

Reading Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

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The post-human discourse is an ongoing process of different standpoints and movements, which has flourished as a result of the contemporary attempt to redefine the human condition. Post-humanism, transhumanism, anti-humanism and the post-humanities offer significant ways to rethink possible existential outcomes. Transhumanism offers a very rich debate on the impact of technological and scientific developments in the evolution of the human species; and still it holds a humanistic and human-centric perspective which weakens its standpoint: it is a 'humanity plus' movement whose aim is to elevate the human condition. On the contrary, speciesism has become an integral part of the post-humanist approach, formulated on a post-anthropocentric and post-humanistic episteme, based on decentralized and non-hierarchical modes. Although post-humanism investigates the realms of science and technology, it does not recognize them as its main axis of reflection, nor does it limit itself to their technical endeavours, but it expands its reflection to the technologies of existence.

Post-humanism seems appropriate to investigate the geological time of the anthropocene. As the anthropocene marks the extent of the impact of human activities on a planetary level, the post-human focuses on decentering the human from the primary focus of the discourse. In tune with anti-humanism, post-humanism stresses the urgency for humans to become aware of their actions pertaining to an ecosystem which, when damaged negatively, affects the human condition as well. In such a framework, the human is not approached as an autonomous agent, but is located within an extensive system of relations. Humans are perceived as material nodes of becoming; such becomings operate as technologies of existence. The way the humans inhabit this planet, what they eat, how they behave, what relations they entertain, creates the network of who and what they are: it is not a disembodied network. In this expanded horizon, it becomes clear that any types of essentialism, reductionism or intrinsic biases are limiting factors in approaching such multidimensional networks that exceed political, social and biological human realms.

Post-humanism keeps a critical and deconstructive standpoint informed by the acknowledgement of the past, while setting comprehensive and generative perspective to sustain and nurture alternatives for the present and for the futures. Within the current philosophical environment, post-humanism offers a unique balance between agency, memory and imagination, aiming to achieve harmonic legacies in the evolving ecology of interconnected existence.

In these contexts, *The Road* gestures towards future patterns of thought and modes of being which go beyond humanism. Interpretations of the eschatological significance of human beings have always underwritten visions of apocalypse. In the aftermath of two World Wars humanism has become a denigrated idea, while progress smacks of an authoritarian disregard for difference. Once considered a foundation of knowledge, man was reconceived as a construct of science and technology, religion and history, cultural structure and political fashioning. Once hailed as the horizon of existence and thought, the human being became a self-doubting, mystery lacking all existential certainty other than its own death. Although

humanism is not necessarily an optimistic, progressive doctrine which can take on diverse forms, it does presume that humans have some unique significance and power to affect their environment.

McCarthy, both directly (through explicit references) and indirectly (through allusive motifs) invokes the specter of historical events, like the dawn of the nuclear age responsible for overturning the belief in human progress. In *The Road*, all peoples and creatures have been subjected to a holocaust, remains are far more common than living beings and the detritus of an all-consuming fire contaminates seemingly the entirety of the earth. The remnant of whatever reduced the landscape to a wasteland permeates every inch of the novel's setting. Calling to mind the fallout of a nuclear explosion and the cinders of bodies burned in the Nazi death camps, this motif alludes to historical events that undermined the efficacy of humanism and progress by seemingly devaluing the dignity of human life, cheapening the power of human reason and dimming the prospects for the future. The father and son flee from sanctuary to sanctuary taking on the characteristics of concentration camp inmates themselves.

Ever since the World War II, the threats of nuclear war and industrialized genocide have shaken humanism to its core, dramatically altering conceptions of apocalypse. All that these past and projected calamities reveal is the transience of life, the depth of human cruelty and the apathy of existence. Making a lie of progress, nuclear war indicts science for pushing our species to the brink of suicide and dismisses progressive attempts to social improvement. By turning seemingly every technological, bureaucratic and philosophical development of Western civilization towards one purpose – the annihilation of all lives deemed unworthy of life – disgraces the humanistic philosophy.

In *The Road*, the whole human world is reduced to cinders, seemingly beyond resurrection. When the father and son explore a town, they find no people. The only thing that moved in the streets was the blowing ash. Humanity has gone the way of the dinosaur and become a mere fossil, an assembly of rocks and relics. Nuclear war, genocide and disaster have reduced life to ash, depriving it of individuality and agency. The fact that the novel's narrator does not reveal any of the characters' names draws attention towards the post-apocalyptic loss of human individuality. The adumbration of day light alludes to the dimming of hope that follows humanism's death by atomic fire. All paradigms collapse. The man cannot remember the names of objects; he forgets the appearance of all hues save shades of gray and cannot recall what bygone foods looked and tasted like. Human inventions have become purposeless, valueless; expensive electronic equipment now unfunctional; electrical appliances and tools are scattered by the side of the road. The discarding of tools is particularly significant because for a long time the use of tools was regarded as what separates humanity from animals. By making tools and human creations redundant, the world of *The Road* seems to void everything that once made humans unique.

The man often resorts to animal metaphors in his speech and thoughts. Like domesticated creatures bred to die, they seem incapable of changing their living conditions, able to do little more with their lives than kill time before slaughter. McCarthy uses an animal simile to illustrate the dreary toil of human existence in the post-apocalyptic world when, describing the grim progress of the pair upon the road, he writes: "They went on. Treading the dead world under like rats on a wheel."

This fear, that in the absence of any meaning or destiny the human life span will become a mere drudgery, as tedious and directionless as a rodent running in a wheel, runs throughout

the text. In a constant state of anxiety, laboring to satisfy basic needs for food, water and shelter and fleeing from perceived threats, the protagonists, in many ways, become like haunted animals. In the father's view all other humans appear similarly inflected by animalistic behavior. He detects reptilian calculations in the eyes of a road agent, the first human being other than the boy that he had spoken to in more than a year. The man regards his interlocutor as a beast whose gaunt, conniving appearance gives the impression of an animal inside a skull looking out the eye holes. Unable to reason in any manner other than reptilian, instinctual drive for self preservation, survivors of the catastrophe have lost something long thought to be distinctly human: the ability to respond ethically to others. Though the animalization of humans is a common trope in McCarthy's fiction, it is the fate of characters who cross the fragile boundary separating the civilized from the uncivilized in *The Road* that takes on a particular urgency. When there is no boundary to delineate the civilized and uncivilized, no humanistic philosophy to grant homo-sapiens a purpose, can anyone be fully human?

A tension can be observed in McCarthy's fiction – a tension between the world he imagines and the words he uses to represent it. Noting that McCarthy invariably employs a highly stylized, manmade literary practice to illustrate environments indifferent to human concerns and customs, critics contend that his novels embody a stalemate between humanist discourse and post-humanist idea. One place we can detect this stalemate is in the plethora of adjectives that McCarthy uses to portray the novels' drab, monochromatic setting: "granitic" (3), "gun metal" (6), "charcoal sketches" (8) etc. Public solidarity is missing and the humans are alienated from each other by technology and corporate culture; citizens are politically detached and self-interested, preferring personal profit over collective benefits.

The Road propels the reader along a horrifying journey to the nuclear winter of post-apocalyptic America.. Following an unnamed father and son through the fiercest and bleakest of landscapes, readers breathlessly watch as the two battle inconceivable odds in their simple quest for survival. In as realistic a context as possible McCarthy examines not only the physical but also the psychological consequences of cataclysm. His is a world where not only the planet collapses, but civilizations as well; speech, writing, oral tales, memories and dreams disintegrate and decay as do almost all articulations and representations of language. Ironically, the lushness of McCarthy's prose swells as the words and semantic trappings of this post-holocaustic earth vanish. Although the catalyst of the calamity is never specifically named, one can infer that it is indeed the aftermath of a nuclear war. The text does describe "a long shear of light and then a series of low concussions" which give rise to a "dull rose glow" (52) that lend credence to this idea. In this setting, a dust cloud surrounding the Northern Hemisphere has rendered the process of photosynthesis null, killing almost all edible plant life. As a direct result, almost all animal life is also destroyed and many humans, in their desperate struggle for life, have resorted to enslaving and cannibalizing one another.

McCarthy has used the scientific theory about long term consequences of nuclear war to create his own dystopic narrative. What is described in *The Road* is not merely the extinction of a species or a planet; he portrays the human oriented experience of the demise of civilization. Fragmented sentences that mirror the process of sensory perception are scattered through the text and evoke the fractured status humankind has found itself in, contributing to the ominous mood:

In the morning they went on. Desolate country. A boar-hide nailed to a barn door. Ratty. Wisp of a tail. Inside the barn three bodies hanging from the rafters, dried and dusty among the wan slats of light. (17)

The lack of names, apostrophes and quotation marks in the text also provokes an eerie sense of displacement. The main protagonists are known only as “the man” and “the boy”. The boy loses his toys and picture books early on in the novel and the father too can possess nothing extraneous. Even the old photograph of his dead wife is eventually left behind. The boy’s flute – a wonderful trope for sound, beauty and language – also gets unremorsefully thrown away. As father and son abandon all but the most essential – food, water, clothing and gasoline, so does McCarthy do away with punctuation marks.

What is also rather interesting is McCarthy’s use of the word “okay” in their dialogue. The word occurs an impressive one hundred and eight times and ends a total of thirty two conversations and most of the times it is a pleading call for existential reassurance:

Can we wait a while?

Okay. But it’s getting dark.

I know.

Okay...

There’s no one here...

Okay.

Are you still scared?

Yes.

We’re okay.

Okay. (204)

The two reaffirm their status as the good guys, the ones who do not eat people, thus maintaining their moral integrity and thereby their humanity:

We wouldn’t ever eat anybody would we?

No. Of course not.

No matter what.

No. No matter what.

Because we’re the good guys.

Yes.

Okay. (128-129)

In contrast to the minimalist speech where words like okay falter in their role as conveyors of complex meanings and emotions, McCarthy creates new words in his descriptive passages: neologisms and kennings are dotted throughout, formed out of the need to illustrate the vast, sullen deafening chaos that subsumes the duo. Words like “illucid” (116), “parsible” (88) and “salitter” (261) rise out of the ash. This embodies the new lyricism that emerges from a fallen and forlorn world. Much as the father uses the fragments of old epoch to create new post-humanistic tools for survival, new words and meanings are also carved

out of the old. This is all in an ironic service of the portrayal of a world where words die. This is best represented in the child's own relationship with language. In the beginning of the text, the boy is excited about communication; the father has been painstakingly teaching his son the alphabet. The two share lessons, conversations, memories and dreams and despite the suicide of the boy's mother or perhaps because of it, they develop a close and intimate bond. However, as time progress we see the boy retreat from speech. Whereas previously the child clamored for the father's tales, which persistently and consistently reaffirmed their moral status as the good guys who don't cannibalize, he ultimately rejects his father's stories as untrue:

Do you want me to tell you a story?

No.

Why Not?

Those stories are not true.

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

Yes. But in the stories we are always helping people and we don't help people.(268)

It is apparent that their previous cheerful and comforting discourse has gradually fallen into a numbness of frozen silence. The boy retreats deeper into himself as he distances from stories. But the depth of language is not only made manifest in the boy's aversion to words. Concomitantly, other examples of literacy and linguistics break apart. Tropes of this phenomenological breakdown abound. Any time the duo discovers a book or a library it is always within a context of destruction. The library, as it appears in its ruin, was essentially a space of expectation. Dying words become the un-mourned victims of the apocalypse. All books in this novel are swollen and shapeless, water-damaged and faded, found, glanced at and without exception tossed away. They are ignored and dismissed as useless artifacts from a bygone era. Words have faltered and language has failed in this post-humanist culture where the self-deceptive centrality of the human is laid bare with the collapse of human culture:

The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colours, the names of birds. Things to eat. Finally, the names of things once believed to be true. More fragile than he would have thought. How much was already gone? The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality. (74-75)

Finitude and death are also emphasized as key constituents of post-humanism. The specter of death is present throughout the text; the father, who takes his son across a ravaged landscape, near devoid of animal or plant life, realizes that he is dying. He has one bullet in his gun, which the boy is instructed to take his life with if cannibals attack them. The post-human condition urges us to think critically and creatively about who and what we actually are in the process of becoming. Depending on how we choose, our post-human age will be either one that represents the humanistic age in a more technologically updated manner or one where a reciprocal, responsive and responsible relation is in progress between humans and the rest of the world.

The Road adequately derails the long held perception of the human being as occupying a natural and eternal place at the very centre of things. The very machinery that humanity distinguished itself from and the belief in a unique essence are all but blatantly questioned

in this post-humanist work. In the humanist account, human beings are exceptional, autonomous and set above the world that lies at their feet. In contrast to this, McCarthy presents a humanity without humanism; a species without purpose, dignity and destiny. He reflects on how the effects of and on the contemporary techno-culture and bio-technology force through a rethinking of the integrities and identities of the human. It is humanism, not the human in all its embodied and prosthetic complexity that is left behind in post-humanist thought.

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