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Ashley Elisabeth Murphy

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The Ethical Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas: A Phenomenological Approach to

Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

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December 2013

The Ethical Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas: A Phenomenological Approach to

Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

A Thesis Presented

By

Ashley Elisabeth Murphy

Submitted to

The Graduate School of Bridgewater State University  
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## Chapter 1

### Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas

American media and pop culture have experienced an influx of imagined apocalyptic scenarios since WWII when the social consciousness became aware of mankind's ability to wreak global destruction, thus triggering societal questioning of morality and violence. In particular, the post-apocalyptic world of literature and cinema harbors a strong sense of confusion regarding morality challenged by the necessity to survive. The post-apocalyptic fiction of modern times questions the structural foundation of society as we know it, begging the postmodern enquiry regarding the survival of humanity without a universal morality bound by law and cultural adherence. Cormac McCarthy's novel, taking place in a barren, lawless world, investigates possible answers to the postmodern question of what would happen if the world as we know it were to succumb to an unthinkable destruction, where chaos prevails and there is no ethical foundation to dictate social behavior.

Critical exploration of morality in post-apocalyptic fiction is nothing new and is what most critics have done with McCarthy's *The Road*; however, in exploring the context of *The Road* through the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, a French philosopher who survived the Holocaust, one is able to explore morality in the face of violence and investigate the depth of human evil from the angle of his ethical philosophy. Applying Levinas's philosophy to the apocalyptic scenario helps to surface the personal internal struggle in comprehending whether or not a universal morality exists, or if it does exist, if it is diminishing. The phenomenological approach of Levinas to these concerns deepens the understanding of the human fascination with the apocalypse because the phenomenological approach shifts the more accustomed viewpoint and evaluation of reality by: "a *suspension* or *bracketing* of the everyday natural attitude and all 'world-positing' intentional acts which assumed the existence of the world, until the practitioner is led back into the domain of pure transcendental subjectivity" (Moran 2). This, in a way, is a form of defamiliarization, which allows one to reassess personal traditions, values,

and, of course, morality in one's existence in a shared reality, which is a reality including the existence of others.

Emmanuel Levinas's philosophy explores ethics in relation to the Other as understood as God—an ultimate being, or any unifying element of existence beyond worldly comprehension—and the Other as another human being—a neighbor, a friend, a stranger on the street, or the clerk standing behind the counter at the local coffee shop. Thus the concept of the Other, according to Levinas, is a concept inseparable from the responsibility and ethical behavior toward the Other. My thesis investigates McCarthy's treatment of ethical behavior under extreme circumstances as understood in terms of Levinas's philosophy as a philosophy that explores ethics under extreme circumstances and the ultimate challenges to moral behavior.

Levinas's exploration of phenomenology started between 1928 and 1929, when he studied under Husserl and Heidegger in Germany and, thus, developed his ethical philosophy based on the relationship with the Other. Levinas eventually strayed away from Husserl when Husserl became involved with the Nazis. After WWII, Levinas wrote on Jewish spirituality, his influence being that most of his family had been murdered during the Holocaust. These early writings helped to further develop his ontological writings he would eventually be widely known and admired for. His status as one of the leading philosophers in France was confirmed with the publication of his work *Totality and Infinity* in 1961, in which "he gave phenomenology a radically *ethical* orientation, an orientation it has lacked since the death of Scheler" (Moran 320). Levinas sought to elaborate the ethical nature of the relation with the Other; which is the focal point of this investigation in terms of *The Road*. Levinas has thus led to a growing interest in ethical issues among postmodernist critics and deserves an expansive exploration in relation to contemporary post-apocalyptic literature, particularly *The Road*.

This investigation of McCarthy's *The Road* in the context of Levinas's philosophy focuses on four areas, each exploring an element of the Other in its application to themes in *The Road*: justice and society, violence, God, and language. Each section applies the philosophy of Levinas to the text and extracts the ethical themes thoroughly. Again, the importance of the application of Levinas's philosophy to

McCarthy's novel is crucial because it acknowledges the interest in ethics in postmodern criticism as well as in the public consciousness.

McCarthy's *The Road* follows the journey of a father and son after an apocalyptic event has left the landscape barren and ashen. The son, having been born post-apocalypse, only knows the world as is, where the father lives with the memory of how the world used to be. The father is instilling his son with stories of an existence completely foreign to his son, who has ever only experienced the world as it is after the apocalypse. The post-apocalyptic world is void of community and social institutions, where an individual takes interest to do what it takes to survive without concern for others. Emmanuel Levinas, viewing western philosophy as grounded in this same egotism, "wants to argue that my *responsibility to the other* is the fundamental structure upon which all other social structures rest" (Moran 321). This is the focus of the first section, "Proximity, Justice, and Memory: Elements to Rebuild an Ethical Society," in which the social aspects of Levinas's philosophy assist in explaining the role of the Other in accordance with society and state institutions. The novel imagines the world filled with starving people succumbing to unspeakable horrors in order to survive, and the only hope the reader has is the loyal devotion of an unnamed father to his unnamed son. The son is being raised with the old society's moral foundation while the resulting post-apocalyptic society adheres to no such laws. McCarthy, then, is asking the reader at what point these moral obligations are counterproductive in surviving in a world without a moral doctrine to adhere to.

Specifically, this first chapter delves into Levinas's concept of morality in action; that is, without the innate core existing within the son, society, justice, judgment nor ethics can exist in *The Road*. The post-apocalyptic world is consumed by chaos and anarchy, where no state or judicial institutions maintain guidelines for acceptable social behavior or morality. This universality of morals is needed in order to create a cohesive, social community. Colin Davis, a Levinas scholar, makes a point in observing the universal needs of morality: "Levinas requires some account of how, without universalization, the encounter with the Other can be at the foundation of a moral society" (3-4). The existence of the Other is what constitutes the foundation of a society in which the majority of survivors in *The Road* lack. There

are few others to build this moral society upon because the world is barren and without resources. It is in this way that anarchy ensues and engulfs the protagonist and his son into surviving, at times, at an immoral cost. The challenges to moral behavior in *The Road* illustrates Levinas's question: "what does it mean to talk of justice or responsibility when the belief systems which sustained such terms are in a state of collapse, is it possible to have an ethics without foundation, without imperatives or claim to universality?" (Davis 3-4). Levinas's question further emphasizes the fundamental problem of the novel: how it is possible to act ethically toward the Other in the situation when the son is raised without the help of the state to instill and reinforce a universal set of ethics, and his father is constantly vigilant to avoid the Other in order to survive.

Although Levinas stresses the importance of the Other as the Other pertains to me, he also notes that this is accepting the violence that the Other may do to me. In terms of an ethical, ontological existence, a person is responsible for the Other in that in even first acknowledging the existence of the Other he is provoking a response, whether this response is embracing or negating. This is the focal explication in the second chapter titled, "Violence in *The Road*: The Face, Killing, and Freedom," where I discuss Levinas's coined term "the face" as it relates to killing and freedom within *The Road*. The face is as it is physically as well as ontologically: it is what we speak to when talking and it is an intimate relation and we share biologically as human. It is in this knowledge of the Other that essentially threatens our own existence and puts our own power and freedom into question. The Other does not exist without the face, as it is the initial occurrence of a relationship with the Other.

The most prominent ethical dilemma emerges not when there is killing, but when there is cannibalism. Even when the father commits murder, it is justified in the purpose of protecting his son, which can be forgiven; however, cannibalism is the extreme negation of the Other. Newborns on spits, half-eaten people corralled in a basement, and mercenaries called road-rats devouring their dead are examples of the gruesome reality in *The Road*. It is through Levinas that the significance of truly not seeing the Other as an ethical responsibility is a clear moral dilemma throughout *The Road*. Violence is everywhere in present day American culture, so much so that people are becoming desensitized to the



brutal actions that a person can commit to another. Thus, Levinas provides a deeper understanding of responsibility and, while explaining the use of violence, or negation, investigates how self-diminishing acts of violence are:

The putting into question of the self is precisely a welcome to the absolutely other. The other does not show it to the I as a theme. The epiphany of the Absolutely Other is a face by which the Other challenges and commands me through his nakedness, through his destitution. He challenges me from his humility and from his height. He sees but remains invisible, thus absolving himself from the relation that he enters and remaining absolute. The absolutely Other is the human Other. And putting into question of the Same by the Other is a summons to respond. The I is not simply conscious of this necessity to respond, as if it were a matter of an obligation or a duty about which a decision could be made; rather the I is, by its *very position*, responsibility through and through. And the structure of this responsibility will show how the Other, in the face, challenges us from the greatest depth and the highest height – by opening the very dimension of elevation. (*Transcendence and Height* 17)

Levinas is referring to an innate sense of morality given to humanity not necessarily through God, per say, but through a deep-seated recognition of the human condition in which responsibility for the Other is essential to preserve peace. It is through Levinas that the violence and cannibalism in McCarthy's *The Road* reveals its absolute emptiness and desperation.

McCarthy's defamiliarization of a road, a more or less permanent path designed for people to pass each other frequently, demonstrates the extreme circumstances in which this ethical core can be tested and exposed. McCarthy describes a post-apocalyptic hell, where survivors lose all human decency and adhere to no societal laws. To imagine a world with a lack of logical association and decency is frightening to our culture in that all sense of purpose and unification seems impossible. Not being able to see clearly the human face is a disassociation put in place by McCarthy to allow the reader the experience of not being able to relate to characters in the text because in the world of *The Road*, there is little need to relate. The purpose of existence is to survive, and, for most, even the biological purpose of reproduction is lost. This

lack of relation on a biological, humane level is an association that Levinas as a philosopher is well aware of in his time because of his experience of horror and loss during the Holocaust. Though Levinas personally faced the most evil of human behaviors, he is still able to discuss this ethical responsibility toward the Other, and he even emphasizes the responsibility of the I in relation to the reaction of the Other. Levinas thus questions the nature of human relations and explores their ethical. He strives to understand how a person can kill and be responsible not only for his or her actions but also the actions of others. This idea of responsibility will be detailed more thoroughly in the second chapter, and it constitutes important themes in the philosophical works of Levinas and the fiction of McCarthy.

The face is crucial to understanding Levinas and his ethical philosophy because the face is the access to the ultimate human relationship. Recognizing the face of another human being is a humbling experience in that it reminds us this world is not our own, but rather it is a shared reality with the Other. Davis further emphasizes the importance of the face in emphasizing that, “In the face to face, the Other gives my freedom meaning because I am confronted with real choices between responsibility and obligation towards the Other, or hatred and violent repudiation. The Other invests me with genuine freedom, and will be the beneficiary or victim of how I decide to exercise it” (49). These concepts apply to *The Road* in multiple ways: the description of faces are vague and violence is abundant, promoting Levinas’s theory of that the struggle of freedom and power with the Other ensues most when the face is not recognized as something that is peaceful and relatable. It is, in turn, a power struggle for existence. Faces are vaguely described while bodies are prevalent, not only perpetuating the imagery of cannibalism but also stirring a sense of dehumanization. *The Road* is a world where people have become a food source, and McCarthy reminds us that in this post-apocalyptic hell where anarchy reigns there is no rationalizing with the road-rats, or as the protagonists refer to them, the “bad guys.” Ethically speaking, according to the protagonists the ultimate sin in *The Road* is cannibalism. In Levinassian philosophy, this ultimate violence is an effort to not only negate the Other’s existence, but to survive in a world where surviving may be meaningless because without the Other, there is, physically as well as philosophically, nothing left to sustain existence.

The third chapter, “Investigating God and the Other in McCarthy’s *The Road*,” explores the theme of God and the Infinite in relation to morality in *The Road*. Throughout the novel, the father questions God directly as well as indirectly, maintaining the belief that his purpose for living is to preserve his son, who must be the word of God. The father “knew only that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke” (5). It is with this belief that the father is able to continue on, despite the horrific reality of the world surrounding him. He thus instills his morality into his son, without instilling any particular religious affiliations behind his moral foundation. The morality question is so prevalent in *The Road* that an ethical application would be beneficial for postmodern and post-apocalyptic critical readers to better critically understand the depth of McCarthy’s work.

This chapter investigates the notion of God in *The Road*, in the philosophical rather than theological context, following the thought of Levinas: “the ethical (rather than ‘ethics’) is a name that describes, a posteriori, a certain event of being in a nonsubsumptive relation with the other” (*Is Ontology Fundamental?* 8). Ethics and morality are, therefore, placed in the realm of philosophy in Levinas’s philosophy, in order to use the terms in application to human behavior and thought. Levinas theorizes that ethics starts with philosophy, and in that philosophy is not only the love of wisdom, but also the wisdom of love. Levinas discusses God not as a theological being but as an ontological phenomenon beyond time and space which binds us in the human experience. It is, in an essence, the innate love for each other that provides us with a sense of responsibility for the Other, in which case is the existence of God.

Levinas uses the term God as a philosophical term to describe the ultimate transcendence within a relationship with the Other. McCarthy, however, uses the term in a theological manner, but leaves the specific religious affiliation to the imagination of the reader. In relation to religion, Levinas writes: “Religion is the relation with a being as a being” (*Is Ontology Fundamental?* 8). The father is constantly questioning the existence of God and meaning. In the beginning of the novel, there is an absence of God, which can be understood to be the absence of the Other, who has only been experienced by the father with his relationship to his son. The son is, therefore, viewed by the father in religious terms, because the

father associates his son with the divine and in being the sole reason for his own existence. The son and the father are a community of two, each the other's Other, and it is in this relationship that the two can exist. It is only when the father realizes he is dying that he, in turn, fears more for his son, who he would be leaving without the trust of others, and the Other. The isolation alone would render him to lose faith in his own meaning and responsibility toward the Other and, in turn, existence.

Within these themes lies Levinas's most recognized subject: morality. In relation to state, justice, and violence is the foundation of societal morality. Morality is easily recognizable in organized religion in laws dictated by religious doctrine, i.e. The Ten Commandments, which is reinforced by a hierarchal system made up of many people. Within McCarthy's *The Road*, there are no such institutions and no guidance to reinforce or dictate proper social norms, and yet the father seems to have instilled in his son a way of deciphering between the "good guys" and the "bad guys" as a survival tactic in this post-apocalyptic and anarchic world. Though there are no religious institutions in place in the novel, and it is clear the father believes in God, there are religious references in the novel, which further adds to the value of faith in hope.

One clear biblical reference in the novel is Ely, a name unmistakably derived from the prophet Elijah from the Old Testament. Ely poses this question to the father: "Suppose you were the last one left? Suppose you did that to yourself?" (169). Throughout the novel, the representation of the Other is initially one heavy with fear, but without the Other, the world is empty. This is why cannibalism is presented as the ultimate sin in the novel. The father and the son witness several incidents of cannibalism, and the tendency to impregnate women and eat newborn children is the especially horrific. After the father passes, the veteran reassures the son that he does not eat people and he did not eat his children. These actions, and also himself witnessing the veteran keep his promise to cover the dead father in a blanket, are tests for the son to know that this stranger is indeed, a "good guy."

The father struggles with his God, at times questioning his very existence, and at other times convinced. This desperation is the father clinging to whatever hope he has left in order to raise his son in a somewhat moralistic setting. Other characters in the book impregnate and even eat children, even their

own children. It is a world where children are not protected by their parents but, are instead, raised for food. It is, therefore, a miracle in a sense that the father did not eat his son at some point, and the son asks the veteran at the end of the novel if he didn't eat his own children: "Do you have a little boy?" in which the veteran replies, "We have a little boy and we have a little girl." The son then states: "And you didn't eat them" (284). This is because the father has instilled a moral law dictating that the "good guys" do not eat people. When the father believes in a purpose, he believes that the world can still be saved and civilization can be rebuilt. This belief in hope, God, morality, and the infinite, are especially prominent in the novel, and are directly related to state, justice, violence, and language in that without faith and the Other, one may never again feel responsible for humanity.

The fourth and final chapter is "Engaging the Other: Exploring Language in *The Road*," and it discusses language in *The Road*. Silvia Richter, a Levinas critic, focuses on Levinas's language and writes: "revelation is experienced not in mystical adventures, but in a common experience each one of us makes nearly every day: the concrete, spoken word addressed to another human being" (63). Language is an ambiguous term that can be discussed in terms of both McCarthy's style of writing and the language in *The Road*. In the first instance, McCarthy's language is bland and vague, allowing the reader a detachment from specific qualities of the characters' physical appearance. McCarthy purposefully ignores certain punctuation in an attempt to demonstrate the minimalistic use of proper language. For example, in his treatment of dialogue, he does not use quotation marks, which, not only expresses a collapse of written language, but also the insignificance of such matters in a world where culture is nonexistent. According to Levinas, in extreme, violent situations, language is no longer situated at the level of comprehension. McCarthy not only uses minimal language for descriptions as well as for expressions, but also has the characters use minimal language in dialogue.

Another observation about the language in *The Road* reveals that within the verbal exchanges between characters, the characters are not clearly indicated, blurring the internal and external dialogue, and thus creating a confusion of communication. In speaking to one another, they are developing a sense of the Other. When applying the idea of the face in relation to dialogue, it is clear that the face is that

which speaks, and it is through recognition and acceptance of the face that one shares in the transcendence of God and the infinite in the act of speaking. As the only Other around to engage in conversation, it is especially hurtful when the son purposely avoids talking with his father after the father has committed a sin according to their laws. For instance, after the father kills the man that is physically threatening the son, the son does not talk to him for quite some time, and when he does, it is in short responses, minimizing the verbal socialization between them.

McCarthy's treatment of punctuation and his idiosyncratic recording of dialogues in *The Road* together with his description of bodily gestures and behaviors contribute to the sensation of the breakup of the traditional means of communication. This stress on the nonverbal means of communication parallel Levinas's language of the body: "The body is the fact that thought is immersed in the world that it thinks and, consequently, expresses this world while it thinks it" (*Meaning and Sense* 40). In other words, though verbal language is an expression, it is less candid than the unconscious language dictated by the body. Bodies are an essential theme throughout McCarthy's novel, from being a food source to being a binding agent to the cruel world in which it resides. Body gestures, such as the son turning away when the father is trying to speak to him, represents a passive attempt at negating the father's existence when the son struggles with the killing of the road-rat, or when he wants to find the little boy in the road. Ethics within *The Road* can only be discussed through language and learning, and the resulting paradox is that there is little language in the text itself.

Some critics view the ending of *The Road* to be an ending of hope, where goodness does prevail and the species will regenerate and exist while the cannibals will eventually run out of resources, including other people. Other critics see the ending as somewhat of a commentary on how the world can never return to what it once was, and the anarchy that exists will eventually decimate the species entirely, both the good and the bad guys. Whichever perspective one decides to take, one can gain a richer perspective when analyzing the novel in the context of Levinas's philosophy.

With the popularity of McCarthy's *The Road* amongst other novels, such as *All the Pretty Horses* and *No Country for Old Men*, all being turned into major motion pictures, the representation of society at

its worst and most violent has become a reality people simultaneously hate to envision but are also undeniably drawn to. *The Road* poses questions regarding morality, violence, God, and the role of language within these themes. Levinas is an important background to these themes because with Levinas we can examine these themes thoroughly and with a fresh perspective, bringing to the forefront the answers to the questions that are being so desperately sought by both the reader and society. In a society where social and state institutions are vastly changing, violence is in its prime as entertainment, God is being reevaluated, and the use and prevalence of language is shifting, McCarthy emphasizes just how relevant these elements are to the foundation of culture and society, and it is through Emmanuel Levinas that one can see the seriousness in which these elements should be considered in contemporary literature and media.

## Chapter 2

### Proximity, Justice, and Memory: Elements to Rebuild an Ethical Society

Post-apocalyptic fiction is a classic sci-fi concept that delves into the world re-imagined and examines the societal structure stripped to its core, and, as a result, explores themes such as the importance of training in basic survival tactics and questioning what it means to be human. Preparing for the apocalypse and surviving in a post-apocalyptic world are two scenarios posed in the postmodern thinking of today and is a conscious threat forever looming in the contemporary media. Most media outlets agree: the post-apocalyptic world is hell. It's the time when survivors grapple with guilt and consider death rather than cope with their post-apocalyptic lives. Such is the situation in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, where the new reality is hell and the main protagonist's memories are a painful reminder of what the world may never be again. The experience of the Second World War, including the Holocaust, gave modern artists the impetus to create post-apocalyptic themes. Levinas himself faced the brutal, violent reality of the war atrocities which people are capable of committing. This is why Levinas's ethics is relevant to this post-apocalyptic novel, where the underlying concern is questioning how we can continue with a just society and prosper with others after such vile disregard for the responsibility to the Other.

Society is defined as the aggregate of people living together in a more or less ordered community, with customs, laws and organizations. In *The Road*, there is no society because the remaining survivors do not trust others; there are no common customs, laws or civic organizations. People do not typically settle in one place in this post-apocalyptic world, but most survivors travel on the road and must always be on the move looking for food, shelter, and supplies, which is quite reminiscent of the nomadic lifestyle thought to be how humans existed at the very beginning of our existence. The most common enemy on the road is another person, and food is so scarce that it appears most have resorted to cannibalism to survive. Where a society may dictate laws about cannibalism, there is no common moral foundation existing in *The Road*. Without this commonality of laws, there can be no universal social justice, in



which case trusting another person is risky. The son is only made aware of the social laws of old as told to him by his father, who so desperately holds onto the values of the society that existed before the apocalypse. Emmanuel Levinas helps bring into perspective the several social elements relating to ethics in McCarthy's *The Road*, particularly the importance of proximity, justice, and memory. Proximity is the closeness of the Other one feels when in presence of the Other and is the foundation of moral responsibility. Social justice, while non-existent in *The Road*, is needed in order to rebuild society, and without memories, all values of the old society are lost.

This moral obligation is always present and is what helps mold the universal code of ethics: "Morality does not belong to Culture: it enables one to judge it; it discovers the dimension of height. Height ordains being" (*Meaning and Sense* 57). Height is a term Levinas uses in reference to transcendence into a spiritual-philosophical realm of subconsciousness that unites human existence. To put it into his own words: "Height introduces a sense into being. It is already lived across the experience of the human body. It leads human societies to raise up alters" (*Meaning and Sense* 57). This transcendence is timeless, and it allows one to relate to another even without ever knowing the other. This is in direct relation to why Levinas believes the other is of the utmost importance, where it is only in being responsible for the other will a society ever exist. Levinas is also saying morality is not defined by a culture, or society, as much as it gives the individual the right to judge his own society and culture. An individual can, therefore, judge the values of society; however, this is easier to judge when there is a univocal system. In *The Road*, there is no univocal system, and although the father yearns for this ethical foundation, he purposely avoids the very thing that could make this foundation grow: other people.

In order to rebuild society, the father and his son must first encounter other people. The father acts as a conduit of conscience from the past society and painfully makes aware his struggle to adjust to the new world. The son was born after the apocalyptic event, and thus this world is the only one he knows. The father strives to keep his son's innocence, while witnessing the horrors of a self-destructive world. Ironically, the son does desire others and does not have the same sense of urgency to remain in the

shadows because the father is successful in shielding his son from the violent reality of the world they are in. The son, thus, represents the concept of proximity, which Levinas defines as such:

proximity is a relationship with a singularity, without the mediation of any principle or ideality. In the concrete, it describes my relationship with the neighbor, a relationship whose signifyingness is prior to the celebrated 'sense bestowing.' This incommensurability with regard to consciousness, emerging as a trace from *I know not where*, is neither the inoffensive relation of knowledge where everything is equivalent nor the indifference of spatial contiguity. It is the summoning of myself by the other, it is a responsibility toward those whom we do not even know. The relation of proximity does not amount to any modality of distance or geometrical contiguity, nor to the simple 'representation' of the neighbor. It is *already* a summons of extreme exigency, an obligation which is *anachronistically* prior to every engagement. An anteriority that is older than the a priori. (*Substitution* 80)

In simpler terms, proximity describes the responsibility the son inevitably feels for every individual he encounters on the road and for people in general. The father, now prejudiced against people, is able to justify his inability to trust the Other, with the exception being his son, in who he is able to ensure has similar values. This innate need to be responsible for the Other is, as Levinas describes above, a trace from "*I know not where*." This trait is both comforting yet troubling for the father, as he believes the son's innocence will keep him from becoming hopeless, but would simultaneously make him unlikely to survive if left alone.

The father and son view people quite differently despite their common value system. As an example, the father views the first human he encounters in the novel as a monster rather than another human: "My brother at last. The reptilian calculations in those cold and shifting eyes. The gray and rotting teeth. Claggy with human flesh. Who has made of the world a lie every word" (75). The father is distinguishing this man not as a person, but as a cold-blooded monster eyeing the son as a next meal. Due to his experience, he recognizes the eyes as calculating and he notices the human flesh in the rotting teeth. The

world has become a lie because his moral foundation has been, and continues to be, tested. This view is apparent in all of his encounters, and though it saves their lives in this instance, the son is more willing to risk death for the chance to help the Other. The father constantly refers to the road as the main place where people will be and wishes to avoid it, while the son asks, "They could be the good guys. Couldn't they?" (103), but this question goes unanswered because it is irrelevant. Any person poses a threat and poses a risk the father refuses to take. He'd rather be safe in isolation than risk interaction. It is the son that offers food for the wandering Ely, and it is the son that pleads with his father to leave clothes to the thief that stole their supplies. The father, on the other hand, expresses his disdain for wanting to share clothes with the thief and he says to his son, "You're not the one who has to worry about everything," while the son solemnly replies, "Yes, I am...I am the one" (259). The son has a sense of proximity most people have lost in *The Road* even though he's never had the chance to experience society before the apocalypse.

Dermot Moran in *Introduction to Phenomenology* notes that "for Levinas, all social interaction is already in some sense taking place within the sphere of the other, the demand for ethics is always present, and as such it is an inescapable aspect of being human" (321). Levinas's ethical philosophy is based on a Hegelian element of the Other, a concept that suggests one can only exist with the presence of the Other, whether the Other is another person or God. Levinas establishes the responsibility of society and justice in terms of the thematization of society, the Other, and proximity. With relation to the Other, a being must share a sense of existence: "There must be justice among incomparable ones...there must be a thematization, thought, history, and writing. But being must be understood on the basis of *being's other*" (*Essence and Disinterestedness* 122). This is what makes up the social existence. The father is determined to keep his son's innocence, reminding him that things he sees will be in his mind forever. The father is desperately trying to maintain his son's sensitivity to death in order to keep him from desensitizing himself to the significance of the Other.

This responsibility for the Other does not stop at one individual, as this Other is the Other to what Levinas calls the neighbor, or a third: "The fact that the other, my neighbor, is also a third in relation to

another, likewise a neighbor, is the birth of thought, of consciousness of justice, and of philosophy” (*Substitution* 95). It is the start of a collection of other beings that make up the state, the society, and suggests the justice that meets the needs of the individuals that make up the society; therefore, “Levinas requires some account of how, without universalization, the encounter with the Other can be at the foundation of a moral society. He attempts to respond to this problem by introducing the notion of *le tiers* (the third party), which functions as the key to social justice” (52). The encounter with the third party is what exposes the individual to the idea of a world much larger than himself and suggests the rules of justice and state.

The foundation of society is to be able to exist comfortably in a community with common laws, customs, and expectations. The father lives through the downfall of the old society and must adapt to the new, for even in the beginning of the end, the father took comfort in a makeshift and corrupt form of social justice:

People sitting on the sidewalk in the dawn half immolate and smoking in their clothes.

Like failed sectarian suicides. Others would come to help them. Within a year there were fires on the ridges and deranged chanting. The screams of the murdered. By day the dead impaled on spikes along the road. What had they done? He thought that in the history of the world it might even be that there was more punishment than crime but he took small comfort from it. (33)

The father takes comfort in the justice system that forms post-apocalypse even if it isn’t moral according to him and even if it is one that has more punishment than crime. The deteriorating society eventually crumbles completely and what remains is a barren landscape without laws or culture, and where the need for survival trumps the need for society: “Needs raise the simply given things to the rank of values... [f]or in fact no human need exists in the univocal state of an animal need. Every human need is from the first already interpreted culturally” (*Meaning and Sense* 44-45). Levinas is simply saying that the state, founded on the needs of man, can neither subsist nor arise without the philosophers “who have mastered their needs and contemplate the Ideas and the Good” (45) because without these fundamental values the

state would crumble, leaving the individual to exist without the recognition of the Other and the face; however, in *The Road*, there is no place for philosophizing as the basic needs for human survival are unable to be met. The people are reduced to existing like animals.

Levinas stresses the responsibility of being to the Other and emphasizes the balance needed between the state and the individual by stating: “both the hierarchy taught by Athens and the *abstract* and slightly *anarchical* ethical individualism taught by Jerusalem are simultaneously necessary in order to suppress violence” (*Transcendence and Height* 24). Violence, which is examined more thoroughly in the third chapter, is the ultimate form of attempted power over the Other; thus, not only does a being have its own existence, but in order to exist it needs to be perceived by the Other, which is a reflection of the face. This engaged relation between the being and the Other is essential for justice, philosophy, and ethics to exist. In *The Road*, there is no state, no society in which to govern ethics and violence. It is also the individual condoning of the face which allows the violence to endure. In a world wear masks are worn to breathe, and dirt and ash cover the rest of the face, a true ethical obligation can be easy to ignore in desperate times.

Moran also speaks to Levinas’s ethics in relation to society in the following way: “[Levinas] wants to argue that my responsibility to the other is the fundamental structure upon which all other social structure rest” (321). In *The Road*, society is absent, yet, glimpses of the past society are revealed through flashbacks of the father. Memory plays an important role in McCarthy’s novel in that it represents the past in which the father is trying to hold on to. The father wants the ethics of the past to be present in his son, securing an ethical future in which a society can develop and thrive. The cannibalism represents the extreme opposite end of this ethical spectrum, where humanity is lost indefinitely and a society would be nearly impossible to rebuild. It is only through these memories that the father can recollect his own morality, which is why one of the first stops he makes with his son is at his childhood home:

They went up the stairs and turned and went down the hallway. Small cones of damp plaster standing in the floor. The wooden lathes of the ceiling exposed. He stood in the doorway to his

room. A small space under the eaves. This is where I used to sleep. My cot was against this wall. In the nights in their thousands to dream the dreams of a child's imaginings, worlds rich or fearful such as might offer themselves but never the one to be. He pushed open the closet door half expecting to find his childhood things. Raw cold daylight fell through from the roof. Gray as his heart. (27)

This father constantly revisits his memories as a reminder of the importance of maintaining his son's innocence. This particular passage demonstrates the father's longing for the past, but also reiterates the importance of maintaining faith in his son's ability to uphold their morality.

The treatment of children is important in that the children are the future, hence why the cannibalism is most disturbing when the victims are children and infants, representing the death of the beginning before the beginning even has time to develop. The wandering Ely reflects upon this when he claims he thought he'd never see a child again. The world is unfit for children and it is a situation where children are not able to survive, and thus are unable to secure a future with people. The father struggles morally with this fate. He constantly asks himself if he will be able to murder his own son when he inevitably perishes from his own illness. In the end, he is unable to murder his own son: "I cant. I cant hold my son dead in my arms. I thought I could but I cant" (279). The father finds hope in his son and wants him to find the "good guys," a risk he was never able to take. The father realizes his son will have no chance without others. The man in the gray and yellow ski parka emerges only after the father passes, thus, only in the father's death does the son have a chance to exist with others.

Other references to the society lost are bittersweet pieces of the father's past described in terms of temporal disassociations: "The ashes of the late world carried on the bleak and temporal winds to and fro in the void. Carried forth and scattered and carried forth again. Everything uncoupled from its shoring. Unsupported in the ashen air. Sustained by a breath, trembling and brief. If only my heart were stone" (11). The father is in a temporal limbo, shifting his perspective from past to present. His past is made up of the society pre-apocalypse. The order and justice which was in place in his pre-apocalyptic world is

still in place for him, but the commonality among his fellow survivors is not. Yet he is bound with the sense of personal responsibility because he yearns for a safe world for his son.

While the father avoids others, the son yearns for them. Though he was born post-apocalyptic, he has only ever known his father, though is constantly reminded of a past he never knew. Remnants of the old society make appearances frequently in the novel, reminding the reader that this post-apocalyptic world is indeed still in shambles of a great disaster. The survival of human existence is questionable and the anxiety of the father is always nudging at the son as well as the reader. It is in those sudden references to the past that the torture of the present is so intimate for the father. When he revisits his old house, he reminisces about Christmas and black-outs, as the son “Watched shapes claiming [the father that] he could not see” (26). These shapes are the past, a yearning for commonality; a yearning for the Other besides his son and himself. He knows he cannot be the Other for his son forever, in that there needs to be the existence of the third party in order to rebuild a world with laws and justice to ensure a sound society. McCarthy purposely references iconic items in an effort to relate the father’s longing for the past to the present day reader: “By the door were two softdrink machines that had been tilted over into the floor and opened with a prybar. Coins everywhere in the ash. He sat and ran his hand around in the works of the gutted machines and in the second one it closed over a cold metal cylinder. He withdrew his hand slowly and sat looking at a Coca Cola” (23). Firstly, McCarthy demonstrates the value of money by indicating coins were everywhere. Secondly, in McCarthy specifically calling the soda Coca Cola versus just soda indicates he is trying to tug at the sympathy of the reader. The words “Coca Cola” are not spoken aloud because it is something the son doesn’t know and will probably never see again.

Despite the father’s memories and longing for life as it once were, most survivors choose death than surviving in a world of immorality and isolation. The son feels this yearnings particularly, especially when he comes so close to finding another being to relate to: “I’m afraid for that little boy... We should go get him, Papa. We could get him and take him with us. We could take him and we could take the dog. The dog could catch something to eat... And I’d give that little boy half of my food” (86). The son is yearning for a community, for something to live for. At this point he doesn’t care if he dies, while the

father is urging him to live on in this dangerous, lonely world. The son longs for other people, always questioning where they are: “I don’t know what we’re doing, he said. The man started to answer. But he didnt. After a while he said: There are people. There are people and we’ll find them. You’ll see” (244). The son has no sense of society because he wasn’t born into one, as indicated by the son’s inability to understand certain idioms: “I’ll be in the neighborhood,” says the father, and the son responds, “Where’s the neighborhood?” (95). There is a constant reminder of the communal past that once existed; even if it wasn’t a perfect social construction, it was better than the anarchy that exists post-apocalypse.

A moral society cannot be established without people sharing a set of core values. In the son’s innocence, he asks where these people, sharing in their core values, are:

There are other good guys. You said so.

Yes.

So where are they?

They’re hiding.

Who are they hiding from?

From each other. (184)

Due to the circumstances, people are hiding from each other and it is unwise, for the most part, to trust individuals along the road. The values of the past society and the values of the current society are best described in the following scene: after the second encounter with people on the road, the father is forced to leave his cart behind in order to hide. In the morning, they waken to find the cart had been plundered by other people: “The few things they hadnt taken scattered in the leaves. Some books and toys belonging to the boy” (70). They left things of civilization and innocence: books and toys. Immediately after this the father finds “the bones and the skin piled together with rocks over them” and “A pool of guts” (71). The group had eaten their dead comrade. This juxtaposition demonstrates the world as is, and clearly identifies the lack of humanity and care left in this world in comparison to the world the father is trying to maintain for the sake of his son.



By choosing to join a group of cannibals, an individual is thus reflecting his or her own morality. Levinas believes that it is through the collective that an individual can be most exposed as an individual: “The idea that the social is the very order of the spiritual, a new plot in being above the animal and human psychism; the level of ‘collective representations’ defined with vigor and which opens up the dimension of spirit in the individual life itself, where the individual alone comes to be recognized and even redeemed” (*Ethics and Infinity* 27). When the individual realizes he is responsible for the world outside of himself, justice and ethics will prevail naturally and the state can be formed when all individuals experience the recognition of the Other within themselves and the face. Davis quotes Levinas in saying: “Exposure to the Other is the bedrock of my selfhood; it is the condition of subjectivity, not an aspect of it” (79-80). Thus, without the exposure to, interaction with, and true recognition of the Other, there can be no self, society, and therefore, no justice.

Without interactions with the Other, a society cannot thrive. In McCarthy’s *The Road*, building a society seems to be an impossible feat. Without children, there is no future; and without ethics, there can be no settlements. Civilization has been undone, and only memories of the father can keep the old moral foundation alive and strong in his growing youth. Thus, the philosophy of Levinas helps to bring to the forefront the importance of these elements in the novel and help us to understand just how hellish the combination of anarchy and desperation can be. Some critics view the end of the novel as pessimistic, where things that have been undone can never be created again. Others view it as optimistic, claiming the son’s new family, with two other children, is the start of a new civilization where the violence and senseless anarchy can end. Whichever view one may take, the father’s view is clear: he could not murder his own son even in these desperate times, and thus his only hope was that his son had learned enough in order to survive and thrive.

The survivors in *The Road* have all the odds against them: they are starving, masked, and dehumanized. In this post-apocalyptic nightmare people are being kept in basements half devoured; infants are being born to be beheaded, gutted, and cooked like meat; and the sight of children is a rarity, and it can even be seen as cruel to bring an innocent child into a cursed world. The landscape is covered

in ash, nature is dead, and the sun barely shines through the thick fog and debris. It seems at times the possibility of existence of an ethical society is hopeless, and yet, through the faith, curiosity, and natural nurturing nature of a son does it seem possible. Throughout the novel is an incessant ebb and flow of hope and hopelessness; the truth, or reality, in comparison to the lies, or dreams. The father often quotes how good dreams are traps that lure one to wish for death, perhaps something his late wife experienced; while he told happy stories to keep his son entertained and cheerful. Toward the end of the novel, the son knows these stories are lies, and yet, the hope is still there, and it is there again when the son finally does find a family unit that will care for him. He finally finds his *le tiers*, and, to the hopeful interpreter, the start of a small community.

### Chapter 3

#### Violence in *The Road*: The Face, Killing, and Freedom

Emmanuel Levinas's interest in the responsibility for the Other does not ignore the possibility of violence, rather: "At the very moment when my power to kill realizes itself, the other has escaped me. I can, for sure, in killing *attain* a goal; I can kill as I hunt or slaughter animals, or as I fell trees. But when I have grasped the other in the opening of being in general, as an element of the world where I stand, where I have seen him on the horizon, I have not looked at him in the face, I have not encountered his face" (*Is Ontology Fundamental?* 9). In other words, Levinas acknowledges that although the Other is my responsibility, I can still react with violence, but only when the face of the violated person is ignored. Thus, violence is able to thrive in the world of *The Road*, where poor air quality results in characters wearing masks to hide their faces. Without the ability to truly see the faces, extreme violence, killing, and even cannibalism ensues. With being faced with these experiences, the Other has the freedom to react accordingly.

Hence, this chapter focuses on three facets of violence as explored by Levinas and appropriately related to *The Road*: the concept of face and its relationship to violence; killing and cannibalism, and how they relate to the concept of face and their relationship to the animalistic imagery; and finally, freedom, and how in reacting or not reacting to the concept of the face is connected to the concepts of freedom and individuality.

Investigating Levinas's concept of the face in *The Road* is crucial in understanding the depth of violence in the novel because, according to Levinas, the face is the very source of linking each being to the Other. Both the face exposed or masked can invoke empathy or rage, but, regardless, the face provokes a reaction that in the end belongs to the responsibility of the receiver: "The face is exposed, menaced, as if inviting us to an act of violence. At the same time, the face is what forbids us to kill" (*Ethics and Infinity* 86). By observing the face of the Other, one can either feel the unity with the Other's face and thus not murder the face, or feel angry at the ultimate freedom of the face, which then provokes

an urge to murder the Other. It is in this way that the father in *The Road* can kill others to survive, but he also protects himself for the sake of his son. In other words, the father is unable to relate and recognize the faces of others, but he is capable of protecting his son.

In the novel, it is easy to ignore the faces because they are covered with masks. The story opens with the father pulling down “the cotton mask from his face” (4) in order to wipe his nose, and the son had “pulled away his mask in the night and it was buried somewhere in the blankets” (5). In the first pages, the protagonists unmask themselves, exposing their faces and thus calling for a special acknowledgement of that face from the reader. The only other character to willfully unmask is the veteran, who, at the very end of the novel, “pulled back the hood from his face” (283) while convincing the son to join his family. The masking of the face dehumanizes the characters, creating a wedge between beings and prohibiting the ability to sympathize with others, for truly seeing the face, according to Levinas, is what enables one to acknowledge the being as such:

In what way the vision of the face is no longer vision but audition and speech; how the encounter with the face – that is, moral consciousness – can be described as the condition of consciousness *tout court* and of disclosure; how consciousness is affirmed as the impossibility of killing; what are the conditions of the appearance of the face as the temptation and the impossibility of murder; how I can appear to myself as a face; in what manner, finally, the relation with the other or the collectivity is our relation, irreducible to comprehension, with the infinite- these are the themes that proceed from this first contestation of the primacy of ontology. (*Is Ontology Fundamental?* 10)

The true recognition of the face is an experience beyond comprehension, but it is crucial to promoting connections among human beings and, hopefully, the suppression of violence.

Investigations of masks in *The Road* reveals their use began at the start of the apocalypse: “In those first years the roads were peopled with refugees shrouded up in their clothing. Wearing masks and goggles, sitting in their rags by the side of the road like ruined aviators” (29). Eventually, the narrator observes: “[the father] thought the bloodcults must have all consumed one another. No one traveled this

road. No road-agents, no marauders” (16). The road is at first “peopled” with people wearing masks, but then the road becomes empty because of violence and cannibalism.

The father successfully shelters his son from most of the atrocities occurring in this post-apocalyptic world, as made evident by the son’s innocent behavior: “The boy had found some crayons and painted his facemask with fangs and he trudged on uncomplaining” (14). The son’s mask is decorated in a childlike fashion, indicating he is behaving as a child should behave in a world before the apocalypse. The father’s only trusting human encounter with another being is with his son, though he tells him tales of courage and justice. His selfless acts and white lies are noticed by the son and even met with protests. An example is when the father drinks hot water instead of pouring hot cocoa into his own cup: “You promised not to do that...I have to watch you all the time...If you break little promises you’ll break big ones. That’s what you said” (34). Although this is a small fib, it reveals the level of moral behavior that exists for both father and son. The son is reinforcing the moral behavior though he reminds his father that it’s the father’s rule about breaking little promises. Throughout the novel, the son is not only the moral enforcer but also the one who is capable of trusting others due to his father’s protection from the world.

The other survivors in *The Road* are defined by the father and son as either the “good guys” or the “bad guys;” therefore, people are defined by what the father and the son consider to be morally good or bad. The paradox of this is of course the question of the morality of the father, where even he considers himself an alien to his son: “He turned and looked at the boy. Maybe he understood for the first time that to the boy he was himself an alien. A being from a planet that no longer existed” (153). The father also doesn’t recognize his own face: “[The father and son] came upon themselves in a mirror and [the father] almost raised his pistol. It’s us, Papa, the boy whispered. It’s us” (132). This scene is crucial in understanding the seriousness of the father’s inability to identify himself in any other way but moral, though the son does recognize them. The moral boundaries the father is trying to instill in his child are blurring for him and this makes him reflect upon his very being and is even reflected in his inability to recognize his own face.

McCarthy not only hides the faces of his characters, but he also leaves out detailed facial descriptions. Instead, they are vague and vacant. Mostly, like the characters, the faces are described in terms of ethical affiliations. The road-rats who wear masks and goggles are understandably less human and seem more capable of delivering unnecessary violence, while the protagonists seem more vulnerable and humane because at times they expose their faces. For instance, after the son is subject to witness the terrors of the basement filled with people herded and ready for slaughter, the father notices a different aspect to his son's face: "when he bent to see into the boy's face under the hood of the blanket he very much feared that something was gone that could not be put right again" (136). Not only is this scene traumatizing to a sheltered individual, but especially to a child. The child reassures himself aloud that there is no way to save the people in the basement: "They're going to kill those people, aren't they?...Why do they have to do that?...Are they going to eat them?...And we couldn't help them because then they'd eat us too...And that's why we couldn't help them" (127). This justification is because the child must account for his actions morally, and it helps him to exist in an otherwise unaccounted for world.

The inability to see the face of the Other perpetuates the hostile and violent. The face does not only provide linkage to an individual existence with the existence of another in a shared world, but it is also the part of the human body that produces language. Though language is discussed in depth in Chapter Four, it is important to note now that for Levinas: "Face and discourse are tied. The Face speaks. It speaks, it is in this that it renders possible and begins all discourse" (*Ethics and Infinity* 87). This relationship between face and discourse is important because in first seeing the face, there is a reaction to the face; in most instances, this reaction is in dialogue. The face which speaks is also the face that invokes a response. Something must be done when the face is encountered, whether we speak to it or negate it. Negating the face is to be violent toward the face and attempt to destroy it, which is what makes killing and violence rampant in *The Road*.

To negate the Other is to murder the Other, and death surrounds the protagonists: "The mummied dead everywhere. The flesh cloven along the bones, the ligaments dried to tug and taut as wires. Shriveled and drawn like latterday bogfolk, their faces as boiled sheeting, the yellowed palings of their teeth. They

were discalced to a man like pilgrims of some common order for all their shoes were long since stolen” (24). Being constantly surrounded by the dead and their killers, the father and the son have grown somewhat desensitized to the scenes of decaying bodies, the father more so; however, the father shelters his son and constantly reminds him that “the things you put into your head are there forever,” and that “You forget what you want to remember and you remember what you want to forget” (12). The father is attesting to the fact that seeing the world as it is will change the son as it has changed him. The father is trying to maintain his son’s innocence as long as possible.

Though death, decay, and violence are too common to the two protagonists, the son is still revolted by those scenes. In his mind killing is condemnable, even in the most detrimental situations. In his mind, killing is not only physically murdering another, but also in ignoring innocent others in need. Throughout the encounters with individuals along the road, the son expresses concern and wishes to help others. For instance, the following dialogue occurs between the father and son when the son sees another little boy in the road:

I’m afraid for that little boy.

I know. But he’ll be all right.

We should go get him, Papa. We could get him and take him with us.

We could take him and we could take the dog. The dog could catch something to eat.

We cant.

And I’d give that little boy half of my food.

Stop it. We cant.

He was crying again. What about the little boy? he sobbed. What about the little boy? (87)

Thus, the son’s innocence allows him to sympathize and feel responsible for the Other, which supports Levinas’s ideas regarding personal responsibility: “we will say that since the Other looks at me, I am responsible for him, without even having *taken* on responsibilities in his regard; his responsibility is *incumbent on me*... [t]his means that I am responsible for his very responsibility” (*Ethics and Infinity* 96). It doesn’t matter that in engaging the little boy may be risky because the son still feels responsible to try

and help. The son feels the pang of guilt in not helping people along the road, while the father has to ignore this innate ethical responsibility in order to preserve his son, despite telling his sons stories of courage and justice.

The father gives in to his son's pleas on occasion, specifically when sharing food with Ely. The father also hesitates on taking a life and would rather not resort to violence, as the counter with the road-rat demonstrates: "You think I won't kill you but you're wrong. But what I'd rather do is take you up this road a mile or so and then turn you loose. That's all the head start we need" (65). The father would rather let the road-rat walk away, but the road-rat intends to harm the son and the father must act accordingly. When the father does act unethically, the son does not communicate with him, which is particularly difficult for the father to cope with because the father and son are a community of two, where the son is the father's only link to the Other.

With minimal resources and the inability to view the face, people have resorted to cannibalism in order to survive. The combination of ignoring the face and the desperate circumstances of hunger create animal like behavior and disregard of humanity of the Other. In the context of Levinas, such behavior means blatant ignorance of the significance of the Other: "If things are only things, this is because the relation with them is established as comprehension. As beings, they let themselves be overtaken from the perspective of being and a totality that lends them a signification" (*Is Ontology Fundamental?* 9). The killing is, of course, not only the result of the need for physical nourishment, but also the need for power. There are clearly groups in the novel who exist with each other, but they do so by essentially raising their own food via impregnating women and eating the newborns. In some cases, cannibalistic groups will eat their dead; such is the case when the father shoots the road-rat in the beginning of the novel. When going back to look for his abandoned supplies, the father notices "[d]ried blood in the leaves...he found the bones and the skin piled together with rocks over them. A pool of guts. He pushed at the bones with the toe of his shoe. They looked to have been boiled" (71). Though the cannibalistic group does not kill their own member, they take advantage of his death. This fact doesn't make the scene less grotesque, but rather it emphasizes the desperation among the apocalyptic survivors.



The idea of keeping people as animals is not only a way to maintain survival by feeding on people, but also an exertion of power. In the context of Levinas, this is a matter of possession:

Partial negation, which is violence, denies the independence of a being: it belongs to me.

Possession is the mode whereby a being, while existing, is partially denied. It is not only a question of the fact that the being is an instrument, a tool, that is to say, a means. It is an end also. As consumable, it is nourishment, and in enjoyment, it offers itself, gives itself, belongs to me. (*Is Ontology Fundamental?* 9)

The people in *The Road*, particularly the ones holding people as hostages for food, literally possess them. These acts of limiting freedom may be personally justified in that faces are no longer being associated with the Other, but dehumanized to an animal. With no universal law or morality to enforce humanity, Levinas states these acts can be justified if: “the violence that the I receives from War and Administration is neglected by declaring it animal or puerile” (*Transcendence and Height* 16). This violence, together with cannibalism, exists because it is neglected by not considering people as the Other.

The violence is forever looming in the foreground of the reader, and killing seems like a natural part of life in the novel even in the way in which the narrator describes things. For instance, the father claims to have trained his son “to lie in the woods like a fawn” (118). There is also a description of the son buried in the snow as if he were hibernating. These examples among others dehumanize the characters in the story. Even the herd of people in the floor of the room are described as “all trying to hide, shielding their faces with their hands” (110). These people are naked, and the imagery parallels the treatment of the Jewish people in the death camps of World War II: as animals to be brought to the slaughter; nameless and without recognition of the human face. This example is crucial in recognizing the application of Levinas is suitable to *The Road* in that, given his personal experience, he witnessed the violence and horror capable of people in his own life.

Levinas, therefore, recognizes that in the act of killing, which can be a direct reaction to the face, is really a reaction to the want of power over another being, which is why freedom ties in so closely with

violence. In wanting to control the bodies of others, the ultimate form of control is to make their bodies submissive and essentially, negate their existence completely.

Merely observing the face means acknowledging the existence of another, which invokes a response because by recognizing this existence we immediately feel like we are no longer in control. This is emphasized by Levinas in terms of freedom:

The Other thus presents itself as human Other; it shows a face and opens the dimension of *height*, that is to say, it *infinitely* overflows the bounds of knowledge. Positively, this means that the Other puts in question the freedom which attempts to invest it; the Other lays him – or herself bare to the total negation of murder but forbids it through the original language of his defenseless eyes. (*Transcendence and Height* 12)

In other words, freedom is twofold: it is allowing the Other to negate the receiver, or to relate to the receiver through height, a term used in representing the universal being of the I with the Other, or God. As previously mentioned, the face invokes a response; it is the initial reaction and response that Levinas claims we are responsible for: “before the face I do not simply remain there contemplating it, I respond to it” (*Ethics and Infinity* 88). Again, language and discourse will be explored in more depth in Chapter Four, but for the purposes of addressing violence in *The Road*, it is important to recognize that the face which provokes a response can be responded to in several ways, whether this is through dialogue or negation, but it is within this freedom that this portion of the chapter is focused.

An example of freedom to react to the Other is when the father dies and the son encounters a veteran carrying a shotgun. The narrator asks the reader, “Who will find the little boy? Goodness will find the little boy. It always has. It will again” (281), and it is after this the veteran approaches the son. The first thing the son asks is if this man is one of the “good guys,” in which the man “pulled back the hood from his face” and replied “Yeah...I’m one of the good guys” (282). The son tests this when he makes him promise to leave his father wrapped in a blanket, and when he notes that his father is still “wrapped in a blanket as the man had promised” (286), he joins the family; he finds the “good guys.” The son could murder the veteran, but he chooses peace and trust, allowing the veteran the freedom to decide. It is this

trust and freedom that a peaceful society can appreciate. That is why the father, as distrustful and skeptical as he is, cannot be a part of the emerging hope for a new society.

Not only is there the freedom to choose a reaction to the Other's existence, but it is also to accept the actions of others. It is the responsibility of both the veteran and the son to accept the violence done to them had either decided to react to each other's presence in that way. In a sense, the reaction in which we seek is the reaction in which we show, and we are, therefore, responsible for it. Though this philosophy may not extend itself to the captives in the basement of the house, it only makes the act itself particularly cruel and disturbing.

Though killing aims to extend a being's power, Levinas does not believe that the satisfaction of this power is possible:

This power is quite the contrary to power. The triumph of this power is its defeat as power. At the very moment when my power to kill realizes itself, the other has escaped me...when I have grasped the other in the opening of being in general, as an element of the world where I stand...I have not looked at him in the face...The temptation of total negation, measuring the infinity of this attempt and its impossibility – this is the presence of the face. To be in relation with the other face to face I to be unable to kill. (*Is Ontology Fundamental?* 9)

According to Levinas, when one recognizes the face of the Other in terms of his own existence and responsibility, killing is not an option. It is only when one turns a blind eye to the face of the Other that negation is probable. In *The Road*, negation is frequent because of the inability to physically see faces and recognize the mutual existence of a being.

Though negation seems unethical, Levinas doesn't denounce it but rather attempts to say that it will always fail. Davis summarizes Levinas's philosophy in the following way: "[Violence] can never succeed in its true aims. When I kill, I am trying to kill the Other, that which is utterly beyond my powers; I may succeed in killing the other, or even innumerable others, but the Other survives. Violence, then, always ends or continues in failure" (53). This is especially demonstrated in *The Road*, where people must constantly kill others in order to survive. Particularly the cannibals, they must continue to kill

and continue to ignore the face if they wish to sustain themselves physically. The violence is never satisfactory because violence must continue in order to maintain survival.

Though violence is very prevalent in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, investigating it through the ethical lens of Emmanuel Levinas allows for a deeper understanding of the moral complications apparent in the story. It is no mistake that faces are vague and disguised, disabling a true connection to the Other, enabling violence and dehumanization to occur. The father, trapped between his own moral teachings to his son while trying to survive in an otherwise violent, immoral world, must tread the fine line of the ethical in order to maintain survival. The killing, which can only be committed through a reaction to the face and the Other, is also a way to dominate in a chaotic world, while having the freedom to be peaceful or to negate isn't always present in an unpopulated world.

Within these boundaries of ethics, Levinas proves that these post-apocalyptic questions are what define us in society and whether or not we feel the innate need to adjust ourselves morally or to at least realize the true nature of our being. The post-modern question of justice and accountability where there is none to be reinforced is examined in terms of innate morality in which Levinas determines to be the ontological connection in recognizing the face of another being. The violence that can be done is committed because of the realization of a shared reality, which can anger and frighten, or be sympathetic toward, another being. This violence, as in *The Road*, where so few people still exist, is damaging to the entire population and can ultimately mean the survival of the species or not.

## Chapter 4

### Investigating God and the Other in McCarthy's *The Road*

The ever present question of the notion of God in McCarthy's *The Road* is first revealed when the father, frustrated with God's silence, directly invokes God's presence: "[the father] raised his face to the paling day. Are you there? he whispered. Will I see you at the last? Have you a neck by which to throttle you? Have you a heart? Damn you eternally have you a soul? Oh God, he whispered. Oh God" (11-12). This desperate plea to God occurs immediately after the father is coughing blood and realizes his time is limited. He is dying and must face the ultimate moral decision: to risk his young, innocent son living on without him in a particularly brutal and violent world, or to personally secure his son's relatively quick and painless death. This decision does not have clear moral implications, and the father is reaching out to God because he is questioning his initial decision. To take his son's life may save the son from an otherwise horrible death, but to let him live gives humanity a chance to rebuild a moral society. The father's predicament echoes the story of Abraham and Isaac from the Old Testament, though it differs in that the father is experiencing the silence of God, whereas Abraham is commanded to sacrifice his son. Levinas is helpful in explaining the silence of God, not in a mystical experience of God, but rather in an ontological way. It is the father realizing the potential goodness that eventually convinces him to let his son try and maintain his faith in humanity. Levinas's philosophy is particular to the moral dilemma of the presence of God in McCarthy because Levinas examines the recognition of the Other as the acknowledgement of God.

Emmanuel Levinas believes ethics is not associated with a morality as connected to humanity by a supreme being, but rather an innate responsibility associated with the Other. In other words, it is in the existence of the Other that God can exist, and not the reverse. This philosophical approach to God enables the reader to view God in terms of a relationship to the Other. Levinas's investigation of God is essential to the moral investigation of the father and son because through the lens of Levinas, God is found at the epicenter of a relationship with the Other: "It is God that I can define through human

relations and not the inverse...it is in terms of relation with the Other that I speak of God”

(*Transcendence and Height* 29). The post-apocalyptic world of *The Road* is virtually Other-less, save for the father and the son, and the father prohibits the building of relationships because he actively avoids the Other due to the high risk of a hostile encounter. The son, however, maintains a child’s innocence and yearns to be with people. In recognizing and accepting the responsibility for the Other, a moral society and meaningful connections can exist.

Biblical analogies and references are present in *The Road* and they allude to the presence of God despite God’s silence. Levinas provides a strictly philosophical approach to these analogies in that he claims, “This tie to the other, which does not reduce itself to the representation of the Other but rather to his invocation, where invocation is not preceded by comprehension, we call *religion*” (*Is Ontology Fundamental?* 7). Thus, these references exist as a reference to the distant past when God is found at the heart of the Other through community via religion. The first biblical analogy includes a parallel to Abraham and Isaac of The Old Testament. Abraham is commanded by God to kill his son Isaac. Abraham, wanting to prove his loyalty to God, struggles with this task as he knows his son is unaware of his intentions, much like the father in *The Road* travels with his son knowing he plans to take his son’s life in the end. He questions this constantly, daring himself to be ready: “He watched the boy sleeping. Can you do it? When the time comes? Can you?” (29). This command, however, does not come from God, but from the mother of the child, whose last words question the father’s moral decision making. She says:

I should have done it a long time ago. When there were three bullets in the gun instead of two. I was stupid. We’ve been over all of this. I didnt bring myself to this. I was brought. And now I’m done. I thought about not even telling you. That would probably have been best. You have two bullets and then what? You cant protect us. You say you would die for us but what good is that? I’d take him with me if it werent for you. You know I would. It’s the right thing to do. (56)

She has lost her faith in God and humanity, and so she believes the only hope is in death. She commits suicide with a flake of obsidian, something the father taught her himself. While the mother submits herself to death prematurely in favor of avoiding a potentially brutal end, the father and son continue on with their faith, but the father's faith is wavering. He does not argue with his wife's last statement that killing the son is the right thing to do, even though the son is the only Other the father has. This moral struggle and anxiety dominates the father's thinking throughout the novel.

Another biblical reference is Ely, the wandering old man who is practically blind. Ely is a biblical reference to Elijah the prophet of the Old Testament, and is as skeptical of people as the father is, as the first thing he says is "I dont have anything...You can look if you want" (162). After convincing his father that Ely was scared, the son gives Ely food without expectations, while the father is hesitant and even demands the child to not hold Ely's hand even though Ely is almost blind. There is nothing more humane and compassionate than a human touch, and even this act of pure altruism is denied, though, even Ely is unsure of why the son wanted to share their food with him:

Why did he do it?

He looked over at the boy and he looked at the old man.

You wouldnt understand, he said. I'm not sure I do.

Maybe he believes in God.

I dont know what he believes in.

He'll get over it.

No he wont. (173-74)

Ely suggests the son's belief in God is the reason for the son's selflessness. Ironically, Ely does not believe in God and, instead, believes in the destruction of the world and humanity: "I always believed in it" (168). The prophet Elijah foretold the return of Christ and the apocalypse, and Ely, having always believed in the catastrophe, first believes the son to be an angel, contradicting his first statement of not believing in God. The father's statement of "I dont know what he believes in" reiterates the idea that

believing in God is irrelevant to his son's goodness; rather, the son believes in helping people, which according to Levinas, is transcendence. It is his dedication to the Other that creates God.

Despite the similarities, Ely does not have faith in God or humanity. The father makes the suggestion that perhaps his son is a god, in which Ely replies, "I'm past all that now. Have been for years. Where men cant live gods fare no better. You'll see. It's better to be alone. So I hope that's not true what you said because to be on the road with the last god would be a terrible thing so I hope it's not true. Things will be better when everybody's gone" (173). Not only has Ely lost his faith, but he is commenting on the loneliness and meaninglessness of a world without others. According to Levinas, life would be meaningless without others because our being is dependent on other beings:

If things are only things, this is because the relation with them is established as comprehension. As beings, they let themselves be overtaken from the perspective of being and of a totality that lends them a signification. The immediate is not an object of comprehension. An immediate given of consciousness is a contradiction in terms. To be given is to be exposed to the ruse of the understanding, to be seized by the mediation of a concept, by the light of being in general, by way of a detour, 'in a roundabout way.' To be given is to signify on the basis of what one is not. The relation with the face, speech, an event of collectivity, is a relation with beings as such, as pure beings. (*Is Ontology Fundamental?* 9-10)

Levinas is describing the signification of being through the relation with other beings, hence why Ely has succumbed to his nihilistic approach to life. The extreme isolation has rendered life senseless and without God. This defeated attitude is the very thing the father wishes to prevent for his son, and by finding purpose through the Other, the Other being his son, the father is able to maintain his own faith, regardless of its instability within him. Erik Wielenberg, a McCarthy critic, in an article titled "God, Morality and Meaning in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*," argues that the novel is making a statement about purpose not necessarily through religious purpose, but through a purpose for humanity. Levinas offers a different interpretation of God, which permits for God and morality to co-exist without organized religion. Although McCarthy uses biblical parallels and may be demonstrating the importance of human



connections instead of religious doctrine, Levinas offers a different view: “I do not want to define anything through God because it is the human that I know. It is God that I can define through human relations and not the inverse. The notion of God – God knows, I’m not opposed to it! But when I have to say something about God, it is always beginning from human relations. The inadmissible abstraction is God; it is in terms of the relation with the Other that I speak of God” (*Transcendence and Height* 29). God exists in the connection with the Other. The father struggles with God because he is unable to cope with his pending sacrificing of his son while God remains silent.

The father, having sheltered his son so well from the morally absent world, has been successful in maintaining his son’s innocence. The son recognizes God as goodness, as made evident by his prayer to the people who made a meal possible: “Dear people, thank you for all this food and stuff. We know that you saved it for yourself and if you were here we wouldn’t eat it no matter how hungry we were and we’re sorry that you didn’t get to eat it and we hope that you’re safe in heaven with God” (146). The son does not learn this behavior from his father or society, but rather, it is an example of Levinas’s concept of anteriority. The son is thanking the people, not God, but hopes the people are “in heaven with God.” The father has maintained his son’s goodness and trust for the Other while having lost this trust himself. It isn’t until after they witness the people in the basement that the father commits on his son’s innocence: “When he bent to see the boy’s face under the hood of the blanket he very much feared that something was gone that could not be put right again” (136). The son’s face indicates his realization of the reality in which he belongs, and it is this realization that the father is hoping to protect his son from. With so many post-apocalyptic novels accepting the failure of religious beliefs without envisioning anything for substitution, it is important to note the spiritual elements related to the father’s internal moral struggle within himself and the affects this has on the moral development of his son.

The son hardly refers to God, but when he does, he is also referring to people. When the father finds the flare gun, he shoots it into the air and the son is the first to recognize the point of shooting the flare:

They couldn’t see it very far, could they, Papa?

Who?

Anybody.

No. Not far.

If you wanted to show where you were.

You mean like to the good guys?

Yes. Or anybody that you wanted them to know where you were.

Like who?

I dont know.

Like God?

Yeah. Maybe somebody like that. (246)

The use of the term God here is an indicator that God is somebody, he is an Other too. As previously mentioned, the father is successful in not prejudicing his son against the world so apparently gone wrong. Without the father's protection, the son would not be able to trust the Other and would be in fear and lean toward isolation, which is what the mother suffers from before she commits suicide. It is in the end of the novel that the son finds a family who also looks to God, however, instead of talking to God, the son decides to talk to the spirit of his father. As the father lies dying, he instructs his son to talk to him if he needs to: "If I'm not here you can still talk to me. You can talk to me and I'll talk to you. You'll see" (279). This is an interesting exchange because the son is always conscientious of the importance of morality and people, but never really in the importance of God, and decides to address his deceased father rather than God in the end.

The father and the son are a community of two, each is each other's Other. The son is enough of the presence of the Other and gives the father hope in God still. He refers to his son as a godsend and it, in turn, gives him the purpose of keeping the son safe. The father has hope in the future and the son at one point even asks his father about his long-term goals: "The boy stood up and got his broom and put it over his shoulder. He looked at his father. What are our long term goals?" 160). The father asks where his son heard that, and he replies he heard it from him a long time ago. This exchange, about halfway through the novel, is amusing in its innocence, but it is also disturbing in a world where long term goals are not

considered because living long term is not expected; however, it is still uplifting. The son clearly has ideas of the future and is optimistic. It is in his innocent disposition that the father views the son as a godsend, and as the one truly carrying the light.

In the various references to light and fire in *The Road*, both objects take on an open-ended symbolism which eventually associates them with qualities of morality and transcendence. Levinas coins the term transcendence to differentiate between the relationship with another person and the relationship with God: “transcendence is only possible when the Other is not initially the fellow human being or the neighbor; but when it is the very distant, when it is Other, when it is the one with whom initially I have nothing in common, when it is an abstraction” (*Transcendence and Height* 27). Lights and fire pose a risk: they either mean others are nearby or they can be a source of warmth and the ability to see. The father and son look out over the horizon trying to spot lights and fires so they can evaluate the threat of their surroundings, because the father and son “don’t like for people to stop” (160) along the road. On the other hand, fire is how they stay warm and how they cook food. It is a light which allows them to see in the dark, although, seeing is not always a pleasurable experience. It is the lighter in the basement of the house that allows father and son to witness the people concealed in the basement like cattle waiting for the slaughter. Ironically, this is also the moment in the story where the lighter is lost, dropped in the horror of the scene unfolding before the father. It is how light and fire warn and expose, yet encourage curiosity and provide warmth. It is referenced multiple times and in a way reflects the moral struggle with the father and son, where the father wishes to avoid the Other but wants to find the good guys while the son wants to find the good guys but will take outrageous risks to do so.

Given Levinas’s definition of God, it can then be deduced that without the Other, life is meaningless for the father and son. The father and the son are each other’s Other, but the father’s timely end will leave the son isolated and alone unless he is able to take risks his father is not. The father must trust in God’s sparing hand, like in the story of Abraham and Isaac; the father must trust there will be others to take care of the son. The father gives the son purpose by giving him the chore of carrying the fire. The fire symbolizes not only hope, but the ability to connect with others. The child has the ability to connect

with others and thus promotes an innate morality. The father, on the other hand, has been traumatized and chooses not to trust the Other. This inability to connect to others is evident in the father's interactions and avoidance of other adults. He may have even been unable to connect with his wife, which may have inadvertently led to her demise. Levinas values this bond with the Other because it is only through connecting with the Other that God can exist, therefore, the father, unable to connect with others besides his son, has trouble envisioning his son safely interacting with others.

The father is aware of the absence of the voice of God, but that absence and questioning is immediately connected to people as godless in their behavior: "On this road there are no godspoke men. They are gone and I am left and they have taken with them the world. Query: How does the never to be differ from what never was?" (32). The father notices the absence of faith and commonality, yet, Levinas offers an answer to the father's questioning of God's silence: "God is drawn out of objectivity, presence, and being. He is neither an object nor an interlocutor. His absolute remoteness, his transcendence, turns into my responsibility – nonerotic par excellence – for the other" (*God and Philosophy* 141). God is available and accessible when one is aware of his being as applied to the relationships with others because both God and people are interrelated; however, the condition of the world is overbearingly pessimistic and violent, as the wife clearly brings this to the surface when she states, "Sooner or later they will catch us and they will kill us. They will rape me. They'll rape him. They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us and you won't face it" (56). The father questions his life and his belief in God all while avoiding the Other, while at the end of the novel giving his son an impossible task: "You need to find the good guys but you can't take any chances" (278). This is impossible because in order to find the good guys the son must take chances. The father knows the son is capable of taking this chance, as he has been trying to all along, but the father lost his ability to trust the others besides his son, but still has hope and faith in his son and in goodness.

The son's mother does not have faith and decides to take her own life, claiming the father only survives for the son but asks him if he'd be able to do the right thing. To the mother, the right thing is to commit suicide in order to avoid another horrendous death that is out of her own control. The father, on

the contrary, believes that life is worth living, and that he and the son can live a fulfilling life amongst the moral degradation that surrounds them. The mother takes the nihilistic approach, claiming there to be nothing left to life. The father takes a more faithful approach, deeming the child as having to be the word of God or else God never spoke, and that the son is carrying the fire. The suicide can be seen, in Levinassian terms, as a self-negation; which means she is forfeiting her human responsibility to the Other. It is for the Other and for Others that the father hinges his hope and purpose on, while the remaining persons exist to negate others in favor of self-preservation.

The son is constantly reaching out toward people wishing to help, and he chastises his father for not being the good guys the father is always claiming to be looking for. Thus the son's life has meaning through his connections to people, as determined by the following exchange between father and son:

There could be people alive someplace else.

Where place else?

I don't know. Anywhere.

You mean besides on earth?

Yes.

I dont think so. They couldnt live anyplace else.

Not even if they could get there?

No.

The boy looked away.

What? the man said.

He shook his head. I dont know what we're doing, he said.

The man started to answer. But he didnt. After a while he said: There are people. There are people and we'll find them. You'll see. (245)

In other words, the son needs people in order to have meaning in his life and this need for others extends beyond the son's immediate knowledge of his landscape. His very being thrives off of this responsibility, and he feels guilty when he does not uphold his responsibility toward the other, as Levinas explains:

Before the Other, the I is infinitely responsible. The Other is the poor and destitute one, and nothing which concerns this Stranger can leave the I indifferent. It attains the apogee of its existence as I precisely when everything looks at it in the Other. The scandalous interference of the prophet in the affairs of the Other already constitutes the I as I. The plenitude power through which the sovereignty of the Same maintains itself does not extend to the Other to conquer him, but to support him. But to support the burden of the Other is, at the same time, to confirm it in its substantiality, situating it above the I. The I remains accountable for this burden to the one that it supports. (*Transcendence and Height* 19)

The son is sensitive to this need to be responsible and it is in this need to nurture the Other that he transcends the father and most of the remaining survivors. He cannot be indifferent as the father can be. For example, near the very end of the novel a thief takes all of their resources, and when he is finally caught the father forces him to strip naked in the cold weather: "I'm going to leave you the way you left us" (257), the father says. The son later convinces his father to at least bring the thief clothes to shelter him from the elements. The father complies, but the son is still upset at the initial father action and isn't talking to his father. The father says, "I wasn't going to kill him," in which the son replies, "But we did kill him" (260). Not only does the son feel they inadvertently killed the thief and is upset about it despite the thief stealing their resources, but he includes himself in the responsibility of the death. The father says "I" while the son says "we." This is an indication of the son's personal responsibility toward the Other, despite the action and decision that belong to the father.

Investigating God and the Other in *The Road* emphasizes the need for the Other and the responsibility one feels through an unknown a priori as a way to transcend. As the father lies dying, he reminds his son of the son's mission:

You have to carry the fire.

I don't know how to.

Yes you do.

Is it real? The fire?

Yes it is.

Where is it? I dont know where it is.

Yes you do. It's inside you. It was always there. I can see it. (279)

Although the father can no longer relate to Others, he reminds his son to continue on. It is again the allusion to God's sparing hand that allows the father to let the son live. He is ultimately deciding to trust in humanity, and convinces his son to continue to "carry the fire." This is an optimistic ending, as McCarthy reveals the son can trust his new family and that the discussion of God is still important: "[the woman] 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 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" (287). This family, believing in God, believes in their responsibility to the Other and reiterates the idea that God is found through the Other.

## Chapter 5

### Engaging the Other: Exploring Language in *The Road*

Acknowledging the face of the Other is to admit the world does not belong to me alone and to react to the Other's presence accordingly. As discussed in Chapter Two, one initial response to the realization of another in my world is to be violent toward the Other in an attempt to negate the Other. Another response is to engage the Other. Levinas believes this engagement occurs through the act of communication and creates a connection between beings: "The manifestation of a face is the first disclosure. Speaking is before anything else this way of coming from behind one's appearance, behind one's form, an openness in the openness" (*Meaning and Sense* 53). To speak to the Other is to accept the Other's presence in peace and, thus, to be responsible for the Other. Levinas's focus on verbal and physical communication is, therefore, an essential form of sociality between beings and deserves an investigation in McCarthy's *The Road* because the novel, stylistically, ignores grammatical rules in an effort to express emptiness, lacks in dialogue between characters, and demonstrates the various ways in which language can emerge in the absence of speech. Language, according to Levinas, is a prominent form of relating to the Other: "Philosophers now accord language a founding role; it would mark the very notion of culture" (*Meaning and Sense* 38), and it is through sociality and communication that society and culture can exist.

Hence, exploring language in *The Road* is not limited to the characters use of language in the text, but also in McCarthy's use of language and style of writing. Among various stylistic and narrative choices, McCarthy purposely ignores grammatical rules in his novel. The most notable grammatical rule ignored by McCarthy is the quotation mark. The lack of quotation marks not only sets a precedent for understanding the lack of language in the novel itself, but also effectively blurs a character's inner and outer dialogue. The blending of verbal communication and internal thought purposefully brings the reader into the nightmarish reality of the text and allows for empathy for the characters who, so often,



suffer from the inability to cope with the reality of the post-apocalyptic world. The following scene from the text is an example of the difficulty of reading the imbedded dialogue with the narration:

[The father] got the binoculars out of the cart and stood in the road and glassed the plain down there where the shape of a city stood in the grayness like a charcoal drawing sketched across the waste. Nothing to see. No smoke. Can I see? The boy said. Yes. Of course you can. The boy leaned on the cart and adjusted the wheel. What do you see? the man said. Nothing. He lowered the glasses. It's raining. Yes, the man said. I know. (8)

At times the meaning of the dialogue between the father and the son is clear in the light of its context, but at other times it is blurred. The reader knows the man got the binoculars and that he is viewing the landscape, but it is not clear if the father speaks the lines "Nothing to see. No smoke" or if it is the commentary of the narrator. This ambiguity is relevant because it reflects the loss of culture through the loss of language. In this context, Levinas's comments about language seem particularly fitting:

"Everything remains in a language or in a world, for the structure of the world resembles the order of language, which possibilities no dictionary can arrest" (*Meaning and Sense* 38). In other words, the conditions of the language reflect the conditions of the world. The post-apocalyptic world is bare, unorganized, and unreal to a man who once enjoyed a comfortable life, such as the father, who so often reflects on his longing for the past, and the language of the text reflects that world.

The distorted reality and minimal verbal engagement are part of a bigger theme in *The Road*, a theme of dreams versus reality. Dreams are relevant in that they serve as metaphors to depict truths otherwise denied throughout the novel, thus, McCarthy uses dreams and metaphors as a way for the characters and the reader to cope with the reality of the world in *The Road*. Levinas furthers the importance of metaphors by discussing their function in philosophy, which also applies to culture: "a metaphor - the reference to absence - can also be taken as an excellence that belongs to an order quite different from pure receptivity. The absence to which the metaphor leads would then not be another given but still to come or already past" (*Meaning and Sense* 36). In other words, the metaphors are used to portray truths that are not yet ready to be revealed or understood. In McCarthy, dreams are the ultimate

metaphors for the father and the son. It is in their dreams that the truth is revealed to them because consciousness is based solely on survival, while dreams can either haunt them, like the reality they are in, or lure them into longing for the comfort that is absent. The father's stance on dreams is made clear in the novel: "He mistrusted all of that. He said the right dreams for a man in peril were dreams of peril and all else was the call of languor and of death" (18). Though most dreams described in the novel fall on both ends of the spectrum, they all represent the character's reality.

Since communication is so minimal between the father and son, and the language between the two of them is bare and plain, their dreams serve as metaphors for topics they don't talk about. McCarthy opens the novel with the father waking from a dream, and it is in this dream that the premise of the novel is revealed in terms of the relationship between the father and the son:

In the dream from which he'd wakened he had wandered in a cave where the child led him by the hand. Their light playing over the wet flowstone walls. Like pilgrims in a fable swallowed up and lost among the inward parts of some granitic beast. Deep stone flues where the water dripped and sang. Tolling in the silence the minutes of the earth and the hours of 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 egg 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. (3-4)

This dream is a metaphor for both things past and things to come, for instance, the son is leading the father into the cave, which symbolizes the son's ability to lead morally. The morality is evident by the description of "Their light playing over the wet flowstone walls;" therefore, they are either holding a light or are illuminating from within, much like the father describes the boy's inner light:

Is it real? The fire?

Yes it is.

Where is it? I don't know where it is.

Yes you do. It's inside of you. It was always there. I can see it. (278-79)

The light is another metaphor used to signify the moral goodness within these characters and to encourage hope. They are both “pilgrims in a fable swallowed up and lost among the inward parts of some granitic beast,” which describes the ways in which the father tells his stories of courage and justice to his son, where they help people. The most disturbing image in the dream is of the creature drinking from the ancient lake, a humanoid that the father doesn't recognize as human, which exemplifies the way in which the father views people as monsters, while the child seems unafraid and is purposefully leading the father to view the humanoid in the cave. This opening dream serves to demonstrate the differences in the father and the son in their view of the world, as it is clear they are living in different worlds as described after the father and son find the abandoned train: “If they saw different worlds what they knew was the same. That the train would sit there slowly decomposing for all eternity and that no train would ever run again” (180). They are both aware of their differing perspectives, but their physical reality is shared. The father is visually shown this truth in his dream and eventually comes to realize its validity.

However metaphorical the language can be, it still has to be sustained by coming from experienced reality: “The meanings conveyed by language have to be justified in a reflection on the consciousness that aims at them. Every metaphor that language makes possible has to be reduced to the data, which language is suspected of abusively going beyond. The figurative meaning has to be justified by the literal meaning supplied by intuition” (*Meaning and Sense* 35). In other words, though metaphors represent what is absent, the absence is only made aware by one being conscious of the absence, in which language is, thus, a reflection of this intuitive absence. This knowledge is what is made aware to the father once he realizes his son must view him as an alien:

Maybe he understood for the first time that to the boy he was himself an alien. A being from a planet that no longer existed. The tales of which were suspect. He could not construct for the

child's pleasure the world he'd lost without constructing the loss as well and he thought perhaps the child had known this better than he. He tried to remember the dream but he could not. All that was left was the feeling of it. He thought perhaps they'd come to warn him. Of what? That he could not enkindle in the heart of the child what was ashes in his own. Even now some part of him wished they'd never found this refuge. Some part of him always wished it to be over. (153-54)

The father can't recreate the pre-apocalyptic world through language, thus, the father is coping with this loss even though he wishes he could better make the boy understand. Their experiences and views are different, despite their ability to connect to each other through language alone cannot represent the absence, but it must be felt.

This blurring of reality and dreams is a theme that creates an ambiguous indifference to reality and the people in it. The following example depicts the assumption of the father thinking the son is discussing a dream when he is really talking about reality:

I had a bad dream.

What did you dream about?

Nothing.

Are you okay?

No.

He put his arms around him and held him. It's okay, he said.

I was crying. But you didnt wake up.

I'm sorry. I was just so tired.

I meant in the dream. (183)

In this exchange, the father has mistaken the son's dream as a reality. There is an uncertainty available to conscious verbal language, but the physical embrace of the father and son is undeniably real.

McCarthy, aside from using little dialogue and metaphors, also purposefully omits apostrophes with certain words. Lindsey Banco, a McCarthy critic and author of "Contractions in Cormac McCarthy's *The*

*Road*,” discusses the use of, or lack of, contractions in *The Road* as a way of McCarthy emphasizing certain themes in the novel:

The contractions missing their apostrophes tend to be ones expressing negation...The contractions that posit something, though, the ones that affirm or assert instead of deny or annihilate, appear on the page *with* their apostrophes...McCarthy signals that which is perhaps most painfully removed from this world: anything that posits, anything positive. Therein lies the productive value of punctuating certain contractions” (277).

With the bare elements existing in *The Road*, and with a focus of what is not, in McCarthy’s use of apostrophes, he is focusing on what is. McCarthy is positing into a world of negatives, but Banco notices something more:

It should then be clear that a contraction such as ‘I’m’ needs its apostrophe. Unlike, say, ‘didn’t’ or ‘can’t,’ contractions like ‘I’m’ or ‘we’ve’ contain a pronoun and emphasize a human agent. The apostrophe highlights the ‘I,’ the ‘you,’ or the ‘we’ in sentences containing such contractions. The indifferent, blighted world McCarthy writes about is thus counterbalanced by the moral, empathetic, or creative possibilities of human beings. (277-78)

In short, McCarthy’s use of language further emphasizes the hope and importance of people and the significance of the Other. In a way, McCarthy’s method lends itself to Levinas’s philosophy on positing the Other into one’s world: “To comprehend a person is already to speak with him. To posit the existence of the other through letting be is already to have accepted this existence, to have taken account of it. ‘To have accepted,’ ‘to have taken account,’ do not come back to comprehension and letting be” (*Is Ontology Fundamental?* 6). In other words, one recognizes the Other, or the human agent, and already accepts his existence and the importance of it within this world. This is a central theme throughout the novel and it further emphasizes the utmost importance of the Other in the existence of a social being.

The text not only lacks quotation marks, but it also contains little dialogue. Most characters only speak when they have to with the exception being the stories the father tells his son; however, these stories are suspect to the son. Whereas, to Levinas, the body is “a fact that expresses this world as it

thinks it,” verbal language can be misconstrued and misleading. This the son realizes about the stories of his father:

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. (268-69)

When words are spoken in attempt to further human connection and understanding, particularly outside of the father and son, then they are really suspect. Verbal language in *The Road* is rare and short, and people can betray with their words; however, words and talking to each other is still part of a larger social component imbedded in the people who had lived pre-apocalypse, as is evident when the father and son encounter Ely and Ely feels he must hide his identity:

Is your name really Ely?

No.

You don't want to say your name.

I don't want to say it.

Why?

I couldn't trust you with it. To do something with it. I don't want anybody talking about me. To say where I was or what I said when I was there. I mean, you could talk about me maybe. But nobody could say that it was me. I could be anybody. I think in times like these the less said the better. If something had happened and we were survivors and we met on the road then we'd have something to talk about. But we're not. So we don't. (171-72)

Thus, because the simple verbal encounter is rare along the road, words are that much more meaningful and important. Even the wandering Ely, with no lingering faith, feels the need to strip himself of his true identity in order to save face and his reputation. Ely is also the only character in the novel with a name, even if it is a false one.

Although Ely claims that the less said the better, Levinas has a different approach to the encounter between two beings. Levinas believes that as the Other's presence is acknowledged, this is already an act of speaking to the Other: "This impossibility of approaching the other without speaking to him signifies that here thought is inseparable from expression. But such expression does not consist in decanting in some manner a thought relative to the other into the other's mind" (*Is Ontology Fundamental?* 7). In many ways, this is true throughout the novel. People "speak" to each other first without words. At every encounter the father and son have with others, their initial response is one of suspicion, but this in itself is still a reaction to the Other, and is, thus, what it means to speak to the Other.

Though Levinas believes to acknowledge is to speak, it is still through language that culture can exist, and so, without it, the devoid of the Other is ever present. The verbal emptiness in the world of *The Road* deeply affects the father. He reminisces about a trip with his uncle across a lake to gather firewood when he was a child, and the reader discovers that throughout this, the father remembers, "Neither of them had spoken a word," and he thinks: "This was the perfect day of his childhood. This the day to shape the days upon" (13). This is another reflection on the lack of verbal communication in *The Road*, and a reminder that this post-apocalyptic world is a silent and lonely place. At multiple points in the novel, the father and son stand and listen for others because the father wants to avoid others. The promising silence is not only a sign of being alone, and thus safe, but also a reminder of the void of the world. Ely's questions, "Supposed you were the last one left? Suppose you did that to yourself?" (169), imply how horrifying this absence of others can be. The father fears, once he is dead, that his son will experience this absence: his son will be left alone in the world with no one to acknowledge his existence. This is why it is pertinent that when the father is dying, he reminds his son that he can talk to him even if he is

not there. He tells his son: “You can talk to me and I’ll talk to you. You’ll see” (279). The father wants to ensure that his son has the ability to feel like he is being acknowledged by another to validate his being.

In a way, McCarthy’s writing style embodies the conceptualization of language to the body: “It is then clear that the language through which meaning is produced in being is a language spoken by incarnate minds. The incarnation of thought is not an accident that has occurred to it and has complicated its task by diverting the straightforward movement with which it aims at an object. The body is the fact that expresses this world while it thinks it” (*Meaning and Sense* 40). The use of the body to communicate is crucial to the relationship of the father and the son. It stresses the fact that bodies reactions are innate automatic reactions and thus more pure than thoughts and language which are the aspects of verbal communication.

With less people in this post-apocalyptic world, it is no wonder that dialogue is scarce, but because it is scarce, it makes communicating through body and bodily gestures that much more important. Levinas himself finds body language to be a relatively unconscious communication, stating: “The body is the fact that thought is immersed in the world that it thinks and, consequently, expresses this world while it thinks it. The corporeal gesture is not a nervous discharge but a celebration of the world, a poetry. The body is a feeling felt; that is, according to Merleau-Ponty, what is so wondrous about it” (*Meaning and Sense* 40). Levinas is expressing the importance of recognizing bodily gestures as a language in itself, and is a more felt communicative process than verbal language. The body and face are the first visual impression of the Other and give the viewer the opportunity to judge the Other’s intention based on the visual implications. This is exemplified in the first person the father and son encounter along the road. Cautiously, the father and son decide to “take a look” (49) at the injured man as he travels along the road ahead of them. Eventually this man sits down allowing the father and son to pass him: “The boy hung on to his father’s coat. No one spoke...As they passed [the man] looked down. As if he’d done something wrong. His shoes were bound up with wire and coated with roadtar and he sat there in silence, bent over in his rags” (50). The father and son continue on despite the son’s desire to help the man who had been struck by lightning. Later, the father and son are resting for the night and he looks at the boy, “but the boy had turned away



and lay staring out at the river” (51). The boy’s body and face are away from the father, insinuating a distant, disengaged relationship. The father tries to defend his actions, and the following dialogue ensues:

There’s nothing we could have done.

He didnt answer.

He’s going to die. We cant share what we have or we’ll die too.

I know.

So when are you going to talk to me again?

I’m talking now.

Are you sure?

Yes.

Okay. (52)

In this exchange, the father is trying to justify his actions to his son. The son’s body language, which already suggests a reaction toward his father’s actions, communicates the son’s disappointment in not helping the old man. As previously mentioned, the silence of the boy deeply upsets the father. Similar reactions to the father’s unwillingness to sympathize with others reoccur throughout the novel, and each time the boy verbally disengages with the father and positions his face and body away from his father in an expression of disappointment and sadness.

The body, however, is not limited to appendages and the torso but includes aspects of the face.

According to Levinas, the ability to assess through vision is also an aspect of the body:

The ‘position of the one that is looking’ does not introduce a relativity into the allegedly absolute order of the totality that would be projected on an absolute retina. *Of itself* a look would be relative to a position. Sight would be *by essence* attached to a body, would belong to an eye. *By essence* and not only *in fact*. The eye would not be the more or less perfected instrument in which the ideal enterprise of vision, capturing, without shadows or deformations, the reflection of being, would be realized empirically in the human species.

(*Meaning and Sense* 39)

This visual assessment occurs before verbal engagement, and where one can see, one can judge based on sight; which is precisely why verbal engagement can be so scarce. The society that exists in *The Road* is to assume the Other is malicious, which can be calculated merely by seeing the body in its tension and spatial relationship to the Other.

To further reflect on Levinas's statement regarding language as the foundation of culture, it is apparent that the language used in *The Road* is bare, scarce, and metaphorical. The need to communicate verbally will be the factor leading to the rebuilding of a moral and humane society, because without verbal language culture cannot exist. McCarthy effectively uses the English language to draw the reader into a world where language is phasing out because people can no longer connect with the Other on verbal terms. Though the language is diminishing in the post-apocalyptic world, the father recognizes the importance of language and teaches his son to read and write, which demonstrates his faith in the future. The use of dreams as metaphors for what is absent further implies the depth of despair in which the father lives. Without language, the world would diminish into the bleak, desolate nothingness that makes up the landscape of *The Road*, with no Other left to fathom it. With the assistance of Levinas, the exploration of language is not limited to the world of the text, but also enables an investigation of McCarthy's stylistic choices and their application to the depth of the Other within the text.

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