

**Narrative Closure and Genre Expectations in Cormac  
McCarthy's *The Road***

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**Abstract**

This paper reconsiders the problematic ending of Cormac McCarthy's 2006 novel *The Road*. The novel has two endings. The second ending is a short paragraph which is antithetical in tone and perspective to the first ending of the novel. Although much critical debate and speculation ensued over this aspect of *The Road*, no conclusive or satisfactory interpretations were advanced up to now. The current study starts with the violation of the generic conventions this second conclusion brings to argue that this ending provides a new sense of closure to the subversive narrative McCarthy constructed in this novel. This generic rift is read as a result of a reversal of the post-apocalyptic classic ending with a new beginning. The second conclusion reverse new beginnings with archival ending in the sense that Jacque Derrida formulated in his latest work *Archive Fever*.

**Key Words:** Closure, Post-apocalyptic Genre, Archive

## المستخلص

يدرس هذا البحث اشكالية النهاية في رواية كورماك مكارثي الطريق (2006) فلهذه الرواية نهايتان. فما ان تنتهي الرواية حتى ينهيها الكاتب بمقطع قصير يتناقض مصمونا ونغمة مع نهاية الرواية الاصلية. لا يوجد اي تفسير نقدي مقنع لحد الان لهذه المشكلة. يلاحظ البحث ان النهاية الثانية لا تتوانم مع النمط الفني لهذه الرواية مما يؤدي لقلب نمطية رواية ما بعد الفناء لاغية مفهوم النهاية كبداية جديدة. ان النهاية الثانية تعكس مفهوم البداية الجديدة باخرى ارشيفية نصية وفقا لتنصيرات جاك دريدا في كتابة ارشيف للابد.

الكلمات الرئيسية: الانغلاق , نمط ما بعد الفناء , الارشيف

Cormac McCarthy's 2006 post-apocalyptic novel *The Road* is one of those road narratives which elude a final station. *The Road* simultaneously extends and stops at the end of the narrative crystallizing in a hermeneutic crux. The road narrative of the unnamed father and his little son ends positively (whatever that might be) with the son being deposited in the custody of a sheltering family. This promising ending affects a sense of cathartic closure on the part of the reader and a point of saturation on the textual level. But this narrative closure is soon violated by even a more powerful voice overwriting a totally different and less optimistic ending, ushering the

inevitable doom of the boy and his newly stabilized world. The new dooming voice resonates nostalgically inscribing a different closure:

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 backs 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 hummed of mystery. (286–87)

This elegiac evocation of a pastoral nature that is utterly beyond redemption is in radical contrast with the strong sense of redemption that the boy seems to attain with his new sheltering family. This is a moment of textual overwriting where narrative closure is textually effaced or at least suspended as a cathartic moment. The invocation of the trout fish is meant to highlight their absence which affects a shift from the narrative immediacy of the father and son's epic journey to the passive reign of memory. Life, whether human or

natural, on earth is lost forever as it "could not be put back. Not be made right again." The redemption of the boy becomes in this perspective a brief transitory moment pitted against the cosmic inevitability of extinction.

This 'second' ending does not only thwart any sense of narrative closure that the 'first' ending might aspire to achieve, but it also goes counter to the genre expectations of this novel. *The Road* is professedly a post-apocalyptic narrative, which is a sub-genre of science fiction that, according to Claire P. Curtis, "takes up how humans start over after the end of life on earth as we understand it." (2010:5) *The Road* is a post-apocalyptic novel because it is set after the apocalyptic event. But it lacks the one fundamental requirement of the genre, namely, that it "denies the possibility of a new social contract...because there is no starting over that is possible after this event." (2010:18). It is too nihilistic in its denial of any chance of survival for the human race. The first ending seems to promise or fulfil this new start of the human race in the figure of the child. The last few sentences immediately preceding the second ending distance the child into the divine cycle of the human race:

The woman when she saw him put her arms around him and held him. Oh, she said, I am so glad to see you. She would talk to him sometimes about God. He tried to talk to God but the best thing was to talk to his father and he did talk to him and he didnt forget. The woman said that was all right. She said that the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all of time.

This passage switches the narrative perspective, for the first time in the book, from the harsh masculinity of the father to the soft femininity of his new mother in adoption. This new narrative perspective brings with it a new calm and assuring narrative voice which might be that of the boy in his new identity. This new perspective and the voice emerging with it do not only highlight the continuity of the human race in the figure of the child but also invests it with the grace of God. The last line here is heavily laden with Biblical association to creation and divine image of Man as the Son of Man. Genesis harks to apocalypse which, in turn, looks back to God as the source of humankind continuity. This would ensure that humanity shall survive and thrive in its normal Godly nature. It is at this point that the second ending comes to disrupt the hopes of human

continuity. Man, as well as nature, would not survive this disaster and if there shall be another chance of existence it would be without Man.

However, McCarthy's supposed failure to comply with established pattern of the post-apocalyptic genre, especially in its refusal to allow a new start at the end of the novel, one can argue, is less subversive than functional. A close reading of the final paragraph can reveal deeper meanings whose actual significance cannot be grasped outside the conventions of the post-apocalyptic genre. I tend to concur with Thomas R. Schaub that the grammar of reference and antecedent of the second ending actually suggests something quite different, because the thing which could not be put back is "the world in its becoming," not the world accomplished and destroyed. This would posit the narrator in the future of the narrative rather than in the temporal immediacy of the authorial voice which is commonly agreed upon as the narratological agency of the second ending. But who is narrating then? The only viable option is the child who had assumed the role of his deceased father as a storyteller. (2009:165-166) Schaub bases this argument on the fact that the perspective of the second ending is temporal whereas that of the narrative preceding it is spatial. This reading is further supported by the fairy tale beginning of this ending: "Once there were." This ending becomes a

fable which remembers a world that is past and beyond recovery and thus conveys a melancholy warning. Schaub cites Northrop Frye, one of the major practitioners of myth criticism, in support of his claim. "Once upon a time," Frye suggests, is "the formula [that] invokes, out of a world where nothing remains, something older than history, younger than the present moment, always willing and able to descend again once more". (2009:166) If the case is so with McCarthy then *The Road* loses a lot as it regress from the richness of aesthetic vision into the didactic confines of fabulation. *The Road*, one should remember, is so ambivalent to be a mere warning for present generations preached from the future of the father's present.

The problem with such an approach is that it could be reversed and yields almost the same result. Ashley Kunsu, for example, finds the second ending affirmative by reading its temporality as going back deep in history, not, like Schaub, harking forward to futurity. Kunsu starts with the father's last words to his little: "Goodness will find the little boy. It always has. It will again." (2006: 236) In the night the man dies, leaving his son alone and starving on the road. And after three days, goodness — much as it does in the Gospels — does, in fact, arrive: the child is found by another traveler, the father of a young boy and girl. These new "good guys" welcome the child

among them, and in the next-to-last scene, the man's wife tells the boy "that the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all of time," strengthening the Adamic connection and recalling Genesis. Kunsza argues that McCarthy added the second ending to emphasize this link. (2009:68) Like Schaub, he dwells on the religious association of the word 'mystery' to arrive at the conclusion that "the end and the beginning are inseparable in *The Road*. For it is the end of the old world that signals the possibility of a new one, and the novel's own ending so clearly harkens back to a beginning, the beginning of time." (2009:67) Kunsza's assertions are Eliotian in appeal when he talks about the circularity of time. Beginnings and ends constitute the same dot on the circular pattern of human existence. But this view is operative in the patterns of historicity that *The Road* is the least concerned with. McCarthy's narrative perspective in the second ending is purely temporal, not historical. It is concerned with existence and creation rather than a historical cycle, which is the immediate textual paradigm of the post-apocalyptic novel.

Probably it is best to view this second ending, as does Randall S. Wilhelm, as "an image to be viewed and contemplated beyond the narrative's temporal dimension." (2008:141) This means that the final



paragraph is not to be read as an ending but a coda to the narrative of the novel. It is never meant to achieve a narrative closure but be a space to contemplate the story just related in the novel. The past which this image recalls through the agency of the folktale formula "once", is textually fashioned as the space of memory which " could be the father's memory existing in a non-physical timeless space, and yet it also resembles the conventional storytelling opening, and could be the boy relating the father's story to a new audience in the future, replicating the father's actions of filling others' heads with goodness." McCarthy, as such, seems to forgo narrative completion for the sake of a more suggestive and even powerful sense of anti-closure. The terminal of renewal of the classic post-apocalyptic genre gives way to persistence and memory as alternative forms of closure. Stefan Skrimshire speaks to this effect when he says that salvation, redemption or whatever is hoped for at the end of *The Road* do not affect a narrative completion in the classic sense of the word, as Frank Kermode used it. It is, rather, "in the persistence and memory of that which refuses to be forgotten." In the end, McCarthy speaks not of the promise of new worlds, nor the redemption of human community, but of the memory of fish. Redemption in *The Road* "might therefore mean nothing more than the persistence of beings

who can remember, invoking a primal goodness through the “religious or sacral forms” (Ryan 2007) underlying McCarthy’s horror.” (2011:12)

Indeed, McCarthy has no option but invoke memory and what it inscribes as the ultimate available mode of closure for his grim tale. For without the final image of the trout the novel would achieve a contrived and highly artificial sense of closure. Everything in the text of *The Road* suggests the inevitability of annihilation and death. There is no slight chance for environmental regeneration. Life is utterly dead and beyond redemption. The darkness, pollution, and fall out had killed everything. The boy's final moment of salvation would be a fleeting moment against the inevitability of all-encompassing annihilation.

Furthermore, McCarthy seems to employ the final image to reinvent himself and his existence through narrative of memory. The final image of *The Road* bears witness to a world that no longer exist but still on the verge of reinventing itself. Temporality loses its distinction in such an act of witnessing. The past is no longer historical, nor is that the future a distant moment ahead. The narrative of *The Road* bears witness to the final moment of the existence but

the final image celebrates the mystery of creation and the reinvention of that existence. While this subverts the narrow localizing effects of the classic post-apocalyptic genre it also recasts the whole experiential matrix of the narrative of *The Road* into a wider and universal perspective affecting a transition from sensationalism of adventures on the road into the unimaginable depths of the philosophy of existence. For without this final image *The Road* would be a mere story, a mere narrative among competing narratives of after the end, a kind of scenario to be imagined. But with this tiny concluding paragraph the human mind is being challenged and enticed into grander issues of existence. Although this paragraph is seemingly devoid of humanity as active partakers in this cosmic scene, the reader is there, directly addressed and dragged into the experiential crust of the scene. The trout exists even in memory only through the senses of a human beholder. The sights and feeling of the human beholder are engaged to materialize the very existence of that fish: "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." It is not that the trout is missing as most critics contend, but the absence of the human beholder and his awareness that marks the concluding image.

This might give this paragraph a parable-like quality as the beholder is directly addressed as in the Biblical parables. But *The Road* is not a text to be squeezed in the strait jacket of religion and morality. The text logic is glaringly stated in a memorable phrase: "There is no God and we are his prophets." (2006:170) D. Marcel DeCoste reads this proclamation by the old man Ely as a normal response to the horrors of this unmade world. DeCoste finds this proclamation nonsensical in spite of the strong association the Name Ely has with the Biblical prophet. He says that "the tortured experience of, and cannibalistic response to, the nothingness of this unmade world reduces talk of purpose and ends, much less love and mercy, to merest nonsense." (2012:69) But this utterance is purposeful and to the point of the text's logic. Man constructed myths and metaphors to live by. One of these is to reinvent himself as holy as a way to rationalize his existence. But the truth which McCarthy asserts in the final paragraph is that Man exists on the verge of the paradigm of ontology. Man only exists but never a real part of the mystery of creation. All the creatures that reverberate of the hum of the mystery of creation are older than Man who is only an accidental by-product of this creation. Existence as a product of mystery has been undone by Man but mystery as the genesis and miracle of creation is still

there and can never be undone. This means that the extinction of Man is not necessarily the extinction of life on the planet. Still there is a chance for another creation, another reinvention of life but in a different guise.

Here this sense of mystery that the final paragraph celebrates should not be confused with the breath of God that the mother at the end of the boy's story assures the boy as his own breathe. The latter is but the form of the perception of that mystery as configured in the semantics of human awareness. God and religion are human constructs to name that mystery. But since they are bound by human existence they are doomed to disappear with that world. Once they disappear as semantic constructs in the human lexicon there only remains the raw 'mystery' that even the text of the novel fails to, or probably dares not, name. The end of the human world, as such, becomes a return to origin, a beginning of a new reinvention of that mystery which is the essence of creation and existence regardless of its life forms it assumes. Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines 'mystery' as "a religious truth that one can know only by revelation and cannot fully understand." ("Mystery."Def.1. *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*. 10th ed. 2000. Print) Semantically the adjective 'religious' binds 'mystery' to human constructs of God and

religion. The word 'truth' aligns 'mystery' with the absolute. But what is so interesting about this definition is its second part. Mystery cannot be grasped by conscious awareness. It is spiritual and a question of revelation. Since revelation is divine and origin and utterly beyond human sensual faculties, Man is not qualified to grasp or understand mystery as hidden truth. Man can feel or smell the trout but can never grasp the mystery of its creation because Man is either handicapped and an inferior creature or (s)he lost his\her spiritual awareness or insight. The trout in this context would have no symbolic or parabolic significance beyond its fragility and beauty of creation. Man can physically touch the vermiculate patterns on their backs. This is within human capacity but comprehending the truth of these patterns as maps of the world in its becoming is quite beyond his\her capabilities. This is intuitive and out of the reach of Man's sensual being. Three concrete adjectives are used to describe the trout as perceived by the holding hand of Man: 'Polished and muscular and torsional'. They pertain to shape, form, and other concrete physical dimensions only.

Earlier in the narrative of the father and the boy the map played a crucial role in their journey. It is really a symbol of guideness and of Man's ability to impose his mental order on nature's apparent

disorder. The map in the concluding paragraph has become a symbol of the mystery of creation and the existence it entails. There are two references to the map and mapping in this concluding paragraph. First, they are maps of "the world in its becoming". The reference is to the immediate world in decay that *The Road* depicts as the definite article stipulates. The map, here, is temporal and historical as an archive of the temporal evolution of this world ever since its creation. The word 'becoming' indicate a world in the process of making. It is a word that the human map cannot contain or represents because it is in a state of becoming as opposed to the state of being. This world eludes the closure potentials of the map as a human construct. It is a world that is brought to a premature termination right in the process of its making\ maturation. Second, they are maps "of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again." Here the map is not of a world or geographical location but of a 'thing'. The reference is probably to the post-apocalyptic world without man and any vestiges of human and natural life. It has become a thing in the sense of a world without existence. The word map cannot adequately describe such a world. The word 'maze' is added as an afterthought to qualify such a world. This qualifies the symbolic meaning of the word 'map' here. It becomes a state of human knowing as opposed to the maze of

unknowing. The father and the boy have a torn map which leads them on the road but outside the road of the map the surrounding world had become a real maze. It is aligned with the 'Other'. It is fearful, fatal, and cannibalistic. The map they carry is virtually a bridge between the pre-apocalyptic world of the map and the post-apocalyptic world of the maze. The binary opposition is not really between order and chaos but between knowing and not knowing. The world that Man knows and could conceptualize has passed away. The new existence cannot be re-archived into human consciousness, nor is that Man capable of constructing it into the cartography of the human mind. Temporally, this world cannot be restored to history, nor is new history be made for this world because Man cannot reinvent himself and his world again. Unlike other creatures, like the trout, Man is not a carries or an incarnation of the divine map of existence. Man has assumed the role of a maker of that map of existence. But human act of mapping\knowing is imperfect and world-bound. It is existential and spatial and is, therefore, doomed to extinction.

The final sentence re-frames the whole paragraph into the frame of reference of 'mystery'. Far from the existential spatiality of maps and mazes this final sentence re-orientes the visual perspective into the depth of temporality. Man and his mental constructs of maps cannot



last in this abyss of temporality because Man is relatively new form of life on the scale of evolution. The phrase 'deep glens' geologically associates with the cave the father dreamed of at the beginning of the novel where he encountered a primitive creature. In a dream vision the child led his father in an ancient cave. They were like "pilgrims in a fable swallowed up and lost among the inward parts of some granitic beast." The subsequent description of the pre-historic atmosphere of the cave and the primitive creature\monster in it deeply echoes the 'deep glens' of the last sentence in the novel:

Deep stone flues where the water dripped and sang. Tolling in the silence the minutes of the earth and the hours and the days of it and the years without cease. Until they stood in a great stone room where lay a black and ancient lake. And on the far shore a creature that raised its dripping mouth from the rimstone pool and stared into the light with eyes dead white and sightless as the eggs of spiders. It swung its head low over the water as if to take the scent of what it could not see. Crouching there pale and naked and translucent, its alabaster bones cast up in shadow on the rocks behind it. Its bowels, its beating heart. The brain that pulsed in a dull glass bell. It swung its head from side to side and then gave out a low moan

and turned and lurched away and loped soundlessly into the dark. (2006:3)

While this establishes strong affinities between the final concluding paragraph and the rest of the novel, it reorients the nature of life from 'mystery' of creation to evolutionary conceptions, from divine conception to existential development. But these two antipodal conceptions co-exist harmonically here. They never go into a binary opposition relationship because both take the same descending direction into temporality and time. Both look at origins and starting points of life on the planet. The creatures antedated Man called 'things' because they lie beyond Man's knowing\mapping. This is why they 'hummed of mystery'. The verb 'hummed' is onomatopieic and harks back to the 'low moan' of the primitive creature in the father's cave vision. The hum of mystery of the creatures older than Man has become a name for that creature's soundless lopping into darkness. Now, what if that creature is Man himself, grouping into darkness and passing away mysteriously from the paradigm of existence? Everything is possible in McCarthy's twisted narratives.

The only serious treatment of the cave dream in *The Road* ignores the pre-historic creature and concentrates on the dark and light

imagery to relate this dream to Plato's simile of the sun. The "Simile of the Sun," according to Alex Hunt and Martin M. Jacobson, "expresses the concept of absolute reality as Socrates explains to Glaucon (Plato's brother) the fundamental need for illumination beyond human perception. He argues that the eye only sees what the sun illuminates, and thus, that the sun symbolizes reality whereas the eye is a symbol for an always contingent human perception." (2008:156) They apply this to the father and his perception of his dark world. But this argument of anti-Platonic progressive illumination which the essay argues as McCarthy's goal is built exclusively on the first ending of the novel. No mention or reference is made to the second ending in this article. This approach, however, skips the real significance of the novel as it concentrates on physical perception of the post-apocalyptic world of the father. I believe that such reading misses a lot by skipping the creature\monster part of the dream section which is the real jest of that vision. As speculated above that disfigured creature might be Man in his becoming, a creature not yet humming of the mystery of life and creation, probably because of his material perception of his world. One cannot help but notice that this creature bears strong affinities with demonic evil. The harrowing description of that creature is reminiscent of the

Biblical Satan. *The Road* presents an approximation to this crouching evil in the decaying image of Man as cannibal. This makes the dream vision of the father a sort of human regression into the elementary and primitive depths of evolution. The post-apocalyptic Man is in a quick reverse of eons years of evolution. The direction of this reversed evolution is descending into a mere creature, a mere 'thing', according to the final sentence of the novel. Man needs to descend into the memory of the planet in order to hum of that mystery. He must shift from time present of the narrative to time past of the final paragraph. The verbs 'lived' and 'hummed' are even beyond the reach of earth's memory. They become part and parcel of the abstract nature of temporality that extends far beyond historicism.

This myth of origins\memory coincides with the concept of the archive as formulated by Jacques Derrida. He employs Freudian psychoanalysis to offer us a theory of the archive by conflating two conflicting drives: death drive and the archive drive that is linked to the pleasure principle. In this formulation, the archive affirms the past, present, and future; it preserves the records of the past and it embodies the promise of the present to the future. (1995:13) Derrida claims that what Freud posited as a death drive (or sometimes as a primal urge toward aggression and destruction) may also be

characterized as “archive destroying.”(Ibid.:14) This death drive “not only incites forgetfulness, amnesia, the annihilation of memory. . . but also. . . the eradication. . . of. . . the archive, consignment, the documentary or monumental apparatus.”(Ibid.:15) According to Derrida, what is at work in the construction of the historical record is a negotiation between the death drive and the pleasure principle, between Thanatos and Eros. (Ibid.:16) The apocalypse in *The road* is "archive destroying" which is purely existential in nature. The map is an archive, just like the bunker and all supermarkets the father and the boy pass by on the road. They are destroyed and their memory is effaced as in the case of their worn out signs and fading away traces. Destruction is and has become the sustaining drive for the surviving people. Cannibalism and other atrocities are practiced pleasurably for life-sustenance as evidenced in the case of the cellar were men and women are stored, used, and ultimately disseminated as food. The post-apocalyptic novel tends to force the archival drive but on an existential plane. It starts with the anti-archival event as the apocalypse of the narrative. Such novels keep that even\drive in the narrative background and work to rehabilitate the world into the destroyed archive. Although the death drive is the rule in the world of the post-apocalyptic novel, the final motion of victorious re-

beginning reasserts the archival as the world is restored to its pre-apocalyptic state, or at least ethos.

But McCarthy reworks this textual paradigm of the classic post-apocalyptic novel into something subversive and more philosophical. The death drive, or archive destroying, in *The Road*, is but a threshold for the passage into the cosmic archive or memory in the geological glens of the planet. The archiving is done on temporal precedence. In that universal archive which Man is about to join things and creatures older than Man are already archived. 'Mystery' becomes the semantics of that geological and global archive. 'Humming' hymns is the sound articulation of that language. It is incantatory and spell-like after the fashion of religious rituals, which is the nearest human perception of this state. The father, boy, and other humans shall ultimately joint their place in that universal archive memory with trout and other older creatures once they become beyond temporality. Such a closure brings divergent forces into a harmony. The archival, evolutionary, and the mysterious currents combine together to affect a closure to the subversive narrative of *The Road*. The final paragraph in the novel does not celebrate genesis or re-starts but ends as archival process in the universal memory. It is only with this process that Man can claim his

place in the mystery of creation and existence. Such a closure does not only extend and enrich the philosophical vision of the novel but is also the only viable option to tell the truth. With these final five or six lines McCarthy was able to do a lot and transform a genre exercise into one of the classics of 21<sup>st</sup>-century American novel.

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