

From Hopeless Selfhood to Hopeful Otherness: Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

Abstract: The article examines the existential perspective—and its development—of the main character in Cormac McCarthy's novel, *The Road*. Its protagonist is a man who, having witnessed the near total obliteration of the reality he was born into, struggles to find meaning in a world which continually reminds him of the debasement that the very notion of meaningfulness has undergone. In the apparent absence of any other available goals or social relations, ensuring the survival of his young son remains his sole guiding imperative, informed by the old concepts of filial duty and ethical standards, both interlinked with his faith, now deprived of all its affirmatory aspects. This cluster of moral motivations also compels him to assume an increasingly belligerent stance towards the “godless” outside reality. His radicalism is met with opposition from the son, whose own manner of being envisions empathy and hospitality where the father's sees only potential confrontation. The man gradually realizes the unbridgeable disparity between his own haunted psyche and the post-apocalyptic new identity of the boy, whose nature inspires defiant hope in the seemingly hopeless circumstances. McCarthy will eventually confront his protagonist with the necessity of making a choice which entails a major shift in his system of beliefs. It is only by electing to act in a manner which is absurd by his standards that the protagonist stands a chance of saving his entire struggle from sinking into meaninglessness.

Keywords: Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*, post-apocalypse, meaning-making, God, father-son

Among the privileges of living in the modern civilization is the received ability to apprehend—at least to a certain degree—the semiotic richness of everyday reality, to read the untold number of meanings and significations inscribed upon the material world, coupled with the relative freedom to define oneself, one's relation to and position vis-à-vis these meanings. Some maintain that the awareness of this richness, of existing in a perpetually open marketplace of ideas, as opposed to being wholly confined to a single dominant system of meaning-making, can have an adverse effect upon the individual, by posing constant problems of ontological nature. It is not frequently, however, that the ramifications of a hypothetical situation where an individual is confronted with a near total disappearance of this semiotic excess are explored, and the question of what happens to one whose environment ceases to provide support for one's notion of having his or her existence guided by a larger design is posed.

If contemporary American literature has an author whose credentials render him well-suited to explore such a scenario, this author is certainly Cormac McCarthy, a writer now celebrated for his uncompromising and frequently harrowing narratives, which, while situated usually in the American past, nonetheless tend to

be read as implicit mockeries of the notion of deriving order and significance from human history and existence. What happens to an individual plunged into a reality where the entire network of previously established meanings has been stripped away and discredited is a subject this essay intends to delve into in its interpretation of his novel, *The Road*. In my reading, I will refer to a number of philosophical systems that have shed light on the vexed relations between men's existential stances and faith.¹

In *The Road*, McCarthy seems to arrive at a logical conclusion to the argument he ostensibly develops in the course of creating his body of work, by presenting a scenario where Earth has, by all indicators, come within a hair's breadth of a state of its complete biological death, spurred by a nonspecific catastrophe, in what seems to be the near future. The environment has assumed the form of a cold barren wasteland, and civilization, as one acquainted with the post-apocalyptic genre might expect, has devolved into atavistic barbarism, where the doomed, wretched, and "creedless" (McCarthy 28) remnants of humanity prey on each other, while trudging through the ash-coated roads towards nowhere. Rather than focusing on the most abject forms human existence can assume in such circumstances (as a reader acquainted with *Blood Meridian* or *Child of God* could expect), however, McCarthy chooses to center the narrative on characters determined to defy the savagery gradually suffusing their world, and to retain what little of the bygone civilization is still available to their powers of cognition. The protagonists—a father and his son—appear at the story's outset as basically of one mentality, with the son's mind being wholly receptive to the man's words. Eventually, though, each one proves to be fundamentally separate from the other in his essential condition. The man, witnessing his reality in the process of semiotic entropy, becomes belligerent in his desperate adherence to the core, stripped-down system of meanings and values he carries over from the past frameworks, even if he does so not without considerable anguish and existential uncertainty characteristic of an unhappy consciousness. This, however, leaves him ill-disposed to respond to the newly emerging system of meanings, born of and determining the *Dasein* of the child. This new system taking shape is oriented towards the absolute responsibility in regards to the other, as opposed to the self-centered and ultimately unsustainable value system that weighs upon and conditions the father's conduct. Oscillating between two irreconcilable imperatives—the external demand to act in accordance to laws that mandate a state of opposition to their current reality, and a desire to ensure his son's prosperity, possible only within that reality—the man faces an ultimate dilemma. The dilemma

1 For an extended discussion of *The Road* in the context of Heidegger's theses regarding the self's loss and recovery as conditional upon the world and the self's possibilities of being in the world, see Thomas A. Carlson, "With the World at Heart: Reading Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* with Augustine and Heidegger." For a detailed overview of the applicability of Levinasian and Derridean conceptions of responsibility and hospitality to the conduct of *The Road*'s protagonists, see Phillip A. Snyder, "Hospitality in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*."

only comes to be resolved at the story's climax, when the father commits to an act arguably most aptly described as a modern rendition of the Kierkegaardian leap of faith. Going against both his notions of morality and the dictates of reason, he chooses instead the absurd hope in what remains impenetrably other and alien to him—his sole remaining alternative to an utter erasure of the self.

From the novel's outset, the pair, determined to keep moving south in search of a hospitable land, defies the ongoing dissolution of order, which threatens to envelop the entirety of the physical world. The dissolution is hence "held up" in the process, according to Thomas A. Carlson, by their story, which serves as an "illumination of a darkness" that results from "the disappearance of worldly things and persons" (59). Their defiance is as daring as it is desperate, for in maintaining it they face forces inimical not merely to their physical existence—represented most notably by hunger, cold, and roving bands of cannibals—but, in the case of the father, whose psyche is anchored in the pre-apocalyptic past, also the very basis of his entire moral and psychological being. The man is vulnerable in these aspects, because his manner of reading the world emphasizes the teleological dimension of phenomena, and his mental balance depends on the ability to recognize and ascertain the meaning of objects and actions, understood in terms of their function, goal, or destination. In their predicament, the man struggles to uphold or recuperate the meanings of the material remnants of the former world, now deprived of any larger conceptual frame that formerly held them together within the realm of "meanings." The space in which they reside appears now as cold, vast, blind and indifferent to humanity's existence. The survivors are left to be governed by a "relentless circling of the intestate earth," surrounded by the incomprehensible force of "the crushing black vacuum," and feebly groping in the "autistic" darkness of the night (McCarthy 138). As a result, the considerable task of nourishing, or, if necessary, forging meaning where no apparent meaning persists, falls upon the man. Or so he believes before growing fully cognizant of an emerging new mode of reading the world—one proving to be incompatible with his ingrained preconceptions.

The primary wellspring of meaning available to the man derives from maintaining an absolute commitment to his son, and raising him to share the ethical values the man himself professes to uphold. He instructs the child that not to murder, eat, or steal from others distinguishes them as "the good guys" (81), who fulfill the uniquely ordained task of "carrying the fire" (87). The fire in question can be understood as representing on the one hand a life-giving power in the world plunged into a perpetual winter, but on the other also the flame of enlightenment, "the seeds of civilization," which, if it "is to return to the world, it will be through the efforts of 'good guys' like the man and the child," according to Erik J. Wielenberg (3–4). The child responds to the man's assertions with ample alacrity, and the principles outlined to him assume the form of unconditionally binding imperatives.

The father, whose one overriding imperative is the wellbeing of his progeny, does not remain unaware of this fact. Himself wrestling with personal flaws and existential doubts, he chooses to view the boy's unqualified belief, along with his

extreme selflessness, compassion and empathy, as a metaphysically based sign of a better reality inscribed in the boy, and, by extension, their bond. It leads him to perceive the son as holy, as the only indication of divine will still infusing the “barren, silent, godless” (2) world, or his “sole remaining referent of sacred idiom,” to quote Thomas H. Schaub (158). “If he is not the word of God God never spoke” (McCarthy 3), he concedes to himself in a statement which underscores the severity of his situation. It is on the boy’s survival alone that his hope of encountering or founding an order of existence fundamentally different from their present drudgery rests. Should that hope prove misplaced, his entire notion of goodness as real and meaningful is destined to collapse.

In what could be considered a consequence of formulating such an outlook, the man’s determination to preserve the boy from harm assumes a radical manner, which he articulates early on by assuring the son that he “will kill anyone who touches [him],” due to being “appointed to do that [i.e. protect the boy] by God” (McCarthy 80). His moral tenets become markedly flexible whenever the boy’s physical wellbeing is deemed to be at stake. Any potential encounter with strangers is perceived as a threat, which conflicts with the pair’s professed intent to find other good guys. This does not go unnoticed by the child, who treats their “good guys” status and the higher standards associated with it very seriously. In his view, informed by the father’s moral teachings, reaching out to fellow survivors, striving to expand the loving relation which the two of them share, constitutes their inarguable duty. The man “grudgingly recognizes [the] value” of the child’s unfaltering principles, and respects them, but he also “attempts to negate the boy’s empathy as a threat to their survival,” to quote Susan J. Tyburski (126). His inconsistency, hypocrisy even, in time becomes glaring and unavoidably factors into the pair’s relationship. After all, as Kristjan Mavri notes, “though the man may at times forget his own teachings, the boy always remembers” (10). After repeated instances where a possibility to attend to the other’s misery goes unheeded, the son comes to distrust the father along with his didactical accounts of the past, as seen when he rejects the father’s offer to tell him a story on the grounds that “in the stories we’re always helping people and we dont help people” (McCarthy 287). The process of mental separation becomes here evident.

The man is naturally distraught by this developing estrangement, yet his hands remain essentially tied. He is only capable of reflecting his views on what constitutes a desirable morality by words and self-sacrificial gestures towards the child, and not in actual interactions with the outside world, which in his reckoning no longer evinces any signs of being compatible with or receptive to such behavior. “[T]he man’s first instinct is to distrust and avoid others” (Wielenberg 8), as well as to distrust any hints indicating a better tomorrow as possibly still awaiting them. In his eyes, happy dreams are an insidious temptation to quit struggling and embrace death, the boy’s claims of having spotted another boy betray a reckless illusion, and even a pristine bunker full of supplies soon becomes a potential trap. The material reality has utterly ceased to provide the father with existential guidance or support—

as noted by Carlson, “[g]oods and values, plans and projects, hopes and promises, all still appear... but in light of their now withdrawn possibility, in the failure of the world” (57). In such a world, sustained happiness or peace are no longer tangible, realistic possibilities, and they are instead relegated to the status of nebulous, unsubstantial concepts meant solely to prevent the struggle from appearing futile. The pair is, in the father’s estimation, posited in a state of unresolvable conflict with the inherently hostile world.

This stance is supported by his rational faculty, whose conclusions are best articulated by the man’s departed wife in their final exchange, which later haunts him in a flashback. There, she lays bare her conviction that the only feasible outcome of their journey will be that “they [i.e. the others] will catch us and they will kill us. They will rape me. They’ll rape him. They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us,” and that the man has conceded to wait for it to happen instead of doing “the right thing” (McCarthy 58), which is to commit suicide. The woman arrives at a final conclusion in her reading of the post-apocalyptic landscape, and the father has no rational arguments with which to rebuke her, as his reason paints a fully concordant image of the world. What he has, in contrast to her, is an irrational love that “insists on a hope of possibility, which is to say of a world, in the child” (Carlson 62), and this love cannot be in any viable way transferred to the woman, leaving him to helplessly watch her abandon them to what she hopes to be an eternity of oblivion.

Yet, just as the man cannot share the hope his son embodies for him with the wife, neither can he extend it to the material present. It is here that the crux of an ontological division and disharmony afflicting the father is made apparent. As Alan Noble points out, “[t]he man has a hope in the future for his son,” but because of his radical opposition to the world, he “is incapable of conceiving of how such future could come about” (103). What is more, his perception of the son as special, even divine, seems to only be relevant, only acquire the dimension of truth, in the context of their personal relationship, so as to serve as an additional reason to guard him all the more fiercely. Behind it stands the possible fear that, if the son were to be exposed to the external conditions, the father’s reading of him as a supernatural being would be discredited, leaving just a helpless boy without personal agency and with an immense vulnerability to the world’s malign influence. This fear is implied by the man’s futile efforts to keep the child blissfully unaware of the various atrocities occurring on the road, but such gestures are also undermined by the fact that the son is in fact not oblivious to them, which does not interfere with his moral resolve. Nonetheless, the father’s faith reveals itself as entirely solipsistic and not projected outwards. Obviously, this poses the implicit danger of relegating the boy’s special qualities to the same functional limbo within which the father wishes to contain their stated dreams and hopes.

The father’s predicament is further exacerbated by the fact that, while his son remains the only presence to which he can relate positively, he is not the only entity with which his selfhood maintains a profound attachment. The apocalypse may have obliterated the previous order, the whole reality may have entered the process of

“shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities,” with “the names of things one believed to be true,” “slowly following those things into oblivion” (McCarthy 93), yet in the mind of the protagonist, the past has not yet faded out entirely. The specters of his life prior to the cataclysm keep intruding onto his consciousness, even if the meanings, signifiers and narratives associated with that life have now lost their footing, their referents. Perhaps not surprisingly, the strongest and most enduring of these meanings is the one supposed to transcend the physical realm, i.e. the divine, God. Steven Frye puts forward a view that “one of the most important questions posed in McCarthy’s works [is]: the question of God’s existence and nature, his presence in the world, and his role in steering the course of human lives and world history” (111). Few if any of the novelist’s works demonstrate this more plainly than *The Road*, which offers an extended meditation on this subject, presenting the father’s relationship to God as layered and deeply ambivalent, including the likelihood that the latter only became a significant aspect of the former’s existence in the aftermath of the apocalypse. As previously noted, the man states that his mission to protect the son, with violence if necessary, was appointed to him by God. This conviction appears to have a fundamentalist tinge to it, and indeed, the acts of violence committed by the man have a streak of religious zeal in them. Of note here is the follow-up to the pair’s confrontation with a cannibal—who ends up shot in the head by the father—where, while washing the assailant’s blood from his son’s hair, the man thinks of the action as “some ancient anointing”; also pertinent in this context is the scene where the father catches a thief and strips him naked in order to “leave [him] the same way [he] left [them]” (McCarthy 276). The notion of justice in the second instance in particular seems to distinctly evoke the harsh teachings of the Old Testament.

The father feels duty-bound to fulfill the imagined appointment, the commandment, even if it calls upon him to perform actions blatantly contradictory to the professed ethos of “the good guys,” and in turn to further alienate the son. Despite those sacrifices, the transcendent is apparently capable of offering very little in return, for the reason that, much like the rest of the man’s reality, it had eroded, dwindled, until it regressed to only a singular aspect—that of the aforementioned commandment. No longer inhabiting the “godless” world, in the father’s perception God cannot offer him any solace or mental support. Divinity, situated both somewhere outside and in the boy’s immanence, is positioned in sharp conflict with the material realm, much like in the case of an unhappy consciousness described by Hegel in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. In delineating this term, the philosopher referred to his view of traditional Judaism, where man was supposedly placed at odds with hostile nature and his own corporeality, while yearning for unity with the utterly disparate and qualitatively distinct transcendent.² Likewise for McCarthy’s protagonist, God is no longer reachable—this sentiment of his is made apparent in his bitter exhortations to God—and if the boy is deemed fit “to house a god,” then the necessity of preserving him from the world is rendered all the more pressing. Similarly to the

2 See Mark C. Taylor, *Journeys to Selfhood: Hegel and Kierkegaard*, 37–42.

transcendent of the unhappy consciousness which figures primarily as an impossible demand, the father's transcendent has assumed a purely prescriptive nature, though this nature is maintained solely by the man's own mind, which continually refers back to the religion-influenced conceptions of paternal duty internalized prior to the apocalypse. As such, and again in concordance with Hegel's theory, it represents nothing but a burden for the protagonist, who in his cynicism is left unable to build upon this remaining singular aspect of religiousness, and can only impotently invoke His name and damn it. To quote Hage, the father "clings to his God and his morality and considers himself a final agent of His will, even if his mission exists in a void, the larger design of the world having been annihilated" (143).

As it becomes increasingly evident that the pair's path does not lead towards any utopian refuge, and that the man's physical condition will soon deteriorate to the point that travelling further will be beyond his physical capabilities, the matter of the sharp division between the outside world and the man, his God, and the God's last referent, assumes a critical significance. John Cant notes that "[t]his signifier of the father's doom is encountered at an early stage of the journey and we know that the question the novel must answer is not what will happen to the father, but to the son?" (187). After all, the father figures, without his protection the boy cannot be expected to fend off the hostile world. The commandment is to shield him from the pervasive evil of the world at all costs, and if the man is not to serve as his guardian, then the only alternative appears to be disentangling the son from the world permanently. The man finds himself in a predicament calling to mind the trial of the biblical Abraham, though there is no voice here to guide his actions, despite his pleas to God: "[t]ell me how I am to do that [i.e. die and presumably take the boy with him]" (McCarthy 187). Yet, to commit to such an act and to give expression to his faith in the transcendent and His demand—supported here, notably, by reason represented by the voice of the man's wife—is to annul the hope he has managed to maintain all this time; hope nourished by his love of the child. A contradiction between these forces emerges, prompting the father to chastise himself for not facing up to the reality of his obligation. Having bound his sense of meaning so strongly to a source profoundly disassociated from and opposed to the reality he has been "thrown into," he finds himself at loss when trying to justify his continued presence in this reality by appeals to this source, which leads to the self-accusations of cowardice and delusion.

Is it truly cowardice, though, which prevents the father from killing the boy and finally denying hope any legitimacy? Or is it perhaps the result of his underlying realization that what the boy embodies is what actually truly transcends him, goes beyond his understanding, his cognitive capabilities, or even his spirituality? During the one substantial conversation that the father conducts with a stranger in the course of the story, a man calling himself Ely, he admits, upon being asked if the boy believes in God, that he doesn't "know what he believes in" (185). And indeed, the boy's faith emerges as qualitatively distinct from his father's, to an extent that renders it near incomprehensible to him. As opposed to a craving for meaning in a world emptied out of meaning, the boy's faith seems engendered by an innate

sense of responsibility for the other. Innate, for even though it was the father that passed down his code of ethics to the son, the latter does not make his adherence to them conditional upon the father's approval or even his example. Not simply an acquired reflex, the son's sense of responsibility appears rather to determine his perception of morality than be determined by it, which is why he goes far beyond what the man desires in his attempts to reach out to the other. In this sense, the boy's stance correlates with Levinas's interpretation of responsibility as the primordial basis of all formalized ethics. On this view, the other figures as the true transcendent to whom one is inextricably and absolutely bound to respond.³ This is very much reflected in the boy's behavior. When the father, after locating the unpillaged shelter, encourages him to speak a prayer as a gesture of gratitude for the supplies they have found there, the boy addresses it to its departed human builders, rather than God. The prayer, while inspired in a sense by the traditional thanksgiving prayer, is actually remodeled entirely by the son, to whom traditional religious customs are all but alien, compelling him to reinterpret man's approach to faith and imbue it with new significance. It is appropriated for the needs of the present circumstances, where it is faith in the other human that is necessary for survival, for finding strength to keep going. It is precisely this conviction that the father, with his "consistently traumatized and exhausted thought and speech patterns" (Cooper 226), has increasing difficulty in offering to the son. The boy addresses the presumably dead people by treating them as the good guys in absentia, even while acknowledging that the pair in all likelihood would not be enjoying their hospitality if the owners were alive. Phillip Snyder infers that the boy feels responsibility towards everyone, living or dead, whose actions had the effect of helping him and his father in their journey, whether intentional or not (84).

When at a different juncture the man washes the son's head of the cannibal's blood, he compares the action to a sacred ritual, presumably christening: "[s]o be it. Evoke the forms. Where you've nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them" (McCarthy 77–78). The scene presents an attempt to attribute encoded, metaphysical meaning to a decidedly worldly action. Yet the similarity the "ceremony" bears to an actual christening does put the father's thoughts in question. There seems to reside in the father "a self-conscious awareness of his own actions as forms of analogy that wobble between faith and irony" (Schaub 159): he admits that no higher power, no divine consecration accompanies the deed, only his "breath," his own substance. More than anything else, it resembles a superficial reconstruction of the past expired customs, rather than the construction of truly new ones, indeed "out of the air," which could then be infused with equal legitimacy and possess the vitality needed to support one's inner life; or, to use Hegel's terminology, an objective rather than subjective religion.⁴ The father has witnessed the collapse of civilization, morality, religion, and is now too jaundiced to carry out the act without an undercurrent of irony. He cannot transpose his faith in the son onto the world he

3 See Emmanuel Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, xii–xiv.

4 See Thomas A. Lewis, *Religion, Modernity, and Politics in Hegel*, 26.

perceives as bankrupt and void of meaning. Even when he suggests the possibility of the son's divinity in the conversation with Ely, he seems to treat it more as an academic query than a sincere declaration of one's belief, effectively excluding his interlocutor from the possibility of participating in the pair's spiritual communion.

Now to contrast it with the attitude of the son: his prayer is also largely constructed ad hoc, "out of the air," but the sense of his conviction, his faith, truly resounds in it. There is no doubt, no irony or sense of futility to be detected in his thought-process, and that remains true throughout the novel, with his seriousness and dedication being reflected in his opinions and actions. More light on the boy is shed during interactions with others, including Ely. As a self-appointed prophet, Ely seems to carry only the message of despair and abandon—claiming that "there is no God and we are his prophets" (McCarthy 181). Nonetheless, he does, if perhaps not intentionally, offer a piece of valuable insight in his assertion that "where men cant live Gods fare no better" (183), which explains why the boy's belief in men remains unwavering regardless of the horrific accounts of their actions that he is subjected to—without belief in men there can be no belief at all. The man, initially reluctant to approach the haggard Ely, does so and subsequently offers him food only on the insistence of the child, to whom an act of kindness does not come preceded by stringent calculation. When afterwards the father compels the old man to thank the boy for sharing food with him, only to hear Ely's refusal, he admits: "[t]hat's not why he did it" (184). The boy insists on hospitality without expecting the father's approval, or any sort of reciprocation, which in Levinas's view is the only legitimate hospitality. Overall, he persists in seeking human goodness and opportunities to do good, when the father has long since forfeited the search. What is more, the boy does not shirk from assuming responsibility for the instances when they could not adequately respond to the call for help, as well as when the father consciously rejects it or perpetuates harm on the other. Such resolve definitely testifies to his strength of character and uniqueness; it proves that the man's belief in him is not unfounded, even if this fact ends up leading to friction between them.

No matter how much the father may object to the boy's attitude at times, he is nonetheless aware of the extent to which their relation, his son's presence in his life, actually keeps him from turning entirely towards the negative aspects of his existence. When he studies the features of the killed cannibal and punctuates this action by calling him "[m]y brother" (79), he thereby admits to an affinity that all the dregs of the old world inherently share. According to Carla M. Sanchez, this affinity consists in carrying a "burden that torments all adult survivors who witnessed the destruction of their world and the emergence of a lawless, godless, hopeless society" ("Survival and Morality"), but also in having experienced the complete undermining of the meanings and narratives which they have spent their lives cultivating, likely incapable of seeing beyond them. The father expresses this sentiment when mentally accusing the cannibals of "making of the world a lie every word" (McCarthy 79). A similar angry reaction is observed in him when he visits a ruined library. While there, the sight of rotting books inspires in him "rage at the lies arranged in their thousands

row on row” (199); a rage which can be partly explained by the man feeling himself saturated with these lies to the point that he can no longer disentangle himself from them, seeing as they constitute a crucial element of his identity. Mavri talks of “the failure of ‘old’ language and its concomitants to relate the truth of the natural and civilizational breakdown” (7), and among the language most culpable concomitants are those who speak it, including the father.

At this point the answer to the father’s ostensibly non sequitur, enigmatic query: “how does never to be differ from what never was” (32) becomes apparent. The difference is that between him and the boy, with him as an individual belonging to, “thrown into,” a particular time and culture—radically different from the present—and condemned “never to be.” Similarly to the dilapidated books, whose “value [is] predicated on a world to come” (199), the man’s mindset is oriented towards arriving at an impossible future defined by a set of conditions which once could, but now can no longer be fulfilled; conditions which stipulate that, among other things, approaching the other ought only to be undertaken when it is not accompanied by an inherent risk factor, and when it does not need to entail a willingness to sacrifice something of one’s own without an expectation of reciprocity. The father may act by apparently sensible considerations, but in doing so he nevertheless excludes the possibility of a positive final outcome. It is only the child—the one that “never was,” whom the past has not irreversibly affected with its no longer applicable modes of reasoning, whose moral commitment is not mediated by a sense of history or any other reservations—who can present to the father an alternative to living solely by the harshest notions of justice and self-preservation.

Yet no matter how much the man might appreciate the child’s significance, it does not change the fact that their differences cannot be fully reconciled. It is in connection to this that a thought occurs to him how “to the boy he was himself an alien. A being from a planet that no longer existed. The tales of which were suspect” (163). This is probably his strongest articulation of the paradox implicit in their relation: which on the one hand is as intimate as possible for two human beings, and translates also to their mutual conditioning, yet on the other does not necessarily mean that they fully understand one another. Their modes of reading the world have essential differences—the boy believes the values the father teaches him, but he does so in a manner not available to the father himself, who is too saddled with the residue of history to maintain them with near as much sincerity. And history itself cannot be related from one to another, being as it is inextricably bound up with all the suffering its erasure has caused. The father concludes that “[h]e could not construct for the child’s pleasure the world he’d lost without constructing the loss as well and he thought perhaps the child had known this better than he” (163). The second part of this sentence involves a notable acknowledgment of the son’s inherent capacity for empathy and sensitivity to another’s pain. It may also imply, though, that the boy is aware of the experience gap between them, and how it is essentially incommunicable. In other words, it may well be that the boy has an intuitive feel for the utter remoteness of the other, or for that which, according to

Levinas, is the other's transcendent separateness. This is something the father has lost sight of, in his willingness to pronounce judgments and execute punishments to his preference. The man claims for himself the right to make categorical statements, to totalize—which is a tendency that the French philosopher identifies as violent.⁵ The boy, by contrast, stays humble and open to otherness. At a different point in the novel, the boy seems to let out an additional clue as to his awareness of this disparity, when he tells the man, in relation to their encounter with Ely: “I wont remember it the way you do” (186).

Comparing the two's discrepancies obviously does not favor the man. However, as flawed as he emerges under such examination, we must take full notice of the exceptionality of the moral standard the father is set against. The boy presents a paragon of selflessness and conscientiousness that innumerable people existing in far less desperate circumstances than the father could in no way measure up to. To live in the shadow of such moral firmness, knowing that it falls upon you to nourish it all the while being continually scrutinized by it, is a daunting ordeal in itself. According to Snyder, it is Ely's primary message when he states that “to be on the road with the last god would be a terrible thing so I hope it's not true” (McCarthy 183), for “[w]hat may be terrible about travelling with this boy/god revolves around the ethical pressure he always brings to bear on his father” (Snyder 81). Indeed, the boy is hence simultaneously a source of comfort and pressure, much like a genuinely worshipped deity could be. The pressure cannot be relieved, for the father will always fall short of the absolute demands the son silently imposes on him as on the only one who can present to him an example of ethical conduct. What the bygone world was to the father, the father himself is to the boy, though while the world failed the father irrevocably, the child's capacity to forgive prevents him from becoming disillusioned by the father's various misdeeds. Instead, the boy's silent presence serves to constantly remind the man of the need to consider and try to amend his behavior.

In fact, it could be argued that the son already displays the ability not only to continually redeem the father, but also to, in his own unassuming but perceivable way, redeem the world, their environment. According to Sanchez,

The child experiences the environment differently from his father, not only because he belongs to it, but also because its lifelessness is temporarily cured by his presence. While the Father experiences a ‘cold autistic dark,’ the Boy is compelled to extend his hand to receive a snowflake, as if it were a natural gift, and he watches it dissolve ‘like the last host of Christendom.’ (“Survival and Morality”)

In the son's treatment, his reading of it, even the most trivial and transient elements of reality can be imbued with wonder, if not sanctity—features which the father can no longer distinguish or derive from reality on his own, being “newly

5 See Kevin McCain, “Response to Levinas,” 66, 68.

blind” and condemned to yearn for the bygone sensations of the old world. What is more, Sanchez suggests, while “McCarthy’s distinction of the flake as the last remnant of the Eucharist might seem to indicate an end of a benevolent Christian presence... this scene actually presents hope for a new covenant” (“Survival and Morality”). The boy is, after all, not held down by the preconceptions and prejudices which mandate seeing the present world as “barren” and “godless.” Containing within himself the “inherent vitality of the ardenthearted” (Cant 187)—which is possibly also the referent signified by the pair’s “fire” metaphor—he has the power to metaphorically transubstantiate the encountered objects so that the good, the beautiful, can never be eclipsed entirely by evil. In addition, the beauty itself carries no baggage for him, can be appreciated without reverting with his mind to the loss he has sustained, whereas for the father “[a]ll things of grace and beauty such that one holds them to one’s heart have a common provenance in pain. Their birth in grief and ashes” (McCarthy 56). Not even the still lingering objects worthy of admiration offer the man respite from his mourning; pain accompanies his every waking moment.

As a release from his sorrows no longer figures as an attainable prospect in life, the man’s only consolation stems from the certainty of the boy’s forgiveness. He knows that the boy’s unconditional love will allow him to live on in his thoughts and hence not vanish entirely from the world, the way he has experienced so many signs and referents vanish. He realizes that the transient nature of the world’s corporeality precludes men and their language from securing a lasting presence in this reality—at an earlier point, he asks himself: “What will you say? A living man spoke these lines? He sharpened a quill with his small pen knife to scribe these things in sloe or lampblack?” (280). Only his flesh, only his child can hold the memory alive; the memory of who he was and the values he stood for, unobscured by resentment. The father expresses this conviction while watching the boy framed by the campfire, thinking how “[t]here is no prophet in the earth’s long chronicle who’s not honored here today” (297). The child’s mode of existence, defined by responsibility and forgiveness, provides a better testimony to what was laudable in humanity than whatever the father could hope to achieve himself. However, this function of providing a testimony is of course contingent upon the son surviving the father.

Towards the end of the novel, the matter of the boy’s fate assumes center stage. The man’s health gives out, forcing him to arrive at a final decision in regards to his stated commitment to protect the child’s purity, to face that which he previously scolded himself for not daring to face. His dilemma, as previously noted, echoes that faced by the biblical father of faith. Noble describes it as an “inversion of Abraham’s test of faith” (103), since, ostensibly, in this case to abide by the divine mandate—which also speaks in accordance with reason—is to kill the son. However, as I tried to establish earlier, the sense of the divine present in the man’s life originates as much, if not more, from the child and what he represents, as it does from the man’s inner convictions, the vestiges of “a sacred idiom [now] shorn of its referents and so of its reality” (McCarthy 93) resounding in his troubled mind. The man’s immanent conception of the divine is the one he can more readily understand; its vengeful,

uncompromising and single-minded nature being attuned to his own psychological state. The boy's alternative divinity, on the other hand, is not to be internalized by the man. The prospects of an existence proposed by the son are wholly impenetrable to him: the child himself appearing to him towards the story's conclusion as "standing there in the road looking back at him from some unimaginable future, glowing in that waste like a tabernacle" (293). From this passage it is obvious that the father infers two ideas. First, the son embodies the promise of a new covenant between man and the world. Secondly, the said covenant is not one he can partake in. Moreover, this covenant must appear as absurd to the man, being so at odds with his own experience in the wasteland, where the defenseless are herded like cattle and butchered. The son "glows" with the hope and possibility; his presence shines light upon and clears the view of a different mode of being, much like the clearing delineated by Heidegger.⁶ The man is, however, too ensnared in his own being, his own *Dasein*, to perceive more than a glimpse of it. In light of that, the father's resolution to allow the son to go on unguarded can only be considered legitimate—as opposed to being motivated by cowardice or indecision—if it involves an actual leap of faith.

For the definition of a leap of faith I refer to Kierkegaard, who made use of his personal interpretation of the story of Abraham and Isaac to establish its essential aspects. Abraham was to him a Knight of Faith, who, loving Isaac and trusting God unconditionally, responded to the latter's call to sacrifice the former by acting accordingly to the "virtue of the absurd" (Kierkegaard 27). Believing against all sense that God expects him to perform the deed and yet will not take his son away from him, he committed to an "infinite resignation" of the self and acting "in absolute contradiction to his feeling" (64). The impenetrable reasoning of the transcendent Will became to him the overriding mandate, even if it necessitated a stance which rendered him an "individual in opposition to the others" (qtd. in Taylor 179). The philosopher noted that to observe a genuine leap of faith in a modern society is exceedingly rare, as religion has become tame and accommodating, with those performing radical acts not guided by the belief in the incomprehensible absurd, but rather in a version of the transcendent modeled by their own ego. Indeed, the set of circumstances described in this essay could hardly emerge in more grounded, familiar conditions, and it is partly due to the very extremity of the post-apocalyptic world that the opportunity for a true Kierkegaardian leap of faith could arise. The man is confronted with a choice either to snuff out the boy's life, effectively acceding to his internalized notions of "doing the right thing" suggested to him by voices from the past, or to trust the irrational, absurd hope that the impenetrable mode of being—the mode embodied by the boy—can flourish in this world even without his presence. To choose the latter, the father would need to withdraw or suspend the claims of his innermost beliefs. In Levinasian terms, this would also mean to sanctify the transcendence of otherness.

The man does not kill the boy, and while he explains it by his inability to

6 See Theodore R. Schatzki, "Early Heidegger on Being, The Clearing, and Realism," 177.

do so, it is evident that his decision stems not from mere cowardice. His parting words to the son comprise a message of hope, in which he assures the son, even then worried about another boy he believes to have seen, that “[g]oodness will find the little boy. It always has. It will again” (McCarthy 300). This utterance hints strongly at an act of reconciliation with the world taking place within his expiring heart, a willingness to admit the possibility of more than the constant peril and the “crushing black vacuum.” Tyburski proposes a reading of this statement as a “prayer of a dying man asking God to watch over his son” (127). However, this prayer is unlike any of the previous man’s verbalizations concerning God in that it presumes His continued presence and agency in the world—definitely indicating a progress taking place within the man’s perception. In line with that, his withdrawing the intention to end the son’s life represents the man’s singularly most profound gesture of religious trust, “the ultimate act of faith” (Noble 106) in that the divine within the boy can fare better than the God who used to claim dominion over the man. Hage, who notes the “suggestions that the son of the man is actually the Son of Man,” also quotes the critic William Kennedy, who describes the boy as an “unsubstantiated messiah” (53). Tragically, his quality of “unsubstantiation” had to persist for as long as the two remained together, as it was the man’s mode of life that remained binding, effectively obstructing the demands of responsibility.

The father passes away, leaving the son, who, Wielenberg writes, “is unable to connect with other good guys as long as his father is alive” (8), alone to face his greatest trial yet, to define his life anew outside of the relation with his former “world entire” (McCarthy 4). After three days of mourning, the boy is made to confront the other, now without a guardian and mediator at his side. By a stroke of luck bordering on implausibility, the others turn out to be the fabled good guys extending an invitation of hospitality. The boy, by not escaping or trying to defend against them—reactions which the father could be expected to have enforced on him—can now join a miniature community, with surrogate parents and siblings. “The fulfillment 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,” writes Snyder (83). The departed man, from whom he has inherited “the breath of God,” which according to his new mother “pass from man to man through all of time” (McCarthy 306), assumes the place of a divine to whom the son may direct his prayers. Organic now, as well as congruent with the tangible lives of the people of the road, instead of engendering separation and conflict, the “God is immanent in the breath of the living and continues, perpetuating itself through the bonds of human connection” (Frye 177). The faith assumes a subjective nature, rather than an objective of a “dead idiom.” The fire continues to burn, shared now by an expanding group of survivors, whose prospects are uncertain yet not hopeless. A startlingly upbeat conclusion by McCarthy’s standards, it appears to lend credence to a mode of being that lies outside the strictly rational framework, implying that the possibility of coexistence with the other can never be discounted entirely, even if no indicators of it remain.

Despite ending in death, the man's fate should likewise be considered decidedly less gloomy than that of many McCarthy's protagonists. Having wrestled throughout the novel with the accelerated entropy of the world, along with the meanings, referents, and principles he once took for granted, he did not end up with nothing. Nor did he finally accede to the voices which threatened to deprive him of all hope and consolation in the name of upholding the tenets that plainly remained no longer applicable to the present reality. Whether posing as reason or as the transcendent, these internalized frameworks of meaning-making had in the process of world-spanning effacement been reduced to the most radical and callous sets of directives. The man could not erect any more affirming structures of thought, too weighted down by the pain of such a sweeping loss, such a profound undermining, of what he had held to be true. His agency in that area was compromised by his experience and the ensuing distrust of his own faculties. However, while the man could not navigate himself out of that quagmire, he was at least conscious of how the other closest to him remained free of it, suggesting thereby that a mode of existence alternative to his own despair was possible still. The other, his son, was not only unburdened by an existential load, but was in fact willing to embrace one by unconditionally accepting responsibility for other human beings. For the man, this attitude constituted a mark of divinity, which nonetheless resulted in an even more severe struggle against the world with an effect of not allowing said divinity to substantiate itself in that reality. Incapable of partaking in that divinity, convinced that any form of it is incompatible with the world, he endeavored to maintain their isolation while ostensibly pursuing a nebulous goal. Once his own body started failing him, though, he was forced to face the true choice—the choice between nothingness, which his inner voices called for, and the transcendent otherness, which however could hopefully carry a particle of his into the future, no matter how absurd that hope might have seemed. By choosing hope, the father died without being consumed by the vacuum, the oblivion; he did not disappear into the past only to have any traces of his life duly follow. His name, incorporated into a prayer, remains resonant, for as long as the fire remains lit.

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