

<https://doi.org/10.18778/2353-6098.4.06>

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Communality and the Individual in Cormac McCarthy's The Road

The subject of the article is the analysis of the notion of communality in the relation between the two protagonists of *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy. Traversing the post-apocalyptic landscape populated mostly by wretched savages harbouring ill intent towards other human beings, the heroes ostensibly seek a place where establishing a sustainable society composed of the “good guys” can still be possible. However, while for the young son this goal implies the necessity of maintaining a sense of openness and hospitality towards the other, for the father it is the matter of day-to-day survival that takes precedence, which leads to repeated instances of withdrawing help from destitute survivors and avoiding human contact. The boy objects to this behavior, despite being wholly dependent on his father, as his sense of responsibility seems innate and unconditional. The man, on the other hand, gradually recognizes that he was so profoundly afflicted by the experience of losing his world that he cannot overcome his radical pessimism and distrust of the other. Therefore, when the man arrives at the end of his life, he comes to understand that it is only without him at his side that the son can enter a larger community.

key words: postapocalypse, hospitality, the other, individual, American literature.

The fiction of Cormac McCarthy, with its recurrent oedipal motifs, frequent depictions of startling violence, and a tendency for bleak, downbeat endings (see *Child of God*, *Blood Meridian*, or *No Country for Old Men* for ample examples), for the most part seems like a less than optimal choice, to put it mildly, for one seeking arguments affirming the notion of communality and its beneficial effect on the individual. McCarthy's last novel to date, *The Road*, initially does not seem to stray from the abovementioned hallmarks of the author's oeuvre. To the contrary, the vast majority of the novel leads one to infer that, by utilizing for the first time in his career a literally postapocalyptic setting, McCarthy set out to weave for the readers his most dire and fatalistic vision yet. Even more so than in the more conventional works of postapocalyptic fiction, in the world of *The Road*, what little is left after the cataclysm does not offer any reasonable hope for the restoration of human society or even the normal life-sustaining state of our world, which by extension renders any notion of communality for all intents and purposes immaterial and virtually extinguished. In the aftermath of the nondescript, but apparently globe-spanning catastrophe that has occurred, and in light of the apparent fact that the Earth was rendered barren in the process, the tentativeness of all social structures is blatantly exposed. Approximately ten years after the event – though it is doubtful anyone is still keeping strict count – what remains of humanity exists in a state of perpetual mad struggle for the continuously dwindling resources, a quagmire of savagery where those with moral reservations against slavery, murder and cannibalism have by now mostly dropped out of the race. What communities are to be found here, exist predominantly in the form of roaming barbaric tribes always on the verge of

disintegration, and with no pretensions of accounting for the future beyond scavenging or hunting down their next meal, as the fate of children in this order is to end up on a roasting spit (McCarthy 212).

Such dire state of affairs, however, does not go wholly unchallenged, even if during all these years no one managed to come any closer to a salvation from it. As the prime example of those still rowing against the current serves the pair of the novel's protagonists: a father and his child, who are devoted both to an indefatigable march south in search of a place offering the promise of a sustainable future, and to maintaining a set of moral values while at it. "The two decide to lay fierce claim to the last vestiges of goodness in world beyond despair," writes Erik Hage (142). The struggle to retain enough humanity to be able to consider oneself as still belonging within the margins of one's conception of what is "human" and "moral" comprises one of the main themes of the novel. However, as this essay seeks to prove, the danger to such pursuit for the protagonists comes not just from the savage and dim outside reality, but also, perhaps most importantly, from the internalized residue of the past, with the embrace of a new and radically unknowable mode of being – one centred on the other – perhaps representing the only course of action offering any hope of emerging from this struggle successfully.

As one could expect, the moral values held by the heroes are very stripped-down and simplistic, appropriately enough for the story's setting. Do not lie, steal, kill, or eat others, but instead help them and keep your promises – this is what their code boils down to. Regardless, upholding these tenets still imbues the pair with a feeling of exceptionality and provides them with a rather lonely mantle of "the good guys" (81), which serves to give an additional justification to their otherwise questionable journey.

Linked to that is also the notion of "carrying the fire" (87), which the father convinces the son is their specially ordained mission. The fire in question can represent on the one hand a life-giving power in the world plunged into a perpetual winter, a guarantee of their survival – which is reflected in the frequent descriptions of the characters making a fire – and on the other, the enlightenment that constitutes "the foundation of civilization," according to Erik J. Wielenberg, who follows this statement by saying:

perhaps to carry the fire is to carry the seeds of civilization. If civilization is to return to the world, it will be through the efforts of "good guys" like the man and the child. At the very least, the two struggle to maintain civilization between themselves. (3-4)

Preserving within themselves the fire of an inherent sense of morality and steadfast "goodness," they ensure it does not fan out entirely in the world dominated by savages, as well as that, unlike to said savages, the notion of entering a genuine community remains open to them. This explanation is in line with what the man tells the boy toward the end of the text, when he is pressed by the child to say where to find the fire: "it's inside you. It was always there" (McCarthy 298). However, if we take into account the belief held by Wielenberg, who writes that "fire is also the primary implement of the destruction of civilization in *The Road*" (3), then we are compelled to also recognize a possible negative connotation of fire in the novel: its paradoxical ability to be used for good as well as bad ends. We will soon see that the premise of carrying the fire, while primarily nurtured with good intentions, also becomes twisted in the father's mind as a justification for maintaining a radical and ultimately damaging isolation from the unfamiliar other.

By means of sharing of the inner fire, of the understanding that they are both assigned the task of its cultivation, the pair consecrates their unbreakable bond and the higher purpose of their

existence, which the outside reality so insistently denies them. On some level, the father realizes that, for their mission to hold real substantial meaning, it is imperative that they never cease searching for the other potential “good guys,” with whom they could establish an elementary community with the metaphorical fire as its centre and warrant of its qualitative superiority to the groups formed by the marauders: “only a good guy who has the ability to make connections with other people . . . truly carries the fire” (Wielenberg 8). With no other “good guys” manifesting themselves to the protagonists, their existence and hence the possibility of a broader communality becomes a matter of faith, just as it is the case with the fire itself. The boy, who desires contact with others, and particularly with other children, is easily convinced that their solitude will sooner or later come to an end, largely because the nature of his relationship with the father, his “world entire” (McCarthy 4), involves absolute trust in his words, including his assurances and his moral declarations. This corresponds to the current prevailing views of morality development in children, based largely on the research conducted by Lawrence Kohlberg, who considered prepubescent children to be at the first, pre-conventional and pre-reflexive, level of morality where one’s “moral code is shaped by the standards of adults and the consequences of following or breaking their rules,” to quote Saul McLeod. On the other hand, though, this trust in the boy’s case is also dependent on the perception of the father as unequivocally committed to the same ethical rules as he – which indicates a deeper level of engagement with these rules than the abovementioned level, as defined by Kohlberg, permits. The perception is gradually revealed to be not entirely accurate, leading to disagreement between the two, as the consideration for finding the other “good guys” is not the only one, or indeed, the most important one, guiding the father’s actions.

Another and initially all overriding concern is the necessity to keep the boy – who by the man’s estimation may well be one of the last children left in the world – safe at all costs. In a violent and ruthless world, where every encounter with the other may potentially be a fatal one, this demands of the father utmost, if not paranoid, caution, as well as stinginess in sharing their supplies with another. This attitude, while being shown to save the two’s lives on several occasions, is still contested by the son who insists on reaching out to others whenever such opportunity presents itself so that their claim to represent the good guys measures up to reality. This matter is critical for the boy, since its undermining would deprive him of both hope and faith in the father. But the boy’s voice is not the only outside influence the father feels, for it has to contend with an older, more entrenched and imperious one. This voice represents an amalgamation of narratives, discourses underlying and constituting the pre-apocalyptic civilization, which the father grew up in. Its demands upon the man’s conscience are vast and essentially incompatible with the present reality. While the voice consecrates the father’s devotion to his offspring, formulating it as his greatest duty, this duty is framed partly in religious terms, as in the “godless” (McCarthy 2), blasphemous world of the post-apocalypse it is the boy in his inner purity and unyielding sense of ethics that remains the main proof of a divine presence still lingering in their lives. This leads the father to imagine him to be “the word of God” (3) incarnate, and “good to house a God” (78); to view him as “the symbolic vessel of divine healing in a realm blighted,” to quote Lydia Cooper (219).

This in turn means for the man, who “clings to his God and his morality and considers himself a final agent of His will, even if his mission exists in a void” (Hage 143), that the two of them exist in a higher state than the other wretched “creedless” (McCarthy 28) dregs of humanity and that his role is to ensure their relation does not become tainted by the outside. Obviously, this inspires a radical inclination towards isolation and focus on self-reliance on the man’s part. He assumes the role of his son’s sole provider and guardian – proclaiming that he will kill anyone

who touches the boy, because he was appointed to do that by God (80) – in addition to that of a judge of the other, invariably declaring those they encounter as unfit to merit their goodwill. As an example of that can serve the scene where, upon encountering a man struck by lightning, the father states that “we can’t help him. There’s nothing to be done for him” (43). On one occasion the man even goes as far as to issue a harsh Old Testament style punishment for intruding on their communion, when he strips a thief of all his belongings – mostly useless anyway – and leaves him for certain death (274-76): an action which Philip A. Snyder describes as a “simplistic kind of eye-for-an-eye justice [that] closes itself on the Other, rather than opening itself to the Other and the possibility of hospitality’s gift” (82).

That such attitude equates to a momentous setback to finding a community for the fire they carry is evident, but there is still more to take into account. The religious resolution is confronted in the father’s mind with a rational consideration, likewise issued from a bygone order and voiced by the man’s wife, who killed herself before the novel’s outset. In a flashback, we hear her argue that trying to survive in such a world is futile and the best available course of action for all of them is indeed suicide, as the only probable alternative is a grisly, humiliating death at the hands of the other (McCarthy 58). The man refuses to concede her point, but is all the same at a loss to present a suitable rational counterargument or to dissuade her from her plan. Wielenberg proposes that the conclusion the wife arrived at was at least in part attributable to the man’s neglect of her in the singular focus on the bond between him and the son, as suggested by the line: “her cries meant nothing to him” (61). The result being, the critic states, that “there are clear indications she has lost her faith in him, and at least hints that she has lost her connection with both the man and the child” (10-11). It is clear also that the man is haunted by the wife’s parting words. His further struggle is weighed down by reason, which indicates the fundamental pointlessness of it all, a sense of irrelevance on the cosmic scale and alienation from the “implacable” darkness and “intestate earth” (McCarthy 138). “The man keeps on going despite recognizing, on some level, that the struggle may very well be futile,” writes Wielenberg (3).

The belief in the boy’s divine nature can be seen as a countermeasure to those encroaching thoughts, meant to alleviate the father’s existential anxiety, but in that case its effect turns out to be contrary to the intended one, as the rational and religious viewpoints become entangled in his mind. This leads him to infer that it is God’s final will that he take the boy’s life away once he can no longer heed the command to prevent his presumably fatal exposure to the other; that the importance of son’s purity supersedes that of his continued existence in this godforsaken world. And since the father perceives that his own time is coming to an end due to a disease festering inside of him, the perspective of being faced with performing this ultimate sacrifice grows increasingly imminent. Time and again, the father feels compelled to bring up the question in his mind – the question as to whether he can answer the demand of reason and the departed God, to kill the boy, to smash his head with a rock if need be (McCarthy 120), even though there is no guidance or support coming from any direction to assist him in such a harrowing duty. The transcendent is reduced to just this echoing demand, no longer a presence to direct one’s prayers to; His name not to be praised but damned for the burden He placed on him, as when the man addresses God by asking: “have you a neck by which to throttle you” (10), or when it later comes to a point where the man starts to think that “now is the time” to take his son’s life, to “curse God and die” (120) (though the thought passes without being fulfilled). The man is stuck in the position of a moral agent in a silent, amoral world, who has to decide whether to hold on to said world, regardless of how hostile it is to both his physical and spiritual side. This sentiment is reiterated in one of the only unhostile encounters the protagonists experience on the road, where an old man named Ely asserts that “there is no God and we are his prophets” (181).

In this way he effectively sums up the paradoxical situation the survivors have found themselves in, being the descendants of a civilization founded upon a set of beliefs the apocalypse and its aftermath have so irrevocably discredited.

It appears then that the protagonists have no recourse to any external system of values that could offer justification to their pursuit, that their continued running like “hunted animals” striving to hold on to their “borrowed time” (138), and holding out hope for entering a larger community, are naught but delusional attempts to postpone the inevitable. Yet that is only the case if we consider exclusively the father’s perspective. For the son, whose inner workings remain more enigmatic, is strongly suggested to have a mindset different from that of his father, and which the father cannot even wholly grasp. This may sound absurd, seeing as it is the father who has imbued the boy with much if not all of his knowledge of the world, as well as has passed down their ethical code to him. If we were to follow the model established by Kohlberg, such stark divergence should not be possible in this situation, as the boy should not yet possess the necessary mental faculties to develop an independent sense of morality, and obviously, he has no contact with any outside ethical code competing with that of his father’s. Nevertheless, while the two do indeed share basically the same code, the difference between them lies in their perception and approach to it. In the father’s case, the commitment to their stated morals is compromised by conflicting voices and considerations waging battle in his mind, the pervading sense of doom and failure of his race, which reflects, according to Cooper, in his “consistently traumatized and exhausted thought and speech patterns.” In contrast, “the luminous innocence of [the boy’s] moral commitments” (226) signifies that the son’s resolution to embody the ideal of the “good guys” is subject to no inner argument, is undisputable and unconditional, for the foundation upon which it is based is, as I would like to suggest, not primarily the pressure instituted by the father, but a primal, nonrational, nontheistic sense of responsibility.

Philosopher Emmanuel Levinas identified this sense as an originary ground for all ethics, maintaining that “the responsibility for the Other comes before history and culture” (Snyder 85), as well as before subjectivity which allows the creation and maintenance of personal, egocentric moral codes. The call to responsibility is initiated by beholding the “face” of the other, which “orders and ordains’ us to service” (71), and it remains at perpetual risk of being silenced by the individual’s subsequent mental constructs. McCarthy’s work seems to share the philosopher’s view, as this would explain why the son’s increasingly prominent sense of responsibility seems to a large degree groundless and wholly uninfluenced by the ego. At one point, the father poses the crucial question: “how does never to be differ from what never was” (McCarthy 32). This sentence encapsulates the difference between the two, with the man imbued with the weight of the past and little future to speak of, and the boy, to the contrary, devoid of a substantial past, being born already after the apocalypse, and forced to try and cast himself into the future. Free of the past’s residue: the shame, the guilt the bitterness, the boy can apprehend and respond to his inner calling to responsibility in an uncompromised manner. Because of that, the notion of communality burns bright within him regardless of what horrors orchestrated by the other he is forced to witness or experience. Where his father prefers to evade contact with other survivors, he insists on initiating it, where the father is hesitant to share their meagre supplies, he does not think twice about offering their best to the decrepit Ely (173). Finally, where the father opts to carry out harsh justice on the other, the boy pleads for mercy and later refuses just to disregard the repercussions of the act his father committed, insisting that “he is the one who has to worry about everything” (277), which, according to Snyder, illustrates how the son realizes “that he is responsible for the father’s responsibility as well as his own and that his responsibility goes beyond being an advocate for ethics” (82). The man moves towards isolation, orients himself

wholly towards the two's sacred bond, distrusting even the dreams of coexistence with the other (17), and, in essence, "attempts to negate the boy's empathy as a threat to their survival," according to Susan J. Tyburski (126), whereas the boy both desires and considers it their duty to seek out this coexistence.

This preoccupation is reflected even in his spirituality, as when he decides to pray before a particularly opulent meal, which results in his directing the prayer to the departed strangers who left the food supplies behind (McCarthy 154-55). As opposed to the father, whose religious rituals are all too consciously constructed "out of the air" (78), the boy's impromptu prayer evinces authentic belief in the other, a belief the father cannot bring himself to share, as neither his conception of the divine nor his reason allow such unequivocal faith in the other taken as something else than an abstract notion. This increasingly glaring discrepancy leads to friction between the two. "As the man and the boy continue along the road, their roles gradually shift. The boy begins to question the stories the man tells him" (Tyburski 126), expresses distrust in the father's assurances of their being the "good guys" and his "old stories of courage and justice" (McCarthy 42). He is not alone in these intuitions, either, as the father is now convinced himself that his stories, have been exposed as lies, along with all the content of the culture which defined him – he expresses this sentiment when the pair visits a library, by calling the books contained therein: "lies arranged in their thousands row on row" (199). According to John Cant, such reaction stems from his perception of them as "hav[ing] led to this cultural demise and the faith in the future on which they based their validity ha[ving been] proved illusory" (193).

The man soon comes to acknowledge the forming rift and the inevitability of its formation, as when he admits that he does not know what the boy believes in (McCarthy 185), to which Wielenberg offers an answer "that the child believes in humanity" (14). This disparity constitutes a further argument against the prevailing contemporary notions of morality development as conditioned by authority figures and social groups, since the child displays signs of building on and developing the principles provided by the father without encountering any alternative viewpoints which could prompt him to consider it morally unsatisfying to slavishly follow the father's example. The motivation to expand his moral responsibility beyond the extent expected by the father seems to derive mostly, if not entirely, from some internal compulsion. The father is apparently conscious of that, of their being creatures of different worlds, conceding "that to the boy he was himself an alien" (McCarthy 163), and that the final choice he will be faced with is precisely between these worlds. Is he to choose the old vanished world, based on the volatile balance between God and reason, one which demands them both to depart this blasphemous reality? Or is he to choose the potential future, seemingly ruled out by these two old axioms, each of them "a sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality" (93)? Is he to place his trust in that which eludes his mental faculties, his capacities to conceptualize; to embrace the primal, the irrational, the otherness? To do otherwise would be to contradict his belief in the boy's uniqueness having a purpose to fulfil, a belief which as opposed to the belief in God, reason, etc., is still not undermined, but alive and capable of a productive expression.

However, to actually follow up on this belief in an authentic manner, he must come to terms with the real possibility that if the boy is to enter a real community of "good guys," he must do so without the father at his side, for, as Wielenberg notes, "the man no longer has the capacity to expand his world beyond the child; the child, by contrast, does have this ability" (8). Instead of just paying lip service to the idea of the other "good guys" still left in the world, as he has done previously, this time the man would have to actually put absolute faith in it, in what his mental faculties judge as absurd, as a delusion, a sign of his cowardice – and commit to the act of offering his most valued, precious thing to this ostensibly cruel, self-devouring world, to the

unknown, feared other, and trusting he is not thereby sentencing his son to unimaginable suffering. His body giving in quick, he knows his final departure is imminent, and that for their inner fire to continue burning, to keep lighting the way towards some possibility of a better life, it must be shared, cannot be sustained in solitude. The notion of the “good guys” that imbues the son with hope and strength to carry on must be substantiated in human relation, so as not to peter out, not to turn into another dead idiom.

For the father, it is an ultimate test of humility – can he perform a leap of faith towards the reality of total responsibility, utter commitment to the other, which is the reality his son embodies, yet which the man can never fully understand or internalize, because of the baggage he carries? As a parent, his main obligation is to spur the child's potential, but “because the man is damaged, he is unable to fulfill this function completely. He can truly succeed as a parent only by dying” (Wielenberg 8). Like a reversal of the dilemma faced by the Biblical Abraham, called upon to fulfil the divine Will against his reason and society, here the man is asked to defy his gods, and make a sacrifice by not killing, a sacrifice to the world and to some invisible and incomprehensible ideal of the living society in a dying Earth, in which genuine divinity could settle.

In the end, the man, the boy's “world entire,” decides against taking the son along on his final road, even though the son, with no other kith or kin on this earth, implores him to do just that. The man must accept the guilt of bringing his son to such predicament, hope that his breaking of the promise never to leave the boy alone will be forgiven, and that this final transgression will not fatally disillusion the boy after he departs. Shortly before death, he makes a gesture of reconciliation with reality, by convincing the boy of some ethereal goodness still infusing the world and protecting those who need it (McCarthy 300). He also ruminates, while seeing the boy by the campfire, how “there is no prophet in the earth's long chronicle who's not honored here today” (297), acknowledging for the last time the ordained special message his boy carries and needs to pass on. He does, in truth, also advise the boy not to take any chances, which is flawed advice, as taking a chance is exactly what the father does in letting the boy go, and what the boy must himself do to in turn survive.

Wielenberg writes that “the child is unable to connect with other good guys as long as his father is alive” (8), and indeed, when the man dies, the boy is soon approached by another group of survivors, and does not shirk from the contact. This proves to be the right choice as the fabled other “good guys” now emerge in the flesh in the form of a family with children presumably of their own, children that the boy has so longed for all this time. The boy is accepted into this miniature community, where the fire is carried and the morals he settled on with his father are upheld. The hope prevails against the odds, “the fulfilment of this messianic expectation justifies the dying father's faith in the future as well as his refusal to use his last bullet on his son,” writes Snyder (83). With the support of his new surrogate mother, the boy now addresses his prayers to his father, further cementing the reality of the faith in the other as the prime imperative guiding those new people in the postapocalyptic world. “And although individual death must come at the end, collective continuity remains a possibility if the generations can pass on that ardenthearted vitality which is the inherent motor of life,” concludes Cant (196), to which I can add merely that the cultivation of said vitality can only take place where the ideals of community are consecrated, and the sense of responsibility for the other resonates most deeply.

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