to face in contemporary 21st century geo-politics. The filling of the boy's head with stories of moral goodness is an attempt by the father to shape the child's ethical vision, a strategy that seems to have worked if we consider the several episodes where the boy's thoughts and actions reveal a moral consciousness superior even to the father who had first inculcated these values in his son. The narrative seems to strike a utopian note here, the hope for a new breed of humanity surviving in a brutal world but unyielding in their adherence to a higher morality. Despite the novel's bleakness, McCarthy (who dedicated the book to his own young son, John) offers the potential for hope in this final movement, but it is a qualified position, for the austere conclusion ultimately yields little certainty as to what will become of the boy or his newfound protectors. And yet, McCarthy's nameless father has seemed to construct an ethical roadmap for the future, for the boy's thoughts, like the beautiful trout in the stream and the photographic object study of earth seen from outer space, serve as an icon of fragility, wonder and goodness, qualities that offer us subtle entrée into the novel's philosophy regarding the fate of humanity and the ethics of that future possible existence.

Notes

1 Other features of Apocalyptic narrative that have particular resonance for a reading of *The Road* include "the extreme moral dualism that divides the world sharply into friend and enemy; the emphasis upon the 'unveiling' of trans-historical truth and the corresponding role of believers as the ones to whom, and for whom, the veil of history is rent" (Garrard 86). At first glance, both features seem to correspond to *The Road*'s dramatic philosophy, where the father and son are constantly on the lookout for enemies. And yet Ely may or may not be a foe. The same could be said for the "lightning-struck" man, and the man in the ski parka and his female companion in the conclusion seem to be some of the "good guys," but we cannot be sure. Similarly, the father and son, as the protagonists, seem to play the role of the believers, although the father is more conflicted about this than the boy.

2 Robert Jarrett has compared McCarthy's Appalachian landscapes to nineteenth-century Luminist painting of the Hudson Valley School of painters who used large-scale canvases and a "sublime" light to infuse the paintings with a sense of spiritual grandeur. For ecocritical and postmodern readings of McCarthy's landscapes, see K. Wesley Berry's "The Lay of the Land in Cormac McCarthy's Appalachia," and David Holloway's extensive treatment of landscape in chapter four of *The Late Modernism of Cormac McCarthy*.

3 The traditional definition of *ekphrasis* is "the verbal representation of a visual work of art," a genre that dates to classical times and which posits comparisons between the temporal and spatial arts. Simonides' proclamation "*ut pictura poesis*" has been translated "as in painting, so in poetry," and has been treated as positing a one-to-one correspondence that overlooks many of the crucial differences. For the history of *ekphrasis*, see Wendy Steiner, *The Colors of Rhetoric*.

4 Skulls and desiccated human heads are, of course, littered throughout *The Road* as ideologically-opposed counterparts to the civilizing nature of still life and its attendant elements. Intriguingly, these skull passages also evoke the metaphor of vision and (eternal?) blindness. See, especially, the "frieze of human heads, all faced alike, dried and caved with their taut grins and shrunken eyes" (76) and "[a] human head beneath a cakebell at the end of the counter. Desiccated. Wearing a ballcap. Dried eyes turned sadly inward" (155).

5 The still life scenes in *The Road* are mainly minimalist and, for the most part, eschew the extensive cataloguing of sensory details one finds in more florid still life scenes in the writings of Virginia Woolf or Marcel Proust, for instance. And yet, this makes McCarthy's use of the genre even more fundamental and semiotically-loaded in that pleasurable and class-based values are stripped away to focus on the ancient origins of the genre with its emphasis on mortality and a potential afterlife as the primary concerns of humanity.

6 The binoculars are a material sign of technological vision, as the machine enables the human eye to see beyond its normative biological limits. As a survival tool, they enabled the father to view the landscape before exposing himself to its dangers. However, along with the brass sextant the father finds in the Spanish sailboat, the binoculars also function as a metaphor for limited vision and misplaced trust in material objects and for the failure of technology to provide true insight or direction. In one scene, the father scopes the outlines of a city and sees no signs of human life, but when the boy looks he sees thin wisps of smoke. This scene, coupled with the boy's role as "God's own firedrake" (26) suggests that his vision outstrips the father's, and by extension, all the other "bad guys" as well.

7 Corn and Appalachian history enjoy a common history that goes back thousands of years. In addition to the Cherokee's use of the crop, mountain families were known to make a staggering number of dishes from corn, including many varieties of hominy and, of course, corn mash for drinking.

8 The pistol is a miniature of the ultimate destructive weapon, the hydrogen bomb, and performs on the level of still life with regard to scale. While the planetary catastrophe remains unnamed, most reviewers see the blackened

ash as suggestive of a nuclear winter, especially when coupled with the line: "The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions" (45).

9 According to Edmund Burke, "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the Sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling" (76).

10 Busts, particularly classical ones, have been used as familiar elements in still life paintings over the ages, and echo the grinning skulls of the *memento mori* compositions but with a telling difference. While the *vanitas* tradition foregrounds death and the brevity of physical life, the "head as fate," according to Davenport, can take on various meanings, either "as the ancient seat of a noble nature and a stoic rectitude of behavior" or as a sign indicative of "cunning and intellectual sharpness" (33).

11 Philosophic conceptions of beauty are historically grounded and ideologically-encoded. Many Classical and Medieval thinkers linked the beautiful with the moral, and its apprehension a strategy for the mind's entrance into a higher consciousness. This position was generally upheld until the twentieth-century, when beauty was exiled from art and considered a charming bourgeois illusion instead of a fundamental element of human consciousness. McCarthy's use of both the beautiful and the sublime in *The Road*, coupled with his emphasis on ancient still life and morality, suggests he is self-consciously working against this dominant discourse and reintroducing beauty as necessary for human goodness. For more on this aesthetic debate, see Umberto Eco's *History of Beauty*.

12 In many ways, *The Road* rewrites *Suttree* in this manner: the tortured father Suttree mourns for the death of his infant son but must keep on living, while *The Road*'s nameless father protects his son until he draws his last breath. Although readers may sympathize with Suttree's largely self-inflicted problems, *The Road*'s conclusion offers a more cathartic effect on a grander scale and may be seen, in effect, to function "beautifully" according to reader response.

13 Although the majority of McCarthy's religious images reflect Catholic and Protestant Christianity, scenes such as these reflect a larger theological canvas. The "God as Light" maxim would hold true, for instance, in Christian theological terms as well as for the Semitic deity Baal, the Egyptian deity Ra, and the Persian deity Ahura Mazda, among others.

14 Examples of still lifes featuring fish as an integral element are replete throughout art history, and are also obviously connected to Christian symbolism where they function as a sign of "life" itself, specifically the redeemed life of pure spirituality. The torturous ambiguity of this unstable sign is amplified

if we read the "beginning" of the novel as commencing at 1:17 with the "series of low concussions," numbers that send us to Revelation 1:17: "And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as dead. And he laid his right hand upon me, saying unto me, Fear not; I am the first and the last."

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Newfound Press and the Knoxville Conference

The University of Tennessee library has recently created a website devoted to online publishing of academic papers. Deliberations of the Society's April 2007 conference can be accessed thereon. The link is: http://www.lib.utk.edu/newfoundpress/mccarthy/program3.html. This site provides access to a range of conference papers as pdf files and also as video recordings of the actual presentations. We are grateful to Newfound for making this available and to Chris Walsh for his work in organizing the material on display.