

Ethics of Being in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

Cormac McCarthy'nin *Yol* Romanında Var Olmanın Etiği

Aylin ALKAÇ*

Abstract

The Road is a post-apocalyptic novel by Cormac McCarthy, narrating the journey of two unnamed characters, a father and a son, through the devastated American landscape in the aftermath of a catastrophe, the nature of which remains unspecified throughout the narrative. Unlike science-fiction dystopias which present worlds with meticulously detailed political and social institutions in alien yet uncannily familiar settings, the earth is devoid of almost any signs of civilization in *The Road*. As such, the narrative presents a symbolic vacuum, an absence of socio-economic context and personal ties that constitute the real and help create meaning in life. Hence, constantly confronted with the threat of starvation and violence, the father and the son keep revisiting the question why they should struggle to survive rather than simply give in and commit suicide just as the mother did some time ago. The common answer they give to this question is that they are "the good guys" and they "carry the fire" although it is clear that one's understanding of these expressions is not necessarily the same as the other's. I will argue in this paper that, by depicting a world empty of almost all signifieds and life barely sustained in the shadow of outdated signifiers, which can be seen as a means of taking postmodern contingency to its extreme, *The Road* raises the questions of what makes life meaningful and what is the ethical responsibility of being in the aftermath of postmodern apocalypse.

Key words: Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*, Post-Apocalypse, Contemporary Novel, Dystopia, Postmodern Ethics, Postmodern Novel

Öz

Cormac McCarthy'nin *Yol* romanı iki isimsiz karakterin, bir baba ve oğulun, sebebi açıklanmayan bir felaketin ardından mahvolmuş Amerikan toprakları üzerindeki yolculuklarını anlatır. Yabancı fakat tekinsiz şekilde tanıdık bir uzamda, titizlikle detaylandırılmış siyasal ve sosyal kurumların tasvir edildiği bilim-kurgu distopyaların aksine, *Yol*'da betimlenen dünyada herhangi bir uygarlık belirtisi kalmamıştır. Bu bakımdan, anlatıya hayatın gerçeklerini ve anlamını oluşturan sosyo-ekonomik ve kişisel ilişkilerin olmadığı sembolik bir boşluk hakimdir. Bu nedenle, baba ve oğul, sürekli, bir süre önce annenin yaptığı gibi, herşeyden vazgeçip intihar etmek yerine neden hayatta kalmaya mücadele etmeye devam etmeleri gerektiği sorusu ile karşı karşıya gelirler. İkisinin de ortak cevabı, her ne kadar bundan anladıkları aynı olmasa da, "iyi adamlar" oldukları ve "ateşi taşıdıkları"dır. Bu çalışmada, tüm gösterenlerin yok olduğu ve hayatın zamanı geçmiş göstergelerin gölgesinde zar zor sürdürülebildiği bir dünyayı anlatan *Yol* romanında, aslında postmodern olumsuzluğu en uç noktasına taşıyarak hayatı anlamlı kılanın ne olduğu ve postmodern kıyametin ardından var olmanın etik sorumluluğunun ne olduğu sorularının öne sürüldüğü tartışılacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Cormac McCarthy, *Yol*, Kıyamet-sonrası Edebiyatı, Çağdaş Roman, Distopya, Postmodern Etik, Postmodern Roman

Introduction

Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* depicts a postapocalyptic world where survival has become a constant struggle. Unlike science-fiction dystopias which present worlds with meticulously detailed political and social institutions in alien yet uncannily familiar settings, in the dystopic setting of *The Road*, the earth is devoid of almost any signs of civilization. The land is barren, nature is dead, the weather is hostile and any remaining resources have long been plundered. There seems to be two choices available to the last few people standing: either to fight for survival to the end or to put an end to this miserable existence. A few pages into the book, the reader realizes that the arguments for suicide outweigh those for survival. "You talk about taking a stand but there is no stand to take. ... You have no argument because there is none" (McCarthy, 2006, p.57) says the mother to her husband shortly before she walks to her death and disappears into the darkness. Her words not only explain her reasons for choosing suicide but also underscore the main crisis in the novel: the lack of meaning and a chance for an ethical existence in this "[b]arren, silent, godless" (McCarthy, 2006, p.4) world. However,

* Assist. Prof. Dr., Boğaziçi University, Faculty of Arts and Letters, English Language and Literature Department, alkacayl@boun.edu.tr

the father chooses to live and make his son live even though survival requires scavenging whatever can be found in the deserted towns they walk through, in the abandoned houses and markets they come across, fighting for their lives and over whatever few supplies they have against the scarce number of people they encounter on the road. Death is imminent, and constantly on their minds. Several times, they nearly starve to death, and barely escape being killed by vagrants on the road, both by men turned cannibals for lack of food, and by people simply trying to survive like themselves. Nevertheless, they walk on towards the south, hoping at least to find more favorable weather conditions but not really knowing what awaits them there. Their journey constantly confronts them with the need to justify their decision to insist on living, when life seems to have become nothing more than a prolonged and painful endeavor to stay alive.

The difference between this father and son, as they see it, and others they encounter on the road is what I will call their “ethics of being”—that is, the moral narrative they construct “to be”, to continue living.¹ While the few others violate every conceivable moral code just to survive, the father and the son believe that they are the “good guys” “carrying the fire”. In this context, I want to consider *The Road* in what follows as a narrative that illustrates the plight of the subject, declared to be dead in postmodern times, trying to survive the crisis of truth and meaning by establishing an ethics of being. I would like to argue that by foregrounding the story of the father and son who adhere to their ethics of being in contrast to the ethics of abnegation—a total defiance of the life based on any discursive reality, as in the case of the mother—which haunts not only the male duo but also the narrative, McCarthy points towards the only possible life-affirming gesture available to the subject if “he” wants to live in the aftermath of the poststructuralist apocalypse.

In an interview, Cormac McCarthy refuses to account for the catastrophe that devastated the land, and probably the whole world, in *The Road* arguing that “it is not really important” whether it has a natural cause or is caused by human error (Jurgensen, 2009). There would be two main implications of any cause given: firstly, the two main characters of the novel would be seen either as helpless victims of a natural disaster or culprits guilty by association with that fatal human error, and in each case they would be understood only in relation to the event that ruptured the course of everyday life on the planet rather than potential agents in their own lives, however miserable it is. Consequently, their choices would be overlaid with significance external to them. What is at stake in the novel, however, is the ethical choices available to them in a state of “thrownness,” to borrow a term from Heidegger. Søfting (2013) also observes that “[t]he lack of specific reasons for the world’s demise, the absence in the text of a pre-apocalyptic world, gives the text a universal quality and contributes to its atmosphere of timelessness and placelessness” (p.708). That the two main characters are not given names but are referred to as the man and the boy, or “his father” and “his son,” further accentuates this atmosphere of timelessness and placelessness. In their analysis of *The Road*, many critics discussed the all too familiar father and son trope as mythical and even messianic characters, especially considering the abundance of biblical references in the narrative.² How-

¹ I use the term “being” in this phrase in its simplest sense to mean “to exist” or “to live” as opposed to “to cease to be,” as implied in the term “ethics of abnegation.” But I am not referring to its philosophical sense, which would entail an extensive epistemological and ontological discussion of its meaning from different philosophical perspectives, a discussion that could not be undertaken within the confines of this article.

² The father may have had religious faith prior to the apocalypse but the narrative attests to his loss of belief not only in God, but in any notion of “Big Other” in Lacanian terms, be it religious, political, or governmental. Furthermore, I believe the novel hardly posits its main characters as messianic figures especially in view of its ending, as will be discussed below. The abundance of biblical references, which have been studied by several critics, seem to convey the father’s nostalgia for a past when it was possible to believe as well as his almost religious

ever, particularly in view of the father's constant critique of grand narratives including religion and state ideologies, I would like to argue that the anonymity of the characters coupled with their dehistoricized background, renders them apt figures for millennial subjects who are trying to justify their being on slippery grounds in the aftermath of poststructuralism and in the era of post-truth.

Unsurprisingly therefore, the father's grievance about the world empty of almost all signifieds and life barely sustained in the shadow of outdated signifiers resonates with the modern subject's frustration about the loss of meaning and reality in the aftermath of the postmodern apocalypse:

He tried to think of something to say but he could not. 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 name 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 referent and so of its reality. (McCarthy, 2006, p. 89)

Not only does the narrative present a symbolic vacuum, an absence of socio-economic context and personal ties that would form the basis of identity and help create meaning in life but also language gradually disappears word by word, following the disappearance of the referents to which these words are supposed to correspond. It is almost impossible to miss in this mournful observation about "the sacred idiom" being "shorn of its referent" and "of its reality" a subtle reference to the all too familiar poststructuralist theories of language and its relation to reality. Similarly, Morgenstern (2014) suggests that the novel "presents us with [...] an apocalyptic encounter with the Traumatic Real, with what happens when the Symbolic is blown away, reduced to ashes, and then very tenuously seeks to reassert itself or to merely hold on" (p.36). While it is possible to read the novel as "a dystopic allegorization of patriarchal psychological crisis or of a more general, historical crisis of post-9/11 vulnerability" as she does (p.35), I would like to argue that it lends itself to a consideration in a larger framework, as an account of the subject's encounter with the world shorn of its reality and with the problem of how to engage with the other in such a hostile environment, which has become a major concern for thinkers and writers alike especially since the turn of the last century.

Poststructuralist theory has faced a number of accusations since its inception in the latter half of the 20th century. One of these accusations, perhaps the weightiest of them all, and which has given those who make these accusations the strongest sense of justification, concerns its supposed inability to respond to the sufferings of the "real-world"; its relativism and internal inconsistencies, critics argue, renders any ethical choice or judgement impossible. How could any consistent political stance be taken, justice administered, any agency or responsibility assumed even in one's personal life, if everything was a text, and contingent? If one common poststructuralist response to this accusation has been to identify a non-foundational ethical starting point to form a stance, as in Spivak's strategic essentialism, the other has been to offer sophisticated ethical philosophies of otherness, alterity, care and responsibility, freedom and justice as in the cases of philosophers such as Levinas, Derrida and Luc-Nancy. Refraining from forming essentializing theories, each thinker tried to consider inherent paradoxes and terms of (im)possible engagements in any encounter with the other

devotion to his mission to keep his son alive. As Erik J. Wielenberg (2010) notes in his "God, Morality, and Meaning in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*": "It is not that he wants to keep going because he believes that he is on a divine mission. Rather, the desire comes first: because he wants to keep going, he believes—or tries to believe—that he is on a divine mission" (p.3). For a detailed examination of the Christian elements in the novel see Eric Pudney's (2015) "Christianity and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*" and Christina Bieber Lake's (2017) "Christ-Haunted: Theology on *The Road*".

that could also form the basis of relations with the external world. Nevertheless, their discussions hardly ever proposed a positive program, and their fascination with aporias has made neat distinctions between the self and the other, life and death, right and wrong, and by extension definitions of freedom, consciousness, and justice all but impossible. Consequently, the subject is caught in a Moebius strip, starting at one point and ending up on the other side.

In “Passions”, Derrida (1995) opposes both those who find in Deconstruction “a modern form of immorality, of amorality, or of irresponsibility” and those who find “intense attention, to those things which one could identify under the fine names of ‘ethics’, ‘morality’, ‘responsibility’, ‘subject’, etc.” (p.15), claiming that his work does neither. Acknowledging that questions concerning the nature of ethics, morality and responsibility are always urgent and demand answers, they nevertheless, he argues, “must remain urgent and unanswered, at any rate without a general and rule-governed response” (p.16). Instead, Derrida tackles with these concepts and others such as “gift” and “hospitality” which explore several aspects of ethical stances available in the encounter with the other without proposing a systematic approach. Without going into much detail, it is important to note that, while he advocates a selfless and non-utilitarian engagement with the other, independent of any hierarchical relation, he also foregrounds the attending dangers and hence the impossibility such an encounter as an authentic experience. His discussion of hospitality is a case in point: He proposes an idea of “unconditional hospitality” which entails an absolute openness to the other, but also posits it as an impossibility because that exposes one to any potential evil and violence from the other. Likewise, his discussions of justice, friendship, forgiveness involve similar tensions, paradoxes, and dilemmas with the other.³

Derrida’s philosophy concerning the other mainly engages with Levinas’s writings on alterity and transcendence. In his by now perhaps the best known statement, Levinas posits ethics as the “first philosophy”, and places intersubjective relations with the other at the heart of his thinking. As he explains in several of his writings, the self is responsible for the other even when there is no direct relationship; the mere presence of an “other” and this recognition, even prior to a direct address, hold the subject responsible for the other. Hence, existence, for Levinas, is always a state of being-with in Heideggerian terms (*mitsein*).

Following Derrida’s engagement with Levinas’s phenomenological analysis of living in the world, Jean-Luc Nancy deals with questions of the equality and singularity of existence as part of a by now well-established tradition of continental philosophy on otherness. His notion of “singular plural” repeats the Derridean gesture of conjoining paradoxical concepts to explore the tension and possible openings they can offer in the subject’s relation to the other. With this term, Nancy intends to offer a possible alternative perspective to what he calls the *democratic paradox*, which assumes that everybody is equal, and thereby, disregards the differences between persons. Instead, he advocates their singularity, which is the precondition to institute justice. What is essential is the *singularity* of the other, its being incomparable to a second entity of the same order, that is any other member of its group, hence its unicity.

The reason I have briefly sampled some of the most important discussions of otherness in mid-20th century philosophy is to show that these theorists’ intense interest in otherness amounts to a reaction to the extreme emphasis on contingency in poststructuralism. Further, these examples shed light on the intellectual atmosphere that informs fiction writers in one way or another, and their increasing attraction to narratives that explore the uniqueness of the

³ For a discussion of hospitality in *The Road* see P. Snyder’s (2008) “Hospitality in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*”.

subject's experience in the world and encounter with the other, whatever form that "other" may take—another person, institution, nature, etc. Cormac McCarthy's depiction of the plight of the father and son in their attempts to attribute meaning to their lives and formulate an ethics of being which involves establishing the limits of the care for the other in its singularity and with hospitality seems to be part of such a general tendency in the literature of the new millennium.

In this context, while the main crisis in the novel is conveyed by taking the postmodern distrust of signifiers to an extreme through the depiction of a world devoid of signifieds, the main problem of textualization of reality remains intact. The situation of the boy perfectly illustrates this absolute reliance on the discourse of the father for any conceptualization of reality. Having been born right after the apocalypse, the boy has no knowledge of the world as it had been. He is the only son he has known in his life, his is the only father, and his was the only mother, before she walked into the darkness one night. The words "father" and "mother", for him, are few of those in his vocabulary which corresponds to a lived experience whereas most others exist only as words in constant deferral of meaning in the chain of signifiers in his father's discourse. Even a simple signifier as "friend" does not correspond to any signified in the world he knows. He is familiar with the word, and tries to imagine what it must have been like to have friends, but without the experience it does not signify much. In one of their conversations, which sound more like catechisms than discussions, the boy asks about his father's friends:

Did you have any friends?
Yes. I did.
Lots of them?
Yes.
Do you remember them?
Yes. I remember them.
What happened to them?
They died.
All of them?
Yes. All of them.
Do you miss them?
Yes. I do.
Where are we going?
We're going south.
Okay. (McCarthy, 2006, pp. 59-60)

If one reason why their conversation comes to a halt almost abruptly is its grievous content, the more important reason is the boy's inability to pursue it; he just does not know what else can one ask about friends. Hence, the conversation turns towards their one and only shared topic and remaining goal: going south. Based on his painful yet nostalgic memories, his father has constructed a narrative reality, a fictional world, for the boy. Hence, if the father's experience of the post-apocalypse represents the poststructuralist crisis of the signifier in its failure to correspond to a signified, the boy's illustrates absolute reliance on the discourse of the father—almost a literal rendering of the Lacanian notion of the Name-of-the-Father, where there is only the "name" and the imaginary reality corresponding to it—to create, unwittingly, an illusion of reality to save himself from the nothingness of the world they inhabit. Thus, the novel demonstrates that if any meaning is to be found in life, life must be inevitably textualized through his father's stories. Since he was a baby, his father has been telling the boy stories about "the good guys" who represent an ideal ethical identity. These "old stories of courage and justice", told by the father as a favorable pastime activity, not only construct a moral code for the boy but also constitute a purpose of their lives: if there is any

sense in their survival, it rests on their being “the good guys” and their mission of “carrying the fire”. Thus, the answer the father and the son give to the constantly pressing question of why still live, becomes interlinked with the answer they give to the other fundamental question regarding the moral code they should be following.

Nevertheless, the discourse of the father, that which constitutes their ethics of being, is not without the relativity and the inconsistency afflicting any grand narrative supposed to order life for all, as the son will also gradually discover much to his chagrin. As the narrative unfolds with distant and near encounters with the others on the road, the father and the son recurrently return to a discussion of what being a good guy entails. Whereas there seems to be some constant premises of the definition of being good, the father improvises the rest depending on the occasion, and the expectations of the boy. That they will not kill unless in self-defense, steal from others, eat other people or dogs are the ground rules they concur in. These rules convey respect to the unalienable right of the other to live, refuse to instrumentalize the other, or his property, for the needs of the self, and reject an anthropocentric view point that entitles humans to make use of nature, in this case animals, for survival. As such, there is a certain ethics of being that regulates the relationship between the self and the external world inherent in this discourse about the good guys carrying the fire. However, what the boy demands from his father is to be faithful to his own narrative, and act according to this discourse of the good guys carrying fire at all times, even when their lives are at stake. The irony is that—a fact frequently overlooked by critics as well—the boy’s understanding of what it means to be a good guy carrying the fire does not necessarily correspond to the father’s, and inevitably so. As the boy understands it, being a good guy entails a philosophy of care for the other which is not exclusionary or utilitarian. For the father, only the wellbeing and survival of his son is important, whereas for the boy anyone, especially in need, is worthy of their care. So when they run into a man hit by a lightning, the father is reluctant to share their food with him knowing that the man will not live long and, as far as he is concerned, giving him food means waste. Likewise, when they run into a near-blind elderly man, who calls himself Ely, the father does not want to share their food. His care is conditioned upon the utility of their goodness in the larger scheme of things. Both times, he is persuaded to share their food by his son, not because he is convinced but because he knows that not doing so would be betraying his son’s trust in him. It is imperative that the boy continue to have faith in the discursive reality he has built to keep them going. When they find a bunker full of supplies, the boy is worried that they are stealing someone else’s food although they are almost starving to death, and he needs to be convinced that the owners of the bunker are all long dead and it is ok to take their stuff. The boy’s selfless care for the other is an example of what Levinas calls “mad goodness” and views as a kind of saintliness in his *Alterity and Transcendence* (1999, p. 109). According to Levinas, this kind of goodness, which is “outside all systems, all religions, all social organizations” is “the most human thing there is in a man” (p.108-9). Thus, he also emphasizes the uniqueness of the act, its spontaneity, and claims that it cannot be systematized, frustrating all hopes for a possible all-encompassing ethical discourse based on goodness.

Hence, there are times the boy cannot convince his father to comply with his “mad goodness”—as when, for example, they have to run away without helping a cellar-full of people used as live-stock by others. The boy needs confirmation that they would have been killed if they had stayed and tried to rescue them, and he also need to be reassured that they would never eat other people even if they were starving. Hence, the boy demands ethical consistency and justification for their actions from his father each time the narrative of good guys carrying the fire is challenged by the harsh realities of life. Although traumatized each time they fail to live up to the ethical ideal they have established for themselves, he can console himself on

condition that they were not directly responsible for the harm inflicted or too powerless to prevent the harm as in the case of cannibalized people in the cellar.

It is their final ordeal against a thief who attempts at stealing their trolley full of supplies and food that marks the boy's complete detachment of himself from the father on moral terms. When the father succumbs to his anger once he catches up with the thief and retrieves their trolley and forces the man to take off all his clothes and shoes, he transgresses the boy's ethics based on care for the other. The boy very well knows that, in this harsh environment, going naked is a death warrant for the man, and no different than murder. When he finally succeeds in persuading his father to go back and return the man's clothes, they cannot find him anywhere; "we did kill him" he cries (McCarthy, 2006, p.260). For the boy, who has always been critical of his father's decisions about not sharing their food as liberally as he would like and his over-suspicious behavior towards anyone they come across, this marks an unredeemable violation of the discourse about the good guys carrying the fire. In response, he refuses to talk to the father, a symbolic gesture of his defiance of the father's language and discourse.

You have to talk to me, he said.

I'm talking.

Are you sure?

I'm talking now.

Do you want me to tell you a story?

No.

Why not?

The boy looked at him and looked away.

Why not?

Those stories are not true.

They don't have to be true. They're stories.

Yes. But in the stories we're always helping people and we don't help people. (McCarthy, 2006, pp. 267-8)

Just as his father had experienced earlier, as evident in his lack of faith in God and his disillusionment with the collapse of the state with all its technological marvels, the boy also has to confront the unbreachable gap between the signifier and the signified as symbolized by the father and his discourse of the good guys. This episode is immediately succeeded by the sickness and death of the father. Before he dies, the father is once again confronted with the ethical dilemma concerning what it means to be a good father: Does he have it in him to kill the boy for his own good so that he will not suffer after he is gone? But he cannot bring himself to do it for he cannot bear the thought of having killed his own son, for whatever "good" reason, and no matter how short a while he will have to live with this pain afterwards. He dies, leaving his pistol and the decision whether to kill himself or not to his son. For the little boy, this literal death of the father by the end of the narrative is only a repetition of his symbolic death that had taken place earlier. As a result, he will now have to grow up, and make his own decisions. It is his turn to act according to his ethics.

At this point, the narrative returns to the same question that has been haunting it all along, whether to continue with the struggle to survive and not just to put an end to life. The path the boy takes, literally and metaphorically, in response to this question, points at the only possible life-affirming choice available to the subject. Obviously, at his age, without the father's support, his survival is hardly a matter of simple choice. Yet, if he has learned one thing from his father, it is not to give up without first exploring his choices; and his desire to live entails taking a risk they would never have taken if his father had been alive. He decides not to hide from the strange man who comes his way, and agrees to join him and his group—only, however, after asking the crucial questions: if he was one of the good guys, if he was carrying

the fire, if he had children, and if he ate people. The boy's questions are intended to test the ethics of the man, to test the limits of his "hospitality" in Derridean terms and the degree of his "madness" in his "goodness", i.e. his humanity as Levinas defines it. He, in a sense, decides to approach the man in his singularity, by not categorically dismissing him as a threat or potential evil. Equally important, also, is his retention of the vocabulary of his father in the description of his ethics, which suggests a repetition of the father's discourse with difference—is not every son's detachment from the father a repetition with a difference after all? Although it is impossible to know for sure if the man was telling the truth when he gives the answers the boy was hoping for, the use of "would" which suggests a sustained activity long enough to become a past habit in the penultimate paragraph indicates that the boy stays with the man's family for at least some time: "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 didn't forget" (McCarthy, 2006, p. 286). Thus, the ending of the novel suggests that if there is any hope for the survival of the human race, it can only be possible not through exclusionary care and utilitarian goodness, absolute distrust of hospitality and denial of the other's singularity, as the father believed, but through an inclusive ethics of care, being open in the encounter with the other. Although this renders life precarious, entrusting the self almost completely to the mercy of the other, as seen in the case of the boy, negotiating the terms of mutual hospitality is offered as the only means of establishing communities that may sustain life on earth, and also attributing meaning to life which is otherwise simply prolonged survival. Thus, the life affirming gesture at the end of the narrative links the meaning of life with an ethics of being which involves care for the other.

The absence of the mother in this whole scenario of constructing an ethical stance as a means of retaining any sense of being a human and attributing some dignity and meaning to life is conspicuous. There is only a brief presence of the mother in the book, and in flashback, not in the present of the narration. Confronted with exactly the same questions, that is the futility of insisting on living when death is inevitable and imminent, and most probably in the worst possible way, the mother chose to die. She walks into the darkness, unable to see a thing, probably to kill herself with an obsidian as her husband taught her earlier. Her decision has been interpreted as an indication of her coldness, heartlessness and even selfishness, not surprisingly mostly by male critics.⁴ Feminist appraisals of the novel, on the other hand, mostly criticize the writer for his depiction of the mother as a fragile figure not strong enough to fight for her life and who surrender too quickly.⁵ However, I would like to suggest that it is also possible to see her decision to opt out of life as a radical feminine act, an ethical choice in its own right. Although the act in question here, the mother's suicide, coincides with the biologically female body in the novel, I use the term "feminine" not necessarily as referring to the biologically sexed body of the woman but to the supplement of the phallogocentric discourse and its definitions, following Lacan's discussion in "God and ~~Woman~~'s jouissance" (73).

It is important to note that, before the mother makes her final decision, the husband and the wife spend many nights "debating the pros and cons of self-destruction with the earnestness of philosophers chained to a madhouse wall" (McCarthy, 2006, 58). The allusion to

⁴ See Berit Åström's article titled "Post-Feminist Fatherhood and the Marginalization of the Mother in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*" for a comprehensive discussion of earlier critical analysis of *The Road*, mostly by male writers, focusing on the mother's inability to care for, love and show warmth towards her son, her lack of nurturing and survival skills

⁵ Like Berit Åström, Naomi Morgenstern also interprets McCarthy's depiction of the mother in an unfavorable light, missing the ethical agency, and more importantly the statement inherent in her defiance of phallogocentrism and male symbolic order.

Plato's cave in this statement is obvious, and a criticism of philosophical idealism implicit in the term "madhouse wall". It is not the Platonic sun of Goodness that lies outside as they stare at the dim shadows on the wall but a gaping void that cannot be filled in with any such extended discussions, which only help postpone making a decision and confronting the reality of their condition. Therefore, she has neither faith in a discursive ideal nor the desire to construct a new one to live for. She embraces the nothingness unflinchingly: "As for me my only hope is for eternal nothingness and I hope it with all my heart", she says (McCarthy, 2006, p. 57). Hers, then, is a completely different ethical gesture: It is an act, in the philosophical sense of the word, and a feminine one for that matter, as it offers nothing new, no positive program, as opposed to the masculine performative, which involves a great founding gesture of a new order.⁶ The decision of the boy to join the group of other people at the end is just such a founding gesture since it entails the only hope for a future, a potential to found a community, slim though the chances are. Whereas the mother's is the true poststructuralist ethical stance with its defiance of any symbolic meaning.

To conclude, it is the poststructuralist contention that there is no outside of the text, and Cormac McCarthy's novel seems to offer not alternative to this view. Then, confronted with this inevitable textualization, one choice is to opt out from the signifying chain as the mother did and defy life; the other, if life is to be affirmed and any social order is to be formed, is to assume the responsibility of one's own narrative as the boy does. In a sense, the boy repeats the father's gesture of subscribing to a narrative which is both the father's and his – in its difference from the father's ethics. Thus, in *The Road*, the life affirming ethics of being based on care for the other prevails over the text as the only possible opening for a future. Nevertheless, it is the dead mother's ethics of abnegation that haunts the characters each time they return to their initial questions, revealing the fragility of any answer.

References

- Åström, B. (2018). Post-Feminist fatherhood and the marginalization of the mother in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. *Women: A Cultural Review*, 29(1), 112-128.
- Derrida, J. (1995). *Passions. On the name*. (D. Wood, Trans.). Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Derrida, J. (2000). *Of hospitality*. (R. Bowlby, Trans.). Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Jurgensen, J. (2009). Hollywood's Favorite Cowboy-Interview with Cormac McCarthy. *Wall Street Journal*. 2 March 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748704576204574529703577274572>
- Lacan, J. (1998). *The seminar of Jacques Lacan: On feminine sexuality, the limits of love and knowledge*. Miller, J. A. (Ed.). (B. Fink, Trans.). New York: W.W. Norton
- Lake, C. B. (2017). Christ-Haunted: Theology on *The Road*. *European journal of American studies*, 12(3), 1-14.
- Levinas, E. (1999). *Alterity and transcendence*. London: The Athlone Press.
- Levinas, E. (1985). *Ethics and infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*. (R. A. Cohen, Trans.). Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP.

⁶ See Slavoj Žižek's *Enjoy your symptom*, particularly the section entitled "Why is suicide the only successful act?" in "Chapter 2: Why is woman a symptom of man?" for a succinct discussion of feminine act vs masculine performative.

- Nancy, J. L. (2000). *Being singular plural*. (R. D. Richardson and A. E. O'Bryne, Trans.). Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- McCarthy, C. (2006). *The road*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Morgenstern, N. (2014). Postapocalyptic responsibility: Patriarchy at the end of the world in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 25(2), 33-61.
- Pudney, E. (2015). Christianity and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, *English Studies*, 96(3), 293-309.
- Snyder, P. A. (2008). Hospitality in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. *The Cormac McCarthy Journal*, Vol. 6, Special Issue: The Road, 69-86.
- Søfting, I. A. (2013). Between Dystopia and Utopia: The Post-Apocalyptic Discourse of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. *English Studies*, 94(6), 704-713.
- Wielenberg, E. J. (2010). God, morality, and meaning in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. *The Cormac McCarthy Journal*, 8(1), 1-19.
- Zizek, S. (2008). *Enjoy your symptom*. New York and London: Routledge.
-