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Patrick Damien O'Connor

- 1 The role of philosophy in the work of Cormac McCarthy has been examined in a variety of contexts. For several decades this scholarship, naturally interdisciplinary, has revolved around issues concerning existentialism, theological and religious questions, post-structural readings of power, and Nietzschean interpretations which see McCarthy's work as shorthand for the search for transcendent meaning in a meaningless world. One could thus say philosophy is crucial for understanding the ethical outlook of McCarthy. Placing McCarthy's work in a philosophical context allows a richer account of his literature. Much philosophical work on McCarthy characterizes his reflections as a direct response to philosophical and political themes such as the post-theological, neoliberalism, late capitalism, deindustrialization, violence, jurisprudence and mortality. Specifically, there is important work that helps us to understand McCarthy in a philosophical register. Writers such as Leo Daugherty, Dianne Luce, David Holloway, and Petra Mundik read McCarthy through the optic of philosophy, Gnosticism, religion and mysticism, and Marxism. Without diminishing the value of these exceptionally important works, I am here more interested in providing a method through which it is possible to examine McCarthy's work in a more strictly ethical sense. I want to examine how McCarthy's literature provides its own unique response to very traditional philosophical questions of ethics, ontology, epistemology, and aesthetics.
- 2 It is important from the outset to realize that we cannot classify McCarthy within any traditional philosophical category. McCarthy's literature works at the intersection of traditional philosophical categories. For instance, in this essay, I will look at how McCarthy evokes and subverts metaphysical questions about the nature of the material universe in order to make specific claims about the nature of ethics and mortality. The value of my approach is that it allows a novel way to understand McCarthy's ethical concerns. While scholars such as David Holloway and Alberto Siani have already proposed that McCarthy's literature is geared towards undermining the centrality of human beings and our values, with a view towards placing humans in the wider context of nature,

environment, and the material and economic production of the world we inhabit, my analysis allows a distinct account of how McCarthy's representation of the material world informs his ethical and ontological vision of humans as ethical beings.¹

- 3 More specifically, I argue that Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) presents an anti-metaphysics which emerges from the consequences of the material destruction of the world. *The Road* therefore offers a reflection on a type of philosophical materialism. This is not to say that McCarthy can be called a materialist or metaphysician, but is rather to argue that his work exists in a hinterland between. Hence, it is necessary to show how traditional metaphysical questions about the nature of justice, the soul, and values meld with the brutally indifferent reality of the material universe. This, I argue, is the key to understanding *The Road* specifically, and McCarthy's philosophical concerns more generally. Firstly, I will attempt to explain how *The Road* works to confront this material logic. Secondly, I will develop McCarthy's material logic through examples from the novel, and finally I will specify how questions of materialism show the ways in which the novel stages questions of memory and community. *The Road* is particularly instructive for examining these themes. With the novel's staging of the material destruction of the world, the brutal consequences this presents for the protagonists, and their forlorn struggle to establish ethical values, offer an exemplar to articulate McCarthy's philosophical concerns.

1. The Physics of the Damned

- 4 How is it possible to configure materialism in *The Road*? Basically, materialism is the philosophical thesis wherein all manifestations of life are subordinate to processes involved in the organization of matter. The different philosophical registers of materialism include material monism, the philosophical proposition that all things can be reduced to one substance, such as matter; there is also historical materialism in the Marxist sense, where the progression of history is determinable by material relations of economics and production. In addition, and a key theme in *The Road*, is the question of consumer materialism where humans are defined through the consumption of material commodities. In his 2006 appearance on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, McCarthy clearly voices his indifference to consumer materialism. The common denominator of the different materialisms is that all explanation must be a direct result of physical interactions. Vital or spiritual accounts are not possible. In other interpretations, materialism can offer a more sophisticated account of the world than simple reductionism. Philosophers of science call this physicalism, where material processes are complex rather than simple, including quarks, forces, dark matter, space-time, and thermodynamics. This physicalism is perhaps more relevant to McCarthy since he is neither a reductionist nor a spiritualist, and he does have a literary and philosophical purchase. From Plato onwards, the material world is tangled, twisted and subterranean, a shadow of the real.
- 5 How then is *The Road* a novel about materialism, when its setting is unambiguously the aftermath of the material destruction of the world? The answer is complicated. The world the father and son inhabit is certainly material, made up of stuff, denuded of any vital or spiritual force. The biosphere in the novel is saturated in ash; the apocalyptic landscape is a by-product of materialism. However, this is certainly a type of material monism at work. The world of the novel is reduced to one indistinguishable substance. In *The Road*, material things are becoming indistinct. There are no longer distinct objects with distinct

form. Plants, trees, roads, coins, buildings are all faced with the prospect of becoming a homogenous material whole, where no object is individuated. Baruch Spinoza sees such indistinction as the foundation for a form of pantheism, where all bodies are not different objects, but different configurations of one substance: God or nature.² However, I will argue here that this interpretation is not possible within the anti-metaphysics presented in *The Road*. The uniform ash which attaches itself to all objects, persistently sticking to all things including the air itself, only reveals further forms of elemental matter and no benign spiritual substance which can offer salvation to the characters or even the universe itself.

- 6 McCarthy, rather than erecting a theological cosmology, presents in *The Road* an inverted cosmology. Here there is no longer a world of substantial things, and such things have no guarantee of a spiritual foundation. Instead, things are presented as sinking into a uniform void. The aesthetic of *The Road* that emerges through the material destruction of the world is fascistic; wanton material destruction reveals uniformity and homogeneity. The world in which the father and son dwell revels in a mix of destruction and homogeneity; communities in the novel are closed orgiastic blood cults, and innumerable survivors exist in cannibal camps becoming indistinguishable from each other. In this novel more than any other, McCarthy tackles head-on the power of nothingness and destruction, as they formally manifest in uniformity. The father worries: “everything depended on reaching the coast, yet waking in the night he knew that all of this was empty and had no substance to it” (29). This is a world where: “The frailty of everything revealed at last” (28). At the core of all things there is, as Maurice Blanchot would have it, a mute and anonymous void. *The Road* is an exemplar of Blanchot’s theory of literature. Here, language and the literary text operate without ownership and are “addressed to no one, which has no centre, and which reveals nothing” (Blanchot, *The Space of Literature* 26). To put it in terms more relevant to McCarthy’s fiction, the personal, collective, and objective movement of all life propels itself towards death. For Blanchot, when all things become nothing or absolute death, it becomes impossible to discern purpose or significance. In *The Road*, the creation of value and purpose is only valuable to the extent that we negate the nothingness that accompanies our existence. This evacuation of substance illuminates McCarthy’s anti-metaphysics most acutely. McCarthy certainly thinks there is human participation in something larger than ourselves. However, that something greater is the material negation of the universe.
- 7 In scientific terms, we can hypothesize how this maps onto the second law of thermodynamics, where entropy, the measure of disorder inherent in any system, increases.³ Basically, all systems, anything that exists, including the universe, progressively devolve into a state of disorder. The more energy in the universe is spread out, the harder it is to use energy in the construction of systems and life. To understand McCarthy, it is necessary to see humans as in some way participating in this type of interminable destruction. However, we must retain caution regarding the aptness of using thermodynamics as a literary metaphor. This is because thermodynamics is easily conflated with a Gothic metaphor of the beauty of decay and degeneration. The reason thermodynamics is richer metaphorically, is because it gives expression to how systems decay and construct themselves. The way systems conserve energy and structure, despite entropy, is a suitable metaphor relevant to *The Road*, since this is a novel that valorizes neither the theological spirit of life, nor the nihilism of absolute death, but instead attempts to understand the complicity of materiality and its dissolution. Indeed, the

struggles of the father and son exist at the threshold of life and death, thus giving *The Road* a unique philosophical aesthetic in its own right—one neither metaphysical, nor radically materialist.

- 8 More specifically, the intermingling of life and death is evident in the disintegration of objects in the novel. Take for example McCarthy's description of a swamp:

A dead swamp. Dead trees standing out of the grey water trailing grey and relic haggmoss. The silky spills of ash against the curbing. He stood leaning on the gritty concrete rail. Perhaps in the world's destruction it would be possible at last to see how it was made. Oceans, mountains. The ponderous counterspectacle of things ceasing to be. The sweeping waste, hydroptic and coldly secular. The silence. (*The Road* 293)

- 9 Despite the spectacle of cosmic devastation, the obvious anti-creationism, we still glimpse the skeletal and formal structure of the world. All systems susceptible to the loss of energy are simultaneously systems that maintain a relative identity over time. Even at the level of absolute destruction, just before everything sinks into the void, existence itself offers a "counterspectacle." In the world's destruction, "things ceasing to be" have their own life. Therefore, McCarthy cannot be stringently categorized as either a materialist or a spiritualist; he is not on the side of immanence nor transcendence. If theologically we might say we participate in something larger than ourselves—in energy, or the cosmos—then for McCarthy, what we participate in is the inherent violence of a universe living on borrowed time:

He'd had this feeling before, beyond the numbness and the dull despair. The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true. More fragile than he would have thought. How much was gone already. The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality. Drawing down like something trying to preserve heat. In time to wink out forever. (*The Road* 93)

- 10 McCarthy offers a fundamentally tragic and pessimistic ontology.⁴ Reality itself is neutral, inhospitable and cold; the material universe offers no meaning or purpose. "Truth has no temperature," as Malkina suggests in McCarthy's *The Counselor* (2013) (21). It is not just that the universe is indifferent; there is also a negativity attached to all things. We see this in *Suttree* (1979), in *Outer Dark* (1968), in *Blood Meridian* (1985), and it is represented by Chigurh in *No Country for Old Men* (2005). This perverse material logic is evident in *Suttree*, where Suttree, following Harrogate, descends into an anti-Cathedral beneath Knoxville. This "material negativity" persists throughout McCarthy's work, haunting all characters, objects and structures. Existence has no theological origin, only the possibility of systems and structures persisting in resistance to the impending material negation of the cosmos. As Markus Wierschem suggests:

the full extent of McCarthy's syncretic vision is revealed in condensed form: the fall of the planet, the decline of civilization, and the loss of meaning are inseparable from each other. In the aesthetics of *The Road*, notions of thermodynamic, cultural and informational entropy form a programmatic whole with its apocalyptic and secular dimensions. ("At a Crossroads" 179)

- 11 The broader dissolution of the universe is intractable and can only be mitigated at best. *Suttree*, for example, finds a way to coexist with this.⁵
- 12 The ethical force of *The Road* develops through the way father and son can sustain ethical possibility despite their predicament and the brutal reality of the cosmos. This resistance to the theological origin of the universe incorporates all forms of spiritualism. Spiritual

materialisms and versions of pantheisms such as, for example, the pantheism of Spinoza, are entangled with theological ideas of eternity, or the idea that all things are derived from one eternal substance. Conventional theologies, as well as pantheistic ones, are ultimately without time, without becoming. As the boy grasps early in *The Road*: “Ever is a long time. But the boy knew what he knew. That ever is no time at all” (28). In eternity, nothing can happen or come to be: there is no temporal life, no violence, and no contradiction. The boy is a symbol of temporal and mortal life, exposed to violence and risk, standing in stark opposition to an eternity where nothing is possible. Additionally, the avatar of complete hopelessness in the novel is the mother. The mother desires eternal peace as the only rational route to salvation: “my only hope is for eternal nothingness and I hope it with all my heart” (58-59). The mother, exhibiting a brutally rational theology, sees the inevitable presence and the absolute death of eternity as the best of all possible worlds, and the best possible outcome for all. Conversely, the boy and his father act respectively as symbols of the future and past. The ability of the father and the son to survive within a precarious world, for the father to turn the past into the future through his son, and for the son to take up the possibility of the future despite the incessant dissolution which inhabits all things and structures, gives the novel its distinct ethical outlook. *The Road* acknowledges the complicity of life and death, as well as the material structure and decay within the ethical struggles of the central protagonists of the novel.

- 13 While there is certainly a sense that humans are caught up in wider material processes, we must not be tempted to replace this with spiritualism of any sort, as this would diminish the dramatic potency of the text, as well as diminishing *The Road*'s unique attempt to articulate a mortal ethics outside strictly metaphysical or materialist frameworks.⁶ For the aesthetic staging of the novel, the material world of things sinks into a uniform material void. McCarthy resists a strict material reductionism, as much as he resists conventional theological explanations of the universe. This resistance is decisive for articulating the unique ethical focus of the novel, and for his attempt to think through ethical affirmation despite the material absurdity of the universe. As such, *The Road* presents the aftermath of materialism; the material universe is decaying, and the world of *The Road* is the apogee of nihilism, with an absolute void manifested openly in a world without distinction. Philosophically, *The Road* thus endorses neither a conventional theology nor a spiritual materialism.⁷ *The Road*'s philosophical power emerges from elaborating how humans can have resistance, transformation, possibility, creation, a future and hope alongside and despite the material negation of the universe.
- 14 One might object that the anti-metaphysical reading I am proposing veers too much towards the Godless. However, the point is that McCarthy is offering neither a conventional theology nor a crude atheism. It is fair to say *The Road* frequently uses sacramental language, particularly in relation to the aura of the boy. For example, the boy is likened to a golden chalice: “good enough to house a god” (78). His father is convinced he is “appointed by God” to care for the child (80). From the outset the recurring symbol of fire is present, with the boy considered as equivalent to a lit candle. The boy is a “tiny paradise” (159). Most obviously, the boy is considered equivalent to the Eucharist as a messianic Host watching a flake of snow fall, “expiring like the last host in christendom” (15). The novel ends with an image of a fish, which could be read as Christian.⁸ However, while sacramental language is used, it would be a non-sequitur to suggest such sacramental imagery endorses a theological desire to transcend material life

or that the values that emerge from the struggle for mortal survival are redundant simply because there is sacramental imagery in the novel.⁹ The function of religious terminology in *The Road* operates to make the empty material universe more palpable. McCarthy uses sacramental language to make a clear ethical point. The boy is a symbol of inherent goodness. However, this goodness is brittle and fragile, even if inherent. It is premised on the contingency of the future, and the material struggles of the protagonists. By the conclusion of *The Road* it is clear that the boy, like all the others, is not spiritually elevated and immune from very real material needs. The boy must face the prospect of starvation and its attendant spiritual and moral degradation once the scavenging of ever-dwindling resources and canned goods expires. The world cannot be redeemed. This is underlined in the final words of the novel:

Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their back 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. (306)

- 15 The order of the cosmos is broken and irreparable, and the possibility of reaching a redeemed state is firmly precluded. Thus, all of the sacramental images in *The Road* are entwined with notions of expiration and death.¹⁰ At the opening of the novel we see the father wake: “He pushed away the plastic tarpaulin and raised himself in the stinking robes and blankets and looked toward the east for any light but there was none” (1). This could easily be read as a reference to the Magi, and yet it is clear that the messianic is entwined with the profane, as no redemption is present. It is wholly necessary for the ethical consistency of the novel that sacramental iconography is entwined with images of dissolution and decay. The mingling of structures and dissolution give the novel its distinct perspective on mortal ethics and is thus exceptionally important for the moral fulcrum of the novel, as we cannot literally take the child to be a Host, since what separates the father and the boy from others is that they do not eat anybody in any circumstances. After all, in communion, the divine Host is literally the divine-made mortal flesh which is to be incorporated via ingestion.
- 16 Perhaps a more obvious example of the dissolution of the sacramental is the use of tabernacle in the novel. The boy is represented as a tabernacle. Tabernacles are usually ornate, bejeweled, and considered as sacred and inviolable places where the Host is kept. As such this would suggest the boy is drawing on some immortal spirit. However, the tabernacle, as an image, even within a Biblical context is not necessarily devoted to evoking an immortal spirit. The tabernacle was a tent, or a meeting place; in short, it was a precarious and moveable structure in the wilderness that provides temporary respite from the wasteland. In addition, the tabernacle is also a nautical term.¹¹ When the father “raise[s] his weeping eyes and see[s] him standing there in the road looking back at him from some unimaginable future, glowing in that waste like a tabernacle” (293), the tabernacle as a structure is the future itself: it is a metaphor for the future, orientation, and navigation that is fragile rather than inviolable, and is not as susceptible to material decay as anything else is in the universe. The sacramental is evident in *The Road* only to the extent that the sacramental is elemental, and therefore of a deeper, more profound wisdom.

- 17 How then is McCarthy's anti-metaphysics manifest in the novel? The process of indistinction is reflected in the formal presentation of *The Road*, particularly evident in the placelessness of the text. As much as there is no time or future in the text, there is also no sense of space, i.e. a space distinct and localized. Certainly, the setting is somewhere in the South-Eastern United States, but mostly the action is non-descript, anchorless, and without location. Or as the father suggests: "Everything uncoupled from its shoring. Unsupported in the ashen" (10). World and place are largely indistinct, the setting mute and anonymous: "The blind dogs of the sun in their running. The crushing black vacuum of the universe. And somewhere two hunted animals trembling like ground-foxes in their cover. Borrowed time and borrowed world and borrowed eyes with which to sorrow it" (138). This quotation reveals an anti-metaphysics of the heat-death of the universe. The universe itself runs, but runs on borrowed time. The ethical dimension of the novel takes shape against this backdrop, where the struggle of life and the ability to endure are only meaningful in direct confrontation with the crushing black vacuum of the universe. What further consequences can we draw from this anti-metaphysics? There are three main points where the consequences become apparent: memory, community, and structure.

2. The Dissolution of Memory

- 18 McCarthy's anti-metaphysics is evident in attempts to assert the psychological coherence of memory. Material destruction and negativity are entwined with the psychological coherence and self-identity of characters. As the father looks at a forest fire, he commends the injunction to remember, as a form of prayer. There is something pathetically defiant about the father's nostalgic desire to retrieve past archives and conventions. The father draws succor from memory: "Make a list. Recite a Litany. Remember" (32). In addition, the father attests to the desire to arrest the flow of memory, to make time stop, to construct fortified images immune to the brutal world in which he exists. For example, he remembers his wife at the theatre: "She held his hand in her lap and he could feel the tops of her stockings through the thin stuff of her summer dress. Freeze this frame. Now call down your dark and your cold and be damned" (18). The father positively constructs memory; the struggle to remember and to reinforce the past is simultaneous with his struggle to be ethical. The preservation of cultural memory, customs, and inherited tradition is all a father without a future can do to teach a child values in the face of cold reality, offering relief from his perpetual realism and pragmatism: "You forget what you want to remember and you remember what you want to forget" (11). He looks forward retroactively: "This is the day to shape the days upon" (12). Past images allow the father to regenerate; there is something inherently conservative about his retrieval of the past in the face of material chaos. However, the father is also dimly aware that his memory is not absolute. He sees that "each memory recalled must do some violence to its origin. As in a party game. Say the word and pass it on. So be sparing. What you alter in remembering has yet a reality, known or not" (139). The father's partial insight is very telling, as the brute reality of his situation impinges on his desire to revel in a lost past, or a quasi-eternity unsusceptible to the destruction of the universe. Memory, and the yearning for the psychological coherence of an individual mind over time, is just as susceptible to the relentless negativity of the world as anything else. The truth is indifferent to the father's desire for his past to conform to the future.

The reality of the material world ensures every memory is entwined with its own dissolution.

- 19 The father most of all represents the struggle to connect with other humans. The urgent pressures of survival mitigate his attempt to construct an enduring legacy between past, present and future. For example, the father finds it threatening when the boy asks “him questions about the world that was for him not even a memory. There is no past” (55). Without a past, there is also no future. There are: “No lists of things to be done. The day providential to itself. The hour. There is no later. This is later. All things of grace and beauty such that one holds them to one’s heart have a common provenance in pain. Their birth in grief and ashes” (55-56). The difficulty for the father stems from his realization of a world where only survival matters: all that is palpable is the now, and the immediate task-by-task effort to find food, shelter and clothing. This is why he leaves the picture of his wife on the road. He is conflicted about the value of maintaining a sense of the past, and the idea that he should have “tried to keep their lives in some way but he didnt know how” (56).
- 20 The very material of memory is infected with the broader global and cosmological collapse of the universe. The father’s struggle to focus on the immediate present, accompanied by the temptation to surrender to an idealized version of the past, is ever-present in the novel. For example, the desire to arrest the past is evident when the father returns to his family home, finding marks where Christmas cards hung from a mantelpiece. These small marks in the material world illustrate the father’s desire to arrest the passage of time, ensuring a coherency of his sense of self; figuratively, his memory of home is pinned in place. The son’s resistance to entering the old family home expresses his reluctance to luxuriate in lost memories, but also that he sees possibility rather than a simple past, or hopeless present. What the father fails to see is the boy’s own form of pragmatism. This pragmatism manifests in the boy’s moral armature; the boy is always other-focused and forward-looking. The boy’s ethical disposition is maintained not just in his capacity to discern others, but when he discerns the inherent risk of encountering other people and their various possibilities. The material world continues on, survives, imprinting its remains without reifying them. Certainly, the father accepts the reality of violence, but this is purely with a view to protecting the micro-community of father and son. What distinguishes the boy’s elevated ethical status is his effort to construct some meaningful future encompassing others *despite* the inherent violence and negativity of the universe.
- 21 The boy also accepts the ruthless reality of ethical materialism. This is because the material world provides the imprint of pain and cruelty. It is because of the ruthless material negativity of the universe that we are ethical. The father struggles with his son’s ethical awareness, seeing such moral perceptiveness as an impediment to the instrumental realities of survival. However, the boy’s superior moral vision emerges from the tragic acceptance of violence at the core of all things, from the acceptance of the inescapable fact that any attempt to construct security, community, and civilization is irredeemably precarious and subject to the broader dissolution of the world. Only violence, contestation and struggle can help discern the ethical illumination of the future, rather than the pragmatic realism of the father. In a 1992 interview with Richard Woodward, McCarthy argues precisely this point, stating that the primary peace of human perfection is not desirable.¹²

- 22 The desire of the father to see in his son a vestige of divine perfection, is necessary for confronting the material needs of a violent world, and provides his motivation to prolong his life as a survivor, and not commit suicide as the child's mother did. However, the father exemplifies the logic that McCarthy outlines in the Woodward interview, in that his nostalgic desire for perfection and peace is inherently connected to the empty universe. The boy represents an ethical alternative. He has a capacity to discern others, the future, consequences, to discern risk and danger, and other people and their possibilities.¹³ The boy's intransigence to indulging in the past is irreversible. For the boy, the material world continues on, it survives, human imprints remain and endure, and possibility is very real. The boy chastises the father for leaving the thief where he was. "I wasn't going to kill him, he said. But the boy didn't answer. They rolled themselves in the blankets and lay there in the dark... He could tell by his breathing that the boy was awake and after a while the boy said: But we did kill him" (278). The boy's acute moral perception understands that the thief is as good as dead. The boy must deepen his moral vision, which encompasses the future, incorporating consequences and outcomes as well as possibility and is elevated above the father's urgent need to deal with immediate threat in the present. Here the boy's ethics give expression to the temporal span of mortal life, how fraught it is, and the fact that human endurance is entwined with material vulnerability, which itself is the very condition of ethical life.
- 23 The father resists McCarthy's anti-metaphysics in *The Road*. His effort to construct fortified images within memory is radically susceptible to dispersal. The realization that "each memory recalled must do some violence to its origin" undermines the father's patriarchal urge to conserve, to maintain the past, to restore order, to protect his ward (139). Ultimately, in this context, McCarthy delivers an anti-conservative message: one cannot satisfactorily retrieve the past, there is no golden age, and any attempt to construct memory, to fortify it, to make it immune from contamination, is automatically negated. The father acknowledges as much when he sees the boy as alien. The reason it is essential that the father is differentiated from the boy, like all fathers, is that the son comes from a future world, one that is as alien and monstrous as another planet. The moral force of the boy emerges precisely because he is not of the present, and ultimately not of the father's lost world: "A being from a planet that no longer existed. The tales of which were suspect. He could not construct for the child's pleasure the world he'd lost without constructing the loss as well and he thought perhaps the child had known this better than he" (163). In terms of the relation of memory and matter, the boy demonstrates that the future is as much a part of the present as the past is. Memory cannot revel in a lost past, in an immaterial psychological recollection, but to be real, memory is dependent on the reality of past and prospective material traces.
- 24 McCarthy draws a contrast between the father and son existing at a fraught nexus of past, present and future, and the mute eternal void which the world sinks towards. The novel presents an ethics of legacy and survival, asking how we can materially improve the world where we are, with a view to improving the material conditions of humans. The ethical injunction the boy represents is the simple demand to help people. He transfigures the father's pragmatism, shifting focus from the brute and immediate pragmatism of survival towards thinking of different ways to help improve the material conditions of other people, irrespective of their pragmatic use. The boy's tenacious refrain to "carry the fire" is an attempt to give his father's pragmatism a future.

- 25 As the false prophet Ely suggests in the novel, even the gods are lost without memory or legacy (178-183). All things, even divinity itself are subject to the material negativity present in the cosmos. Ely is an excellent example of the anti-metaphysical logic of the text. This spiritually impoverished and “threadbare Buddha” joins in a long list of ambiguous soothsayers in McCarthy’s fiction. Ely is the anti-prophet that is apt for the dying universe in which the characters reside. Ely revels in absolute nihilism: “Where men cant live gods fare no better. 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. Things will be better when everybody’s gone” (183). Such messianic nihilism sees humans as the ultimate aberration; the universe is simply better off without us. But if we probe deeper, we see this is because of our desire to elevate ourselves above the material world in the vain hope of transcending the material destruction at the core of all things. Ely claims he predicted the apocalypse: “I knew this was coming.... People were always getting ready for tomorrow. I didnt believe in that. Tomorrow wasn’t getting ready for them. It didn’t even know they were there” (178-179). For Ely, there is disjunction between humans’ rational and controlled expectations of a future state of affairs based on past memories and the chaotic reality which is simultaneously unfolding. Ely represents the rejection of the forlorn effort that future outcomes can be subordinate to the present; humanity’s attempt to own the future, to plan, to implement projects, to affirm past certainty in the predictability of events, exposes a fundamental human vanity in the face of a chaotic and indifferent universe. As such, Ely sees the denial of the inherent destructibility of the world and future events as central to the very destructive tendencies that lead humans to think they can transcend time and truth. As Ely suggests, the Gods only have power where humans exist. The desire to transmute our vain desire for order into the eternal, and with it immortal life, separates humans from the desire to care for the future of the world itself, and for the future of others. For this reason, the function of Ely should be read in a more sympathetic light than other commentators suggest.¹⁴ Ely sees the comic side of death; death is left on the road, with no one left to kill and with death’s days being numbered. Here we are left with a world of pure death. Without death, there are no humans, and without humans there is no sense of possibility (184). The tragedy and comedy of *The Road* resides in the dearth of human connection, and Ely’s symbolic function explains the ultimate absurdity and folly of humans’ inability to connect not just with immediate peers, but with humans of the past and future.
- 26 In order to understand the ethical dimension of the novel, it is crucial to understand the interrelation of legacy and survival. As with many of McCarthy’s other works, most overtly *Suttree*, *The Gardener’s Son* (1976), *The Stonemason* (1995), *The Border Trilogy*, and *No Country for Old Men*, a dominant theme is generational dysfunction. A recurring theme for McCarthy is the capacity for humans to negotiate enduring human values across a fraught temporal span. More specifically, in *The Road* this generational dysfunction is manifested through the parents and the child. The mother represents a lost present, the father the brute instrumentalist survival of tradition and the past, and the child represents possibility and the future. These characters inhabit a lost universe where past, present, and future have no continuity or duration in the face of the relentless material negativity of the post-apocalyptic world.
- 27 The ambiguity of the father is that he is struggling to see the point of engaging in the desperate struggle for survival, to such a degree that he loses sight of the idea of possibility, of activity that can be enriching and transformative, and of creating a future

world worthy of his son. This is never more evident than when he struggles between his memory of the past and his material present. The ethical implication of the father's struggle with memory is that there is a different relation to memory necessary for constructing an ethical response to the world. McCarthy shows that we ought not to aim for the needless conservation of memory, but instead need to look for what makes memory endure, rather than succumbing to the nostalgic desire to conserve the past, and attempting to impose something that we can "shape the days upon" (12). The tragedy of the father is the trauma of losing the temporal arc of human life. The value of memory is premised on the ability not to retain a past that never was, but to see that what is of value is only valuable insofar as it can be lost: "He'd not have thought the value of the smallest thing predicated on a world to come. It surprised him. That the space which these things occupied was an expectation" (199).

- 28 The ethical import of memory is intertwined with testimony in *The Road*, and testimony is a form of promise that stories can continue to the future, that they will remain "the good guys." Memory, as Henri Bergson shows, requires continuity to work; otherwise one could not discriminate between the past and the present. As Bergson designates it, memory is a form of duration (126-128). Memory is as real as the stories which allow memory to continue to the future. It is necessary that there is a minimal structure in a memory to support continuity, and endurance in the face of the relentless negation of the flux of experience. Hence, we see the father's reticence and difficulty in telling stories of good guys and bad guys.
- 29 In the same way that the anti-metaphysics of the novel embellishes the action with the combination of structure and dissolution, this is also evident in the psychological coherence of the characters. Any memory not open to duration, to the present, to the future, cannot become intimate with the reality of pain, suffering and loss. The painful struggle for the persistence of memory in *The Road*, the sense that the past is premised on the future existing requires the intertwining of memory with promise. Hence narration is decisive in the novel. Stories of good guys and bad guys are defiant acts of creation. Injecting narrative into survival is an indefatigable form of creation in the face of a universe where all is dying. The mixture of life and death, of future and past, of creation and destruction, intermingle in *The Road*, and this mixture is necessary for the ethical stakes of the novel, as it negates the anti-metaphysical void at the core of the novel. Life is intimate with death, yet life draws fraught succor from the universe around it.

3. The Dissolution of Community

- 30 Another element of McCarthy's anti-metaphysics is McCarthy's representation of structure and community. The question of fortification and shelter is ever-present, working in tandem with the novel's reflection on the desirability of community.¹⁵ When father and son find a bunker full of supplies, McCarthy's anti-metaphysics is fully in evidence. The structure, although self-contained, fortified, a tiny survivalist bourgeois paradise, is clearly susceptible to violation since it did not offer protection to its creators. Any sense of fortification, of a structure that can shelter a group together, is premised on its own dissolution. For a brief period, the boy and the father find respite in a tiny mausoleum of forgotten consumer choices. However, one cannot consume one's way out of the apocalypse. Thus, any attempt at constructing a fortified structure remains essentially precarious. Any commitment to the formation of substance or structure is as

subject to destruction as the material universe itself. Nevertheless, an ambiguous dignity does emerge in committing to forming structures—physically, communally, even psychologically—that are resilient, and tenacious to the extent that they confront, challenge, construct and create in opposition to the dissolution of the material universe. While ostensibly the father and son are usually alone, everywhere there are traces of others: roads, gas stations, toy trucks, tracks in the tar, a can of Coca-Cola, a trailer full of cadavers. In line with the father's inherent suspicion of all possible encounters, he remains wary and resistant to the temptation which groups and structures offer. They remind him of the imminent possibility of meeting others and the dangers attendant to any encounter (McCarthy, *The Road* 48).

- 31 Communal structures as represented in *The Road* conform to the material logic developed in this essay. The suspicion of “gathering” can be understood in relation to what Blanchot considers as an unworking of identity. *The Road* is one of the great American anti-novels, drenched in destruction and negation, foreclosing easy resolution. The richness of the novel—character, plot, imagery, themes—emerges from the anonymous nothingness pervading the text. This is particularly evident concerning the formation of communal structures. For Blanchot, “Every being’s substance is contested without respite by every other being” (5). The truth of a community is its own incompleteness, insufficiency and interruption” (*The Unavowable Community* 9). *The Road* performs an emptying of community with a view to expressing a more universal depiction of human life. All protagonists in the novel do not know where to belong, socially or personally; people have forgotten how to co-exist. Any attempt to draw succor from communal gathering is only ever temporary. The ability to form a community, a group for mutual security, or even a cannibal militia, is automatically rendered suspect. McCarthy’s broader point is that the assertion of an absolute, consecrated community is impossible to instantiate from its inception.
- 32 Why might a rejection of community be a good thing? It is because there is a universalism in *The Road* which resists community. Alongside the mute placelessness of the novel, attempts to form community are considered suspect. We see the orgiastic fusion of the blood cults, where groupings and communities enslave prisoners, collections of roaming cannibals perpetuating enclosed communities with enforced abortions. Groups are seen to be dangerous, violent and untrustworthy, formed only for allegiances of defense and fortification. For example, when the father is fatally injured towards the end of the novel, his assailants desert each other. The final community offering aid to the boy is temporary; the boy treats with skepticism the matriarch’s religious overtures to talk to God. The matriarch affirms a theological eternity common to all humans which transcends time and space, imposing on the boy the idea of a “breath of God,” passing from “man to man through all of time” (306). However, the boy prefers to talk to “his father and he did talk to him and he didnt forget” (306). There is a form of faith in the novel; however, this is not faith in a theological eternity, but a faith in mortal survival.
- 33 The stakes of the rejection of community are necessary for configuring the ethical function of *The Road*. This is because *The Road* articulates a suspicion of types of communal life with a view to articulating a more universal form of being together, one where all humans have a sense of both inheritance and promise. Blanchot’s logic here applies to *The Road*: the truth of community is paradoxically its weakness, its incompleteness and insufficiency. Notwithstanding the micro-community of the father and son, the novel is generally hostile to the idea of humans being together. However, the comforts and solace

of community are only viable as far as they acknowledge the broader anti-metaphysics of the novel. McCarthy offers a form of universalism, one that paradoxically requires undermining community. McCarthy is seeking to find a more fundamental type of being together, one that transcends local determinations of identity. Determinations of community are not eternal but historically specific, valuable only when a community is tentative, and only to the extent that human goodness materially sustains humans in the face of a menacing future. There is no orgiastic fusion possible as we find in the blood cults of the novel; the cults form to perpetuate death, figuratively worshipping the new god of eternal death and negation.

- 34 The community of two which characterizes the father and the son must also dissolve. Formally, for the ethical force of the novel it is necessary the father dies. Their micro-community must dissolve in order that the promise of the future can endure. The dissolution of this micro-community is essential, permitting the mixing of life and death in the boy, who survives, remembers, and lives on with the memory of his dead father. McCarthy's depiction of mortal ethics in the novel comes to fruition in the closing scenes of *The Road*, where we see a minimal reconciliation of the temporal dimensions necessary for ethical life. The present, the future and now the past coexist in the boy. Faith in mortal survival permeates the novel rather than faith in the nihilism of eternity. Any form of continuity is premised on loss and mourning. Therefore, it would be unwise to read the boy joining a family at the end of the novel as McCarthy's unambiguous affirmation of the family unit. This is one community among many, haunted and vulnerable to the anonymous negativity that the novel performs.
- 35 Throughout the novel, McCarthy presents an anti-cartography, a geography of a world without borders. Thus, any markers of location are resolutely dissolved, encapsulated by the hollow and mocking shipwreck *Pajaro D'Esperanza* receding back into the world on the border of land and ocean. Indeed, symbols of navigation, i.e. objects which make people, places and the world visible and distinct, become redundant: the broken map, the sextant, the binoculars. This is ambiguous; now that the world is indistinct, we finally live in a borderless world, and ought to be free from the regressive proclivities of nativism, chauvinism and nationalism. However, this is not the case. Borders and divisions may have kept us civil, but of course they are the same borders that led to, or at least did not prevent, the cataclysm which precipitates the novel. This is seen when the father chastises the boy for worrying about everything: "You're not the one who has to worry about everything. The boy said something but he couldnt understand him. What? He said. He looked up, his wet and grimy face, Yes I am, he said. I am the one" (277). This is the boy acknowledging his future role: the burden is on him to "carry the fire" towards the future. The boy is one insofar as he is many. "Fire" is an elemental metaphor "for the practice of civility and ethics" (Cooper 234). This means that in addition to surviving he must take up the burden of the "fire" and attempt the impossible task of warranting the virtuous survival of the human species.¹⁶
- 36 It is important to be cautious here. It is impossible to draw an *absolute* distinction from the global nihilism which *The Road's* characters inhabit. This is because all characters are susceptible to the material negativity upon which the form, content, and narration of the novel are based. However, there is a minimal sense that humans can differentiate themselves from the cosmic nihilism and violence ever-present in McCarthy's work. While the father and the boy are ostensibly alone, the possibility remains of a different type of belonging. McCarthy endorses a form of universalism; everyone's possibility is the

father and son's possibility. The father and son are exemplars of the attempt to construct a meaningful endurance between past, present and future in the face of the material negativity of the universe. Their struggle is everybody's struggle and cannot be restricted to specific communities. This is precisely what is required to carry the burden of humanity to the future. This universal experience differentiates them from those who revel in the material destruction implicit to all things.

4. Mortal Ethics

37 There is an unambiguous material ethics on display in *The Road*. While McCarthy is not offering a naive materialist reductionism, there is a sense that human endeavor is caught up in the wider material processes of the world, which in *The Road* is the material decay of the world itself. In a direct reversal of a theological cosmos, the characters of the novel participate in the broader material dissolution of the universe. The consequences of this strange anti-metaphysics allow us to grasp more clearly the philosophical, ethical and political imaginary of *The Road*. This is particularly evident in relation to questions of structure, memory and the suspicion of community. *The Road* attempts to overcome the generational dysfunction of past, present and future in an effort to reconcile human destruction with possibility. The father must die for the boy to gain the wisdom and faith in mortal forms of survival. What survives is neither the Gods nor the eternal, but the material stories of ourselves, stories of how to help others in actual, real and physical ways. The resistance to luxuriating in memory and the past allows community to be overcome, to reveal something generically human. Therefore, *The Road* depicts a radical difference between those entrenched in cults and communities and those who are refugees, those without borders, those without walls. The attempt to form fortification, whether in community, belonging, or psychological coherence, is embedded in wider material processes; efforts to construct any form of resilience can only draw physical support from the confines of the material and existent world. Here, *The Road* expresses a desire for the universal: that which transcends belonging and community offers more resilience to human values than any community that immunizes itself to the implacable material absurdity of the universe.

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NOTES

1. A good example of how McCarthy is interpreted within a postmodern framework is available in Linda Woodson, "McCarthy's Heroes and the Will to Truth," as well as Philip A. Snyder and Delys W. Snyder, "Modernism, Postmodernism, and Language: McCarthy's Style," both of which appear in *The Cambridge Companion to Cormac McCarthy*. For a good account of how McCarthy utilises Gnostic philosophy and theology see Leo Daugherty, "Gravers False and True: *Blood Meridian* as Gnostic Tragedy." For the definitive exploration of the question of Gnosticism in McCarthy, see Dianne C. Luce, *Reading the World: Cormac McCarthy's Tennessee Period*. Other areas of philosophical enquiry applied to McCarthy's work can be seen in Nietzschean readings, as proposed by Shane Schimpf in the introduction to his *Reader's Guide to Blood Meridian*. Schimpf's observations are important for understanding the philosophical implications of McCarthy's work, as it is necessary to see not so much that McCarthy makes positive claims about the existence or non-existence of God, but that he is rather trying to think through the consequences of Nietzsche's proposition of what a universe is like after the death of God. Another philosophical trajectory that is worth nothing is the attempt to understand McCarthy in Marxist terms, or as a literary author who is attempting to think through the consequences of the neoliberal political and economic order. The principle work here is David Holloway's *The Late Modernism of Cormac McCarthy*. Another exceptionally valuable recent contribution to this strand of McCarthy studies is Raymond Malewitz, *The Practice of Misuse*. Malewitz stringently argues that *No Country for Old Men* offers a direct repudiation of the rugged consumerism of neoliberalism. So, while there has been some work that tries to understand the philosophical dimensions of McCarthy's work, it is clear that much of this work is geared towards understanding McCarthy under specific critical optics such as Marxist, religious, post-structural, Nietzschean or existential, and consequently, there has not been an attempt to understand the totality of McCarthy's philosophical reflections, as well as the distinct manner that his fiction operates on at the intersection of literature and philosophy. A welcome addition to this debate is Christopher Eagle's edited collection, *Philosophical Approaches to Cormac McCarthy: Beyond Reckoning*, and particularly Alberto Siani's Nagelian reading of McCarthy, which is important because it attempts to discern a core philosophical logic at the heart of McCarthy's philosophical reflections.
2. I would argue that it is not possible to suggest that McCarthy's work can strictly be defined as a pantheist theology, though this does not preclude examining the ontological status of nature in his work. For a valuable account of the metaphysics of nature in McCarthy, see Julius Greve, "Another kind of clay": On *Blood Meridian*'s Okenian Philosophy of Nature."

3. For a rich description of thermodynamics as a metaphor, see Markus Wierschem, "The Other End of *The Road*: Re-Reading McCarthy in Light of Thermodynamics and Information Theory." See also Wierschem's "At a Crossroads of Life and Death: The Apocalyptic Journey(s) of Cormac McCarthy's Fiction."
4. For an excellent account of how *The Road* represents an optimistic argument for a new type of fiction, one surpassing postmodern interpretations of McCarthy, see Ashley Kunsu, "Maps of the World in Its Becoming: Post-Apocalyptic Naming in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*."
5. For a fuller exposition of how Blanchot can be deployed in McCarthy, see my chapter "Literature and Death: McCarthy, Blanchot and Suttree's Mortal Belonging," in *Philosophical Approaches to Cormac McCarthy: Beyond Reckoning*.
6. It should be noted that McCarthy is not offering an unsophisticated form of atheism. It would be erroneous to suggest McCarthy is offering an atheism of the variety promulgated by say Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, or Christopher Hitchens.
7. Erik Wielenberg has presented the strongest rejection of a theological reading of *The Road*, suggesting that "... the existence of God remains ambiguous throughout the novel" (1).
8. Joseph Allen suggests that McCarthy subscribes to a form of Christian existentialism (142-143). This is not wholly inaccurate, expressing well the fraught intersection of non-belief and faith which we find in *The Road*. However, as I have argued here, it is necessary to develop a philosophical register which does justice to the way McCarthy has a vastly different metaphysical register than either Christianity or existentialism.
9. I agree with Matthew Potts, who argues that ultimately McCarthy is not a Christian novelist. However, it is certainly the case that McCarthy invokes Christian sacrament and imagery to make palpable the value of human life in the lived and practical world. As Potts suggests, McCarthy does not overreach for "systems of metaphysical meaning" (4). Instead, sacramental imagery offers succor, respite and temporary shelter against the unpalatable universe in which McCarthy's protagonists exist (Potts 70).
10. Throughout *The Road* the dissolution of objects is ever-present, and this dissolution is represented through the insertion of contradiction and juxtaposition. In many instances, this amounts to a reversal of common symbolism. For example, we see the collapsing of mortal and immortal symbols when we see a single grey snowflake "expire" on the man's palm "as the last host of christendom" (McCarthy, *The Road* 15). For an excellent summary of symbolic juxtaposition see Yuliya A. Tsutserova, "Seeing Nothing," 195.
11. In nautical terms, the tabernacle is the object which mounts the mast to the deck.
12. McCarthy, in his interview with Woodward, rejects the notion of harmony and peace as worthy aspirations: "I think the notion that the species can be improved in some way, that everyone could live in harmony, is a really dangerous idea. Those who are afflicted with this notion are the first ones to give up their souls, their freedom. Your desire that it be that way will enslave you and make your life vacuous" (29).
13. For an excellent analysis of sight as metaphor in *The Road* see Eric Pudney, "Christianity and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*." Pudney, of all the critical readers of *The Road*, comes closest to expressing the contradictions and struggles of life in an empty universe. He writes: "Throughout the novel, atheism is associated with despair, hopelessness and death, and Christianity with the rare moments of hope. In the final analysis, *The Road* can also be understood as a challenge to the atheistic view of the universe, and this challenge is one that any atheist ought to take seriously" (309). Pudney is surely right about this. However, this logic also must extend to Christian readings of the novel. As I have argued in this essay, the simple opposition of atheism and

Christianity doesn't fully do justice to what McCarthy is trying to achieve in *The Road* since it is necessary to reconfigure both strands.

14. For example, Benjamin Mangrum calls Ely a "dark prophet," unable to perceive the boy as an "affirmation not of God but of the continuation of humanity" (285). Similarly, Stefan Skrimshire sees the limitation of Ely in the incapacity to discern "the realisation that, in the very act of their survival, something unshakeable of the trace of God (in the book it moves from "word" to "breath" to "dream", in that order) is incarnate" (Skrimshire 7). Lydia Cooper suggests Ely is the voice of "the catastrophic loss of faith in the human endeavour" (223).

15. For example, in *The Road*, buildings, mansions, the father's family home, gas stations, highways are in a process of disintegration. This anti-architecture reveals what Martin Heidegger calls world-withdrawal, or the idea that the lived-world and possibilities of any building recede into the material world (40).

16. Lydia Cooper provides an excellent analysis of the way in which the symbolism of fire and water stands in for questions of inheritance, and the way "inheritance and the future is entwined with survival and the continuation of the human race" (227).

ABSTRACTS

This article proposes that to understand the ethical and philosophical dimensions of Cormac McCarthy's work one must engage in an articulation of mortal ethics. To do this, it is necessary to understand how *The Road* depicts the material destruction of the world, and the ethical consequences such physical destruction imposes on the novel's central protagonists. More specifically, this article argues that Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* presents an anti-metaphysics with consequences for understanding philosophical concepts of memory and community, as well as McCarthy's effort to construct universal forms of being together.

INDEX

Keywords: Materialism, Ethics, Philosophy, Community, Mortality

AUTHOR

PATRICK DAMIEN O'CONNOR

Patrick O'Connor is a Senior Lecturer in Philosophy at Nottingham Trent University. He researches European Philosophy, with special reference to Phenomenology, 19th and 20th Century European Philosophy, and early to Mid 20th Century French Philosophy. He has published two books one entitled *Atheism Reclaimed* on atheism and existentialism, the other on phenomenology, ethics and the work of Jacques Derrida entitled *Derrida: Profanations*. He is currently working on project that investigates the intersection between Philosophy and Literature in the work of Cormac McCarthy.