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The Road Home: Cormac McCarthy's Imaginative Return to the South.

Compassionate McCarthy?: *The Road* and Schopenhauerian Ethics.

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

Schopenhauer's philosophical pessimism is founded on the common Idealist premise that the world exists both as phenomenal representation and Kantian thing-in-itself. Where Schopenhauer believed that he had surpassed Kant, however, was in his identification of thing-in-itself as *Will*, a blind, aimless striving which is not subject to plurality but is nevertheless fragmented by the thinking subject into discrete parts or

representations via the purely cognitive categories of time and space. What Schopenhauer terms the *principium individuationis*, or principle of individuation, is entirely illusory, yet as the thinking subject is unable to comprehend Will other than through these cognitive categories, the self is regarded as the centre of the phenomenal world, opposed to everything else. From this subject-object distinction arises egoism and consequently violence, as each individual attempts to wrest control from the others. Such is the vision that Eddins sees as being at the heart of *Blood Meridian*.

That novel is not, of course, a complete anomaly in the McCarthy canon. As much as Eddins seems to justify his reading of the text on the grounds that the scholarly commentary it has given rise to “has tended to be of a wider philosophical and religious scope” (25) than that on McCarthy’s other works, *Blood Meridian* does not stand alone and isolated. As far as concerns the “prevailing vision” of the novel, it is my suggestion that McCarthy’s latest offering, *The Road*, stands firmly along side the earlier piece – despite taking place in a post-apocalyptic future, *The Road* shares much of its imagery and many of its thematic concerns. Once again the reader is presented with a world ravaged, a landscape “barren, silent, godless” (4); an “ashen scabland,” (13) desolate and, in a reiteration of that word which so evocatively captured the essence of the Western landscape in *Blood Meridian*, “cauterized” (12). As in the earlier novel, the wasteland which constitutes the world of *The Road* is one of seemingly hopeless suffering. Walking out into the thin gray light, the father sees this truth: “The cold relentless circling of the intestate earth. Darkness implacable ... and somewhere two hunted animals trembling like ground-foxes in their cover” (110). The world of *The Road* is a lawless one, through which stalk bands of thieves, murderers and cannibals all intent on maintaining their own

essentially futile existences at the expense of the weak and vulnerable. As Schopenhauer would put it, the novel presents us with the conflict of egos in its most distinct manifestation, the release of the mob from all law and order precipitating the Hobbesian *bellum omnium contra omnes*, the war of all against all (333) [1].

Amid this destruction the father and son move towards a vague and elusive goal, journeying southward in hope of more favourable climes but certain of nothing save eventual death. The father has an indistinct notion of the vanity of life in the midst of this suffering. He wonders whether there is a cow somewhere being fed and cared for but arrives only at the unanswerable question, “but saved for what?” (102) He is equally unable to give an adequate explanation for the continued maintenance of his own existence, asserting that the bravest thing he ever did was “get up this morning” (229). Yet the justification of this bravery merely consists in the vague conviction that “the good guys keep trying. They don’t give up” (116).

Passing through the mountains the father and son “ate sparingly and were hungry all the time,” (27) nourishing themselves in the most frugal manner. For Schopenhauer this is the nature of all attainment, akin to “the alms thrown to the beggar, which relieves him today so that his misery may be prolonged till tomorrow” (196). In like manner, the father and son are referred to as “mendicant friars sent forth to find their keep,” (106) dependent either on what meagre supplies they can scavenge, or on what is bestowed to them as a result of the misfortune of others. Hunger, their habitual state, not only forms a running motif throughout the *The Road* but possesses particular significance in Schopenhauer’s system, being the most universal manifestation of that constant striving which is representative of the world’s innermost nature. It is an iron command to nourish

the body which is itself, as Schopenhauer explains, “nothing more than objectified will-to-live” (312). Moreover, the conflict inherent in all of nature rests on precisely this premise, for it is the same will which manifests itself in all phenomena, and since “every animal can maintain its own existence only by the incessant elimination of another’s, [t]hus the will-to-live generally feasts on itself” (147). Just as the father likens himself and his son to two hunted animals, so others are likened to the animals that hunt, bestial in their savagery, as is necessitated by their environment.

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

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

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

Moreover, the concept of wrong is in Schopenhauer's model "most completely, peculiarly, and palpably expressed in cannibalism ... the terrible picture of the greatest conflict of the will with itself at the highest grade of its objectification which is man" (335). It is the picture of the greatest conflict of the will with itself not only because it represents the ultimate denial of the victim's will-to-live but because it also satisfies, albeit temporarily, that most universal manifestation of the will-to-live of the offender. McCarthy's world is one which is "soon to be populated by men who would eat your children in front of your eyes," (152) and many of the most horrifying and disturbing scenes in this novel are those which feature cannibalism, implicit or otherwise: instances such as that of the charred infant, "headless and gutted and blackening on the spit," (167)

and even more chillingly, those unfortunates locked in the cellar of the grand plantation house who are being kept as a human food stock, the man “with his legs gone to the hip and the stumps of them blackened and burnt” (93). This extreme manifestation of the denial of the will of others is rejected particularly by the son, who urges his father to promise that they would never eat people. And he replies that they never would, because they “are the good guys” (109).

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

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

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

latter, he tells him that the man “is going to die. We can’t share what we have or we’ll die too” (44).

In his essay *On the Basis of Morality*, Schopenhauer suggests three fundamental incentives for human actions: egoism, malice, and compassion (145). Insofar as the father gives his own well-being priority over that of others, it could be said that his actions are driven by the first of these. The fact that he affirms not only his own will but that of his son in no way contradicts this. The narrator’s assertion that “the boy was all that stood between him and death” (26) not only refers to the material purpose given to his life by protection of the boy, but also to the knowledge that since the individual does not endure, “everything therefore has to be staked on the maintenance of the species, as that in which the individual’s true existence lies” (*WWR II*, 511). The father sees himself in the child, and in the affirmation of the child’s will-to-live sees the extension of his own beyond death. Thus protection of the boy becomes of paramount importance in the quest for self-affirmation, even if the means by which this protection is assured is fraught with moral ambiguities.

Early in the novel, for instance, the father kills another man in order to protect the boy. This could be read as an action devoid of egoistic drives, as the father affirms the will of the boy as if it were his own. But given that the will-to-live of the father is inextricably bound up with that of the son, in terms of maintaining the family-species, his killing of the man could be read as merely the affirmation of his own will extending into the denial of the assailant’s. As has been noted, however, Schopenhauerian right is simply the negation of wrong, and finds its principle application “in those cases where an

attempted wrong by violence is warded off” (339). The initial threat of violence is an attempt to deny the will of the potential victim, and as Schopenhauer maintains:

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

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

Of course, in *The Road* there is no State, a fact which is crucial for an understanding of how the ethical system in question relates to the novel. For

Schopenhauer, only the individual who accepts the moral boundary between right and wrong where no State or other authority guarantees it can truly be identified as *just* (370). Where the State exerts its influence, it may well be the case that a citizen “promotes the well-being of all because he sees his own well-being bound up therewith,” (349) but this is often conditioned by the threat of punishment, which exists as a counter-motive to the doing of wrong. In *The Road*, the disappearance of the governmental machinery of the states, or as the father puts it, “what used to be called the states,” (36) has taken with it any judicial incentive for people to refrain from acting out *wrong* deeds. When by the campfire the father tells his son “old stories of courage and justice as he remembered them,” (35) the reader becomes aware that it is not only the stories that exist purely in memory – in McCarthy’s wasteland the ideals of courage and justice themselves seem to be disappearing.

Even the father himself is not immune to this moral disintegration. While it would be a stretch too far to suggest that the father acts out of malice, the second of Schopenhauer’s fundamental incentives, his actions do exhibit a certain moral ambiguity. As has already been suggested, many of his actions, judged by Schopenhauerian standards, can be deemed *right* (in the negative sense, as in not being wrong actions), yet given that he acts in the interests of himself and his son he is fundamentally egoistic. The father is aware that there is an ethical distinction between his treatment of the thief and the killing of the man who threatened his son earlier in the novel. The force of the boy’s anguish over the fate of the thief leads the father to give his word that he “wasn’t going to kill him,” (219) an assertion which he believes justifies his behaviour, whereas he did not feel the need to justify the earlier killing. Initially believing that “an eye for an eye”

constitutes a *negation of a negation* and is thus morally valid, the boy's reaction forces upon the father a change of knowledge which leads to remorse. Despite Schopenhauer's assurance that this appearance of right "distinguishes revenge from pure wickedness, and to some extent excuses it," (364) the fact that the father returns to the scene of the encounter, piles "the man's shoes and clothes in the road [and] put[s] a rock on top of them" (219) is vitally important for the development of the relationship between man and boy and demonstrates the latter's emerging status as the moral centre of the novel.

"The absence of all egoistic motivation," writes Schopenhauer, is the absolute "*criterion of an action of moral worth*" (*Morality*, 140). In *The Road* the son, in contrast to his father, is most able to see through the illusory principle of individuation, with the result that he reacts with compassion towards others. This is what Schopenhauer categorizes as the *good* character, present in that person who is induced "not to hinder another's efforts of will as such, but rather to promote them, and who [is] therefore consistently helpful, benevolent, friendly, and charitable" (360). Yet what moves such a person to "good deeds and to works of affection is always only *knowledge of the suffering of others*, directly intelligible from one's own suffering, and put on a level therewith" (375). The boy is repeatedly referred to as being scared, yet as a consequence of his ability to perceive the affinities between all those who walk the road, he is able to identify and empathize with the fear of others. On encountering Ely, the boy tells his father, "He's scared, Papa. The man is scared," (137) a phrase which is reiterated a number of times. Upon catching the thief, the boy again exhorts, "He's so scared, Papa ... He's afraid to answer" (218-19).

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

Of course, as befits Schopenhauer's pessimistic world view, individuals who are able to come to such intuitive metaphysical-ethical knowledge are exceedingly rare. Such is also the case in the world of McCarthy's latest fiction. The father admits he doesn't think they are "likely to meet any good guys on the road," (127) and the boy concurs, observing that "there's a lot of them, those bad guys" (78). So what are we to make of the novel's ending? It is my suggestion that *The Road*, while seeming to present a cautious

sense of hope, does so in a most misleading way. On his deathbed, the father emphatically asserts that “Goodness will find the little boy. It always has,” (236) and his prediction appears to be borne out when the boy is soon taken in by a family who have followed the pair into the woods. The boy really has no choice however but to blindly place his trust in the family, and even if they are, as they profess to be, “the good guys,” there is nothing in the novel’s narrative trajectory that would suggest that their continued journey will be any easier than that which occupies the pages of the text. But how else could McCarthy have satisfactorily concluded such an already harrowing piece of work? Regarding dramatic poetry in general, Schopenhauer noted that it:

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

Despite its apparently tentative celebration of humanity, and of the love between father and son, the end of the novel nevertheless exudes the same “kind of vital pessimism” (66) that John Vanderheide recently spoke of as being representative of McCarthy’s entire canon. In the first of his two interviews with Richard Woodward, McCarthy stated that “the notion that the species can be improved in some way, that everyone could live in harmony, is a really dangerous idea,” (31) and this new novel does little, I believe, to suggest that he has altered his stance. Just as the epigraph to *Blood Meridian* famously pointed to a violence which has been ever-present in human history, *The Road* only

serves to conclude that, despite the efforts of those rare, compassionate individuals, it will continue to be the hallmark of our human future.

## Note

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

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