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Hospitality in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

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

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

Hospitality Structures

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

to sacrifice his son and thus also finally bring them both to rest? To paraphrase Derrida, we shall have to see what comes.

In his article “The Lost Commandment: The Sacred Rites of Hospitality,” Peter J. Sorensen defines hospitality as a “sacred duty that demonstrates how the host and guest should treat each other . . . [with] certain reciprocal responsibilities” (5). He adds that in the ancient world “merchants or travelers needed a host who would not only give them a place to stay but would also take legal responsibility for them. . . . Hosts became essentially agents for these strangers. Hospitality, therefore, became a powerful bond of trust and even a contractual agreement” (5-6). Further, he suggests that the cultural formalities attendant to hospitality took on the status of social ritual even to the point of embodying a “sacred ethos that both the guest and host, if they were honorable, were careful to follow” (6). Sorensen’s main argument is that world cultures have lost this sacred sense of hospitality as a fundamental responsibility for the Other, figured in the Judeo-Islamic-Christian tradition as the “wandering stranger” or the “stranger in the gates” whose very presence proclaims the ethical demand to be made welcome. Indeed, he references examples of hospitality as an ethical imperative from a number of world cultures and literatures with figures including, among others, the Bedouin, Abraham, Lot, Odysseus, Demeter, Hamlet, Jesus, Peter, and Joseph Smith. He also underscores hospitality’s pervasiveness by laying out a brief etymology of the word:

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

Finally, according to Sorensen, “no matter the situation, no matter the culture, no matter the name of the god . . . penalties for inhospitable behavior are great . . . And the rewards of

genuine hospitality, despite the risks, are deeply satisfying and represent the highest order of reverence possible” (7). McCarthy, like Sorensen, reverences hospitality, especially given its inherent risk, namely harm and death, because such humane generosity in an inhumane world where self-preservation seems paramount may constitute McCarthy’s essential notion of goodness and grace. Although the hospitality motif abounds throughout McCarthy’s writing, perhaps nowhere else does it figure so fundamentally as in *The Road*, a travel narrative where the dangerous, primal hospitality drama of meeting or being the stranger looms imminently within an environment already rendered utterly lifeless and where what knights there be are desperate roadrats who welcome every pilgrim as a potential meal. The father and son are regularly torn by the dilemma inherent in the ethical call to responsibility for the Other that frames every encounter they experience because, as the “good guys . . . carrying the fire” (109) emblematic of hearth and home, they feel the weight of an impossible hospitality mandate. Ethical behavior is never easy to enact in McCarthy’s fictional worlds, but here its possibility seems far, far beyond the pale, and Sorensen’s traditional model of hospitality seems inadequate to get us very far down McCarthy’s road, particularly because extending hospitality usually means that the host is somehow master of the situation. That mastery comes very rarely in the novel and is always temporary and limited..

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

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

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

Levinas further underlines the sacredness of this relation with the Other, particularly with regard to the face-to-face, by arguing that the face “orders and ordains” us to service (97), which service is itself removed from any requirements of reciprocity because our responsibility encompasses all responsibility: “I am responsible for a total responsibility, which answers for all the others and for all in the others, even for their responsibility. The I always has one responsibility *more* than all the others” (99). Indeed, the “I” constitutes itself as an “I” solely on the basis of its relation with the Other and, in addition, on the impossibility of its substitution with regard to what Levinas calls its “exclusive” and “unique” (101) responsibility for the Other: “I am I in the sole measure that I am responsible, a non-interchangeable I. I can substitute myself for everyone, but no one can substitute himself for me. Such is my inalienable identity of subject” (101). Levinas radically raises the stakes within the play of this Self/Other welcoming relation by connecting it with God, the Divine or Infinite: “When in the presence of the Other, I say ‘Here I am!’, this ‘Here I am!’ is the place through which the Infinite enters into language, but without giving itself to be seen” (106). Further, Levinas argues that this declaration by the

subject “*testifies* to the Infinite” and that “[i]t is through this testimony, whose truth is not the truth of representation or perception, that the revelation of the Infinite occurs” (106). Thus, Levinas is able to conclude that his reconfiguring of subjectivity within the Self/Other relation which invites and testifies to the Infinite—this “otherwise than being” of Levinasian ontology—represents “the glory of God” (109).

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

For Derrida, hospitality revolves around the French term *hôte*, meaning at once both host and guest, an aporetic binary figure whose very undecidability renders it desirable as a *khôra*, defined by Caputo as “a great abyss (*abîme*) or void which is ‘filled’ by sensible things” (85). As Gil Anidjar, editor of Derrida’s *Acts of Religion*, puts it, “To translate this *hôte* as either ‘host’ or ‘guest’ would be to erase the demand made by hospitality as well as the violence that is constitutive of it” (356). This violence stems from the unethical audacity implicit in the presumption of enunciating a welcome, in Derrida’s words, “thus appropriating for oneself a

place to *welcome* the other, or, worse, *welcoming* the other in order to appropriate for oneself a place” (qtd. in Anidjar 356). In typical Derridean fashion, he coined another term for hospitality, the neologism “hostipitality,” to underscore the impossibility of resolving this *hôte* aporia. Virtually every key term in Derrida’s structure for hospitality functions in this same way as analogous figures to each other, their respective “meaning,” if we can properly invoke such a concept in this context, wavering incessantly between poles of possibility/impossibility: **Justice** (*le loi /le droit*); **the Gift** (*le cadeau/le don*); **the Messianic** (promise of future), **the Yes/Yes** (Joycean double affirmation), **the Invitation** (hospitable openness); and **Forgiveness** (beyond forgiveness).

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

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

(*Nutshell* 19). He adds, however, that we need a rigorous calculation, but again warns that “there is a point or limit beyond which calculation must fail” (*Nutshell* 19).

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

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

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

(“Hostipitality” 361-62). For Derrida, it is only this last kind of welcome that constitutes real hospitality.

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

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

Hospitality Encounters

All the encounters in McCarthy’s novel demonstrate in one way or another the various elements of the Derridian model of hospitality, beginning with the establishment of the father/son relation as the primary Self/Other relation. The son functions for the father as an important “third” in his encounters, literal and figurative, with the Other, an undeconstructible kind of *khôra* imprinted with ethical traces (Caputo 85), as well as the source of the father’s most essential and infinite call to responsibility. The boy, who has known no other world because he was born just after the nuclear destruction, represents the ethical center of the novel, not just as

the face of the Other but also as the receptacle of his father's previous teaching. McCarthy establishes this relation very early in the novel when he describes the father scanning the horizon with binoculars looking for danger while the boy sleeps and thinking about his responsibility toward his son: "He knew only that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God, God never spoke" (4). Here McCarthy means much more than the son gives the father the divine right to do whatever he deems necessary to protect his progeny. Rather, McCarthy invokes a Levinasian testimonial of the Infinite, both directly in the father's immediate speech and proleptically in the boy's subsequent speech, as the father welcomes his responsibility to his son as the ontological ground of his identity. The father always associates the son with the divine, calling him "God's own fire-drake" (26) as he watches the boy stoke the fire, for example, and likening his washing the roadrat's gore out of the boy's hair to "some ancient anointing" (63). According to Levinas, the face of the Other represents and articulates the demand for responsibility, the foundation of ethics as well as ontology, and, by so doing, the face also reflects a connection with the Infinite: "In the access to the face there is certainly also an access to the idea of God (92).

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

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

I'm right here.

I know. (5)

This ethical "me voici" moment also circumscribes the personal world of the father/son relation within the larger world of the novel which relation must be maintained as the prime directive of their existence whatever other relation might present itself. As they prepare to move off down the road on this same morning, they re-enact a "me voici" exchange which, again, reaffirms the

primacy of their relationship: “Are you okay? he said. The boy nodded. Then they set out along the blacktop in the gun-metal light, each the other’s world entire” (5). This exchange also reflects Derrida’s notion of the Joycean double affirmation. For the rest of the novel they would experience everything as if reflected in each other’s face, even though, as the boy later remarks, “I won’t remember it the way you do” (147), because their pact, which goes far beyond their mutual promises, binds them together as beings constructed according to relation and responsibility, well before any promises are even possible. In Derrida’s terms, they will push each other beyond self-limiting thresholds toward an impossibly mad kind of hospitality.

McCarthy underlines the ethical depth and power of this father/son relationship with analeptic references to the absent mother, who commits suicide before the bleak hopelessness of the future she anticipates, doubting that her husband can protect them: “They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us and you won’t face it” (48). Here she misreads her husband because he does, in fact, “face” everything that is to come, deeply and directly. Her suicide demonstrates, according to Levinasian and Derridian notions of subjectivity, that when one loses the sense of responsibility to the Other, one also loses one’s self. The mother commits suicide, not because she rejects her responsibility toward her husband and son, but because of the way its impossibility necessarily overwhelms her. “As for me,” she says to her husband before going off into the dark, “my only hope is for eternal nothingness and I hope it will all my heart” (49). She wishes to be relieved of responsibility and, because it is infinite, the only way she can discharge herself of it is by destroying herself physically, hoping she will also be destroying herself psychically, yet even in her suicide plan, she articulates a hope of what is to come. McCarthy calls the “coldness” of her going—refusing to tell her son goodbye and leaving her husband with these parting words in response to his pleas, “No. I will not. I cannot.”—“her final gift” (40). This inhospitable reading of her cold parting goes beyond irony because it might truly be a gift, to relieve her husband and especially her son of their responsibility toward her. In uttering her refusal of the face-to-face, she is already halfway gone as a subject. Death, even as her

figurative “lover,” cannot substitute as and Other. Still she understands the profound necessity of the Other for the survival of the self and articulates it to her husband in the following way:

Maybe you’ll be good at this. I doubt it, but who knows. The one thing I can tell you is that you won’t survive for yourself. I know because I would never have come this far. A person who had no one would be well advised to cobble together some passable ghost. Breathe it into being and coax it along with words of love.

Offer it each phantom crumb and shield it from harm with your body. (49)

Of course, she ends up being wrong about her husband’s capacity for managing an ethic of survival; he is certainly “good” at it, almost impossibly so, but she is absolutely right about the necessity of his son as the Other and the third who keeps his selfhood intact. Although McCarthy relegates her to the margins of the novel’s action, he also haunts its mood and setting with her absence, which is embodied in a startling simile of poignant and irrevocably lost maternal hospitality: “By day the banished sun circles the earth like a grieving mother with a lamp” (28).

The Road possesses a certain repetitious monotony of action and setting and conversation, punctuated only by the high drama of each human encounter the father and son experience on their journey south, all of which bear a certain ritualistic resemblance to each other. Such encounters do not portend what Sorensen calls the “sacred rites of hospitality,” however; these seem to belong solely to the pre-apocalyptic world that has disappeared, along with anyone able to function as a host within Sorensen’s model of hospitality. This post-apocalyptic world features a different set of meeting rituals which mock this model of mutual responsibility. As the father thinks to himself, “On this road there are no godspoke men. They are gone and I am left and they have taken with them the world” (27). Not counting the myriad of burned, dismembered, and desiccated bodies the father and son confront almost as a matter of course, their dramatic encounters with others on the road are of two kinds: those with humans who are literally present and those with humans who are absent, made figuratively present only by their traces. The literal encounters tend to be fraught with immediate danger, each one a

threat to their lives and the goods upon which those lives depend, while the figurative encounters tend to be full of anxiety and hope as, for example, whenever they enter an abandoned house to see what they could scavenge, never sure what they might find.

There are nine significant literal encounters the father and son have with live humans referenced in the novel which have ramifications regarding the demands of hospitality. These encounters occur at different levels of intimacy and interaction:

1. The lightning struck man whom they track and observe (41-43). He acknowledges them, but doesn't speak with them. The boy keeps asking, "Cant we help him? Papa?"(42) to which the father responds, "No. We cant help him. There's nothing to be done for him" (43). Although the father refuses to take action, he still feels the dilemma of his responsibility to the man, but most especially to the boy, and later asks forgiveness. Here as in later parts of the novel, forgiveness is not for any particular act but for everything about the situation, including the impossibility of ameliorating it: "I'm sorry for what happened to him but we can't fix it" (43).

2. The roadrat whom the father kills after he discovers them accidentally (51-56). As a part of a larger group of scavengers, he represents the first real threat. The roadrat and the father engage in some negotiating discourse before the man pulls a knife, grabs the son, and is subsequently shot in the forehead by the father, using his next-to-last bullet. The father refuses the roadrat's empty offer of hospitality and keeps the man's eyes from engaging the boy's, as if to spare the boy the demand inherent in the gaze of the Other. He violate the prime ethical command of the face—"Thou shalt not kill!"—knowingly and firectly with his foreheat shot when negotiation fails. The aporia, or dilemma, of hospitality does not exempt him from decisive action. As Derrida notes, violence can come from hospitality's demands. Here, as in the aftermath of other such violent encounters, the boy is silent, refusing the affirmation of talking with his father.

3. The phalanx of red-scarved medieval marchers and their company which they only observe from hiding (77-78). Again, the father fears the boy's face-to-face

engagement with the Other because he does not want his son drawn into the relation, so he tells him immediately, “Keep your face down. Dont look” (77). Then he engages the boy in a brief discussion on the identification of the “bad guys” (78), presumably as opposed to the good, perhaps because he fears his some’s capacity for action..

4. The plantation house with a basement full of people waiting to be slaughtered and eaten (89-98). This house represents the antithesis of hospitality with its perverse welcome-to-the-larder orientation, complete with a lookout system which warns its decidedly inhospitable inhabitants of the approach of visitors. Ironically, however, the basement dwellers do welcome the father and son as their rescuers, imploring them for succor, “Help us, they whispered. Please help us” (93). The two barely escape, but not before the father reminds his son of how to commit suicide should he be caught (95) and realizes in the intensity of the moment what it would require of him to sacrifice his own son (96). Later that night as they huddle together, hidden but within earshot of the house, the father tries to keep his son from hearing the screams of the basement people, although later the boy communicates his complete understanding of the situation and reaffirms their commitment to be the “good guys . . . carrying the fire” (107-109). This encounter exemplifies the impossibility inherent in the demand for hospitality and the Derridian notion that the term *hôte* must signify at once host and guest.

5. The nearly blind old man whom they invite for dinner (136-148). After determining that the old man is not a decoy for an ambush and assuring him that they are not robbers, they feed him and invite him to spend the night. The father makes a “deal” with both his son and the old man in extending this hospitality, which he attributes all to the boy. Around the campfire they debate how one would know if he were the “last man on earth” and the existence of God. The father asserts that “[t]here is no God and we are his prophets” (143), but he later asks the old man, who will not give his real name to protect his identity, “What if I said that he’s [referring to the boy] a god?” The old man responds, “It’s better to be alone. So I hope that’s not true what you said because to be

on the road with the last god would be a terrible thing so I hope it's not true" (145).

When the old man refuses to thank the boy for the hospitality on the request of the father, he asks, "Why did he do it?" to which the father responds, "You wouldn't understand . . . I'm not sure I do" (146). This encounter reflects the Derridian notion that hospitality exists without acknowledgment and reciprocation; in some senses, it simply is.

6. The group of four people following them who later abandon their campsite, leaving a new-born baby roasting on a spit (164-167). The sight of this horrific object causes the father to again invoke forgiveness, not for himself, but for the inhospitable world: "I'm sorry, he whispered. I'm sorry" (167). Later, the boy remarks that they would have taken the baby with them (168), expressing a hospitable willingness even though nothing can be done. He reimagines the situation to provide a space that allows ethical action, albeit hypothetical.

7. The thief who steals their goods on the beach (215-219). When they catch up to the thief, the father makes him strip on pain of death and leaves him in the road, despite his son's protests. Later, the boy convinces him to return his clothes, they find no one there. When the father assures his son that he wouldn't have really killed him, the boy answers, "But we did kill him" (219), taking responsibility for what his father did. When the father tries to explain his actions to his son he says, "You're not the one who has to worry about everything," to which the son replies, "Yes I am" (218). The son's sense of hospitality reasserts itself again, calling his father and even his protection into question. The son also understands that he is responsible as an agent for himself—his father cannot substitute for him.

8. The Bowman who ambushes and wounds the father (221-225). The father shoots the flare gun through the sniper's window, severely wounding him. By the time he makes it up to the room, the Bowman has been deserted by the others who were with him, with the exception of a woman who cradles him in her arms and who curses the

father for presumably killing him. Her loyalty, at the risk of her own life, enacts a moving, albeit desperate, hospitality as she refuses to leave her man behind.

9. The bearded shotgun-toting stranger who takes the boy in after his father's death (237-End). This man and his family, who have been watching the father and son, represent an unexpected surprise ending for the novel's hospitality quest, although the father does prophesy that "goodness" will find his son. Finally, the boy finds some of the "good guys," who decided together to take the boy into their midst without any kind of request other than the demand inherent in responsibility for the Other. The man responds affirmatively to the boy's face-to-face inquiry regarding whether he is "carrying the fire" (238), although the man does not initially understand what this metaphor means. They both function within the dual-identity of the *hôte*. The woman welcomes the boy literally with open arms. The boy talks to his dead father, as the dying man requested, and also talks to God, although talking to his father was the "best thing" (241). The woman's affirmation of this practice seals for the boy the tripartite structure of Levinasian ethics—the son as self, the father as Other, and the Infinite as reflected in the Other—on which he and his father had been operating: "She said that the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all of time" (241).

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

1. The farm with the cistern and apple orchard (99-105). This episode occurs just after their encounter at the plantation house and, although the farm offers modest refreshment—hay seeds, dried apples, and fresh water—and minimal tools—a spoon, a boxcutter with extra blades, and a screwdriver—it nevertheless saves them. They accept the hospitality of the absent landlords who neither offer nor refuse them as a true gift without intent or reciprication..

2. The bunker (113-131). The father's discovery of the hidden bunker represents the possibility of the future and the reality of pleasant surprise. Despite the boy's fear at what they might find beneath the trap door, they remain open to possibilities in their desperation and are rewarded, perhaps because fate somehow knew that they would appreciate the hospitality offered and even hesitate for a moment before accepting it. When the boy asks, "Is it okay for us to take it?" the father responds, "Yes. It is. They would want us to. Just like we would want them to" (118). The ethics of this hospitable imaginary exchange between the "good guys" who built and stocked the bunker and the "good guys" who will make use of its stores is extended by the boy's prayer of thanks before their first meal: "Dear people, thank you for all this food and stuff. We know that you saved it for yourself and if you were here we wouldnt eat it no matter how hungry we were and we're sorry that you didnt get to eat in and we hope you're safe in heaven with God" (123).

3. The unpillaged house (171-180). Again, just when they are on the verge of going under they discover a source of food, shelter, clothing, and goods which offers them a respite from their travels and provisions for the road ahead.

4. The ship (188-208). After their arrival at the coast, the ship provides them with needed food and supplies, especially the flaregun, which probably saves their lives later when they are ambushed. Again, the boy wants to be assured that the people who were on the ship are dead because he does not want to be "taking their stuff" (204).

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

Hospitality Implications

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

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