

Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

Cormac McCarthy's novels depict human relations in terms of hunter and prey in a landscape bereft of civilized attachments. Thievery, murder and rape, intimidation, cunning and treachery are the normal standards of human behavior. Warmth, love and affection are not perhaps deviant characteristics but are uncommon and never to be taken for granted. McCarthy's characters struggle in deadly, nocturnal forests and deserts with spiders, venomous snakes and larger beasts hidden behind ridges or rocks and trees, creatures that threaten to walk off with a bleeding piece of unsuspecting prey should any come within reach. Humane feeling and attachments have not disappeared but remain subsidiary to necessity, chance, and brutality. "The kid," the unnamed and central character in *Blood Meridian*, shows some regard for human life, but is murdered at the end of the novel by Judge Holden, the erudite, articulate killer who offers to the motley band of Indian-killers in the Glanton Gang Nietzschean aphorisms on the feebleness of morality. Llewelyn Moss in *No Country for Old Men*, the later novel, steals millions in drug money but returns to the scene of the aborted drug deal in the desert to succor--pointlessly, as it turns out--the dying member of a Mexican gang. He and his wife are later killed by the mysterious and remorseless Anton Chigurh, just about the only major character alive at the end of the novel.

Chigurh, perhaps a later incarnation of Judge Holden, is the articulate figure in that story, the one who offers philosophical grounds for killing people; or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that he offers the soon-to-be murdered philosophical consolation.

The play *The Sunset Limited* is a rare and recent addition to McCarthy's work that is set in New York City rather than in the desert waste of west Texas. No one dies in the story, and there is no on-stage violence, merely a remembered prison experience. But even here "the white," as the college professor is designated in the *dramatis personae*, is expected to commit suicide after the play has come to an end. A solicitous figure, the black ex-con, has generously taken "the white" in to his apartment, where the debate over the value of life takes place, though he seems unable to protect the college instructor from self-destruction when he leave his dwelling place. Tommie Lee Jones plays the college instructor in the filmed version of the play, opposite Samuel L. Jackson, and offers a summary judgment mid-way through the drama that appears to reflect McCarthy's thought. "The darker picture is always the correct one," he assures his interlocutor, the uneducated ex-con who has stymied his suicide attempt. "When you read the history of the world you are reading a saga of bloodshed and greed and folly the import of which is impossible to ignore."

The structure of *The Road* is altogether different from that of *Blood Meridian* and *No Country*. The story is far more direct and presents few of the narrative puzzles that readers are obliged to solve in the other two books. At the center of the story, the dynamic that sets the plot in motion, is the relationship between the unnamed father and son who have left an unidentified city for "the coast," where the father believes conditions will be warmer and more survivable. The mother is dead, the apparent victim of suicide, having given up any hope for survival in a ruined landscape populated by killers, rapists and cannibals. The father, failing to persuade his wife to save herself, has set himself a task: "My job is to take care of you," he tells the son simply and directly, after killing a man near the road who had threatened the boy's life. "I was appointed to do that by God." Like the displaced persons of World War II, the formal designation of the armies of stateless refugees roaming Europe in 1945, father and son try to survive another, perhaps similar, catastrophe that has caused the known, recognizable world to collapse.

An unidentified global disaster has destroyed the planet, both the natural habitat and the structure of civil society. The disaster is environmental or climactic, or perhaps the aftermath of a nuclear war. The conditions the book renders--dead forests, absent wildlife, constantly blowing ash generated by fires on a near-continental scale, ash that accumulates on city streets and on the floors of

forests, the prevalence of "carbon fog," the vacant succession of "grey and nameless days" under "a noon sky blacker than the cellars of hell"--all of this is reminiscent of discussions of "nuclear winter" in the 1980s, when experts debated the blast effects of nuclear weapons. As a reader, it took me time to understand that the story occurs years after the calamity has happened, long after the daily routines of life have been replaced by brutality and cunning and force, when the cities and towns have been destroyed, when the country is simply divided between isolated groups of "good guys" who want to survive (with their moral selves intact) and the gangs of killers who seek to destroy them. The beginning of the tale is not, as I had thought on first reading, the immediate aftermath of the disaster. The story begins much later, when conditions have "settled" into what McCarthy apparently considers the true state of nature in its darkest and starkest terms, the condition into which people will drop, and drop "naturally," when the restraints of custom and law have fallen away and chance and necessity rule.

Because of the limited range of the story and the characters who people it, the reader struggles with a certain claustrophobia. It is a labor to read the novel attentively when two lone characters exposed to hunger and cold for over 200 pages cope with incipient illness, the absence of companions, and gangs of killers. Very little action takes place and few other characters are introduced. The father, determined to protect his son and preserve his life, makes his way through vacant

fields and forests, semi-destroyed, "looted and exhausted" cities, abandoned shorelines, depopulated small towns with their decayed houses and exposed cellars, where decomposing corpses can be seen floating in stagnant pools of water. The father discovers in one scene a row of heads that has been set up on the top of a wall, "all faced alike, dried and carved with their taut grins and shrunken eyes." The skulls are lined with "runic slogans," "creeds misspelled," "crude tattoos," a display evidently intended as a warning to competing gangs. Later in the narrative, the father and son come upon a long-abandoned old-fashioned pharmacy with a food counter, and find a desiccated human head with a baseball cap on backwards that has been carefully placed under the plastic lid of a cake holder. He had "come to see a message in each such late history," McCarthy writes, "a message and a warning, and so this tableau of the slain and the devoured did prove to be." This is the Biblical language other readers of the novel have commented upon, with its hint of God communicating through burning bushes and pillars of fire. The father invokes the deity as grounds for protecting his son, but McCarthy offers no evidence of a benevolent presence active in the world. What the reader finds instead are "common migratory killers," the occasional harmless straggler, gangs of cannibals who occupy territory and must be avoided, most of whom present a brave new world of constant menace, in a novel where images of atrocity have become as unremarkable and routine as a televised sporting event.

The father protects his son, as does the stranger who appears at the end of the novel. Constituted societies of almost any kind protect offspring because the young are the means of creating a future and envisioning continuity. In *The Road*, where father and son chance upon a charred, headless infant roasting on a spit, the sense of a continuing society has disappeared, and little but day-by-day survival matters for the organized gangs.

The father traverses the land with the acquired skills of a veteran, somewhat like Llewellyn Moss in *No Country*, avoiding detection. That has become his vocation, surviving and protecting his son. When they come upon a "roadrat" who threatens the boy, the father quickly explains to the tattered stranger the parts of the brain that will be destroyed if he has to shoot him--the frontal lobe, the colliculus, and the temporal gyrus, which will be reduced to "soup." When asked by the killer if he is a doctor, the father answers simply (and truthfully) "I'm not anything." Truthfully, because professions no longer matter.

John Hillcoat directed the movie version of *The Road* and has tried to break up the narrative, but not altogether successfully; the muted sex scene in the movie in particular seems out of place. Novels, of course, employ dialogue, but a novelist can also depend on the narrative power of language to carry the story. Inevitably, the filmed version of the story lacks the resonant language McCarthy exploits to suggest the presence of higher worlds. Viggo Mortenson plays the father, and a

child-actor named Kodi Smit-McPhee, the son. Robert Duvall has been cast as the stooped, harmless, elderly man the father and son come across on the road, a semi-blind Tiresias who says in the novel--and offers a similar remark in the movie--"I knew this was coming." There is only one distinct flashback in the novel to the post-disaster world, in that darkened, unidentified city or town, where the mother of the boy intently offers her husband a justification of suicide and explains her unwillingness to continue; the lines in the movie are drawn directly from the novel. She declares to the father, "We're not survivors. We're the walking dead in a horror film." He continues to plead with her and she says,

Sooner or later they will catch us and they will kill us. They will rape me. They'll rape him. They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us and you won't fact it. You would rather wait for it to happen.

In the movie, a number of flashback scenes recur presenting a young and beautiful Charlize Theron, tableaux that reflect both normal life of the couple and their post-disaster struggle, after the son has been born. These flashbacks introduce color and life and sex into the story; they draw on one episode in the novel but also fragments of dreams the father has of an earlier life, many years before that he barely apprehends: "Rich dreams now that he was loathe to wake from." But he also believes that "each memory recalled must do some violence to its origins...So be sparing. What you alter in the remembering has yet a reality, known or not."

Some readers will decide that McCarthy intends *The Road* to be seen as a religious allegory. The road the father and son are traversing will immediately remind readers of Dante and the opening lines of the *Comedy*, and the novel offers references to pilgrims and penitents. "My job is to take care of you," the father declares to his son, shortly after killing a man who threatened the boy's life. "I was appointed to do that by God." "We're carrying the fire," the man says to his son, with its inevitable corollary of warmth and light. But unlike the *Comedy*, there are no dependable guides in *The Road*, where only the parties that have organized for killing claim any authority. An early horrifying scene draws the father to a house in the country where people are chained to a basement wall while a corpse has been placed on a mattress, "his legs gone to the hip and his stumps blackened and burnt." Later on father and son observe at a distance an army of killers moving on the road armed with crude but effective mace and lances, followed by women and slaves in harness who are drawing wagons "with goods of war" and "a consort of catamites...fitted in dogcollars and yoked each to each." In the parlance of the novel, these are "the bad guys" who have banded together in gangs and command a floating sovereignty over a country that "is looted, ransacked, ravaged." The cities, what remains of them, will soon be controlled "by cores of blackened looters who tunneled among the ruins" carrying off whatever there is to be used or consumed; whatever food they leave behind will be poisoned. "The good guys" are the

isolated remnants--the father and son--on guard against everyone else. An inferno that lacks a paradise, it is not a propitious setting for the regeneration of life.

There is little emphasis on this in the movie, and indeed the scenes near the end of the story when the pair reach the coast--which one is never specified--seem to point in a different, perhaps pagan direction. In the novel, the ocean "is vast and cold and shifting heavily like a slowly heaving vat of slag and then the gray squall line of ash." Renderings of the ocean in the movie are not as persistently heavy but are frequent enough to suggest another odyssey, the water-borne one of Odysseus, who had a crew he hoped to bring safely back to Ithaca; he also encounters a cannibal, the Cyclops, whom he ultimately destroys. But the Mediterranean of Homer's age is a pristine, fertile, life-generating (if dangerous) body of water, while the oceans in *The Road* are as contaminated, lifeless, and sterile as the land.

Homer's tale ends with the unification of Penelope, Telemachus and Odysseus, the wanderer's family. McCarthy offers a version of that, and it is one of the most moving passages in the novel. *No Country for Old Men* ends with a recollected bond of father and son, also united by fire, when Sheriff Bell recounts on the final page of the novel (omitted from the movie), a powerful dream of his long-dead father:

It was like we was both back in older times and I was in horseback goin through this pass in the mountains. It was cold and there was snow on the ground and he rode past me and kept on goin. Never said nothin. He just rode on past. And

he had this blanket wrapped around him and he had his head down. And when he rode past I see he was carrying fire in a horn the way people used to do. And I could see the horn from the light inside of it. About the color of the moon. And in the dream I knew that he was goin on ahead and that he was fixin to make a fire somewhere in all that dark and all that cold. And I knew that whenever I got there he would be there.

When the father dies at the end of *The Road*, another man, a stranger, "a veteran of old skirmishes, bearded, scarred across the cheek and the bone stove and the one eye wandering," comes out of the woods and up the road to confront the bereft son. His father by then has been dead for three days. The son holds onto his pistol. The stranger, wounded and matter-of-fact but also kindly, invites the hesitant boy to join him and his wife and their two children, becoming in effect a member of their family . He explains that the son can take his chances on "the road," where he will almost certainly die, or join his family. When the boy hesitates, the father, hard-bitten from his struggles, comments that "There was some discussion even about whether to come after you at all."

The most effective passage in *The Road* (the novel) becomes, regrettably, the weakest scene in the movie. The stranger in the novel, like other figures, lacks a name, because names are attached to histories and identities that no longer matter. Moses was a stranger in a strange land, and Hamlet instructs Horatio "to bid the stranger welcome"; the stranger introduced by McCarthy is injured but decisive. In the movie, unfortunately, he wanders down the shore of the ocean and

speaks to the boy in a somewhat wan monotone. He lacks the gravity and weight of the character he is based on. The mother who embraces the son at the end--on the beach, with the ocean in the background--lacks gravity as well, and in an image of remarkable absurdity and sentimentality, John Hillcoat has chosen to end the movie with a tableau of the wife, father and two other children accompanied by a dog. The animal comes at the end of a story where starvation is rife, and anything edible, including human flesh, is greedily and readily consumed.

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