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McCarthy's Sense of Ending

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Introduction

First, 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, Diane Luce, and Wes Morgan, whose work on patterns and correspondences in 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 24 hours of that record-breaking storm. And every week for three weeks, another storm came and dumped more snow on us. Where I live in Boulder, we're 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, in *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 a relatively quick, if not painless, divorce it is 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-slitted 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, in the earlier book's ending. The plot of *The Road* might be described as a father trying to avoid the death and consummation 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's as if God tells Abraham, “Hold off: use a lamb instead.” It's 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* with *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 knowledge 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. Here is another early fear also echoed in *The Road*, that you will not manage to leave your son enough to get by with. 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” [ck], 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 Polly (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 but 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) to 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 McAnnaly 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 reinstated 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 thanatopic 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 alley behind the White Lake [ck]. 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 thanatopic 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 seven-year-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 him. 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 a 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 skillfully 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 every 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 loving 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 him 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 their 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 mean-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 secret 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 nightmare: 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 pole, 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 finality, 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” (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 Chigurh has told Carla Jean that her life had “a beginning, a middle, and an end.”

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. 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—any parent's greatest fear—is that they will outlive their own child. But the second greatest fear is that in the parent 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 famililess 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'd already heard from some of *you*, for those connections between the author's life, to 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 about the suffering of his characters.

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 wasn't 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.”

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.”

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 Christlike 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 ever-present 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" 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.