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The *Endgame* of *The Road*

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While critics have usually discussed the novels of Cormac McCarthy within the self-enclosed space of his own earlier narrative worlds or with respect to his American literary progenitors like William Faulkner, Herman Melville, and Flannery O'Connor (Chabon 118, Frye 7, Kunska 69), early reviewers of McCarthy's post-apocalyptic narrative *The Road* (2006) noted its Beckettian atmosphere. *Kirkus Reviews* described *The Road* as "a parable that reads like *Night of the Living Dead* as rewritten by Samuel Beckett." Alan Cheuse of *The Chicago Tribune* described *The Road* as a book that "reads as though Samuel Beckett had dared himself to outdo Harlan Ellison." Gail Caldwell of *The Boston Globe* considered McCarthy's novel to be like "Beckett at its most gritty," characterizing *The Road* as "an endgame novel." Despite these initial signals toward the intersections between Beckett and McCarthy as twin narrators of apocalyptic aftermath, there has been no sustained critical effort to consider what it means for *The Road* to "read like" Beckett.

The connection between McCarthy's *The Road* and Beckett's work extends far beyond McCarthy's evocation of atmosphere or landscape. Instead McCarthy directly references the situations, relationships, images, and themes of Beckett's post-apocalyptic play *Endgame* (1957). McCarthy's echoes of Beckett's play are both generally atmospheric and incredibly specific. Both texts center on the few humans who have survived an unnamed and unnarrated terrestrial catastrophe. Both texts narrate the aftermath of the catastrophe primarily by evoking what life was like before that catastrophe. Both focus on co-dependent familial relationships in which "each is the other's world entire" (McCarthy 6). McCarthy's unnamed father and son wander through a "scabland" of "cauterized terrain" that recalls the world Hamm and Clov observe from

within the house in which they are entombed in *Endgame* (McCarthy 16, 14). The land is devoid of life in both texts: “Everything [is] dead to the root” and the “old crops [are] dead and flattened” (McCarthy 21). As in *Endgame*, land, people, and light have all been “extinguished” (McCarthy 20, Beckett 121). The dead remain unburied (Beckett 121) in the aftermath of the unspecified apocalypse that has left the “mummified dead everywhere” like “latterday bogfolk” (McCarthy 24). What food that remains is scarce, consisting in both texts primarily of biscuits, corn, and grain for which they must compete with the remaining rats (McCarthy 17, 73, 87, 80, Beckett 140, 142, 143, 122, 129, 135, 95-6, 98, 103, 104, 139). The physical realities of their existence constrain the narrative and psychological concerns of characters in *The Road* and in *Endgame*. Both texts begin in a post-apocalyptic moment in which characters cannot help but feel that “the end is the beginning and yet you go on” (Beckett 141). Beckett’s Hamm and the father in *The Road* both “hesitate to end” at the same time that they “wish... it to be over” (Beckett 93, McCarthy 154). In *Endgame*, Hamm implores Clov to “promise to finish me” (Beckett 118) and “If you must hit me, hit me with the axe” (147). The father in *The Road* wrestles with whether he has the strength to murder his own son. The father, like Beckett’s Hamm, shares something of the sensibility of the mantra with which Beckett concludes *The Unnamable* (1953): “I can’t go on, I’ll go on” (407). Living in a “corpsed” world, the characters of *Endgame* and *The Road* vacillate between the temptation to bring about the end through murder and suicide and the burdensome revelation of their own continuing existences (113).

McCarthy begins *The Road* exactly as Beckett begins *Endgame*, with a few human survivors emerging from beneath sheets and tarps to continue living after the apocalyptic end.

The Road opens:

When he woke in the woods in the dark and cold of night he'd reach out to touch the child sleeping beside him. Nights dark beyond darkness and the days more gray each one than what had gone before. Like the onset of some cold glaucoma dimming away the world. His hand rose and fell softly with each precious breath. He pushed away the plastic tarpaulin and raised himself in the stinking robes and blankets and looked toward the east for any light but there was none. (McCarthy 3)

Here McCarthy firmly locates the reader in the opening scene of Beckett's *Endgame*, where the "grey light" reveals characters that are "covered with an old sheet" (Beckett 91). Rising from "stinking... blankets" into a "gray" world and a perspective that "like... glaucoma... dim[s] away [that] world," the father of *The Road*, like Beckett's Hamm, awakes from a dream of vanished nature. Hamm exclaims "What dreams! Those forests!" (93) before being reminded by Clov that "there is no more nature" (99). The father dreams of a cave troubled by a sightless monster (McCarthy 3-4). Both characters wake in a world in which the "light [is] dying" and in which they are condemned to carry on (Beckett 100). Upon waking, both character pairs—Hamm and Clov and McCarthy's father and son—immediately attempt to orient themselves in the wasteland by turning lenses on the landscape in which they find themselves. Looking through his telescope, Clov informs Hamm that "the sun is zero... the sky is grey... from pole to pole" (114). The man viewing the gray new world through his binoculars at the start of *The Road* sees "everything paling away into the murk. The soft ash blowing in loose swirls over the blacktop" (McCarthy 4). He "looks for anything of color. Any movement." Finding nothing, he "just sat there holding the binoculars and watching the ashen daylight congeal over the land" (5). He then uncovers his son from beneath a tarp and they set out on the road. Having opened his

novel with a direct invocation of Beckett, McCarthy makes his first significant departure. Forcing their characters to continue to live after an apocalyptic end, McCarthy and Beckett choose radically different narratives for these characters as Hamm and Clov remain entombed in their own home, believing that “There is no one else,” “There is nowhere else,” and McCarthy’s father and his son elect to migrate, effectively taking *Endgame* on *The Road*.

Endgame and *The Road* are both centrally concerned with the potential for language and narrative form to survive the apocalypse. Neither Beckett nor McCarthy narrates the event that causes the apocalypse, as if previous narrative forms cannot account for what has happened. Both texts struggle with the way in which post-apocalyptic narrative relates to the pre-apocalyptic. For Beckett, narrative form survives as repetitive, self-centered, and backwards-looking. Limited by point of view and by the individual’s perception of time, narrative in *Endgame* ceases to have any value as a mode of communication or as a way of understanding the present moment. The various monologues—especially Hamm’s “chronicle”—suggest the persistence of narrative after the apocalypse as well as its end as stories become empty monologues defined by the repetition of a pre-apocalyptic yesterday that has nothing to offer a radically altered post-apocalyptic world. McCarthy’s invocations of Beckett suggest a return to and revision of *Endgame*’s conclusions regarding the continuing possibilities for narrative. McCarthy’s novel mirrors Hamm’s “chronicle” of a man, a boy, and the curse of existence (Beckett 134), using that narrative to investigate ethical and pragmatic questions about the relationships and obligations of humans who have survived the apocalypse. Human and narrative survival in *The Road* are predicated on two distinct breaks from narratives found in *Endgame*: 1) Hamm’s chronicle rejects the possibility of “bring[ing] in other characters” (130) and 2) the boy in *The Road* rejects the Beckettian philosophy behind his father’s own chronicle

in order to bring in other characters and carry a shared narrative forward into the future. In returning to and departing from Beckett's *Endgame* through the son's active questioning of the father's narrative, McCarthy concludes *The Road* with a gesture not only of human survival, but of the survival and continuing significance of narrative.

Both *Endgame* and *The Road* consider narrative in terms of the relationship between self and other. The paradoxically divergent shared memories of Nell and Nagg emphasize (in comic form) the underlying significance of the past in the imagination of the post-apocalyptic moment. The "accursed fornicator[s]" of the play (Beckett 98), Nell and Nagg, offer no indication of how they have come to exist in a new world which they can be "bottled" in ashbins (108) but they are unambiguous in their attachment to the past. All Nell and Nagg reveal of the present moment is that their ashbins are not filled with sawdust because "it was sawdust once" but is "now... sand... fetch[ed] from the shore" (103). This is presumably the result of Hamm's and Clov's revelation that there are no more trees in a world in which there is "no more nature" (99) but Nell and Nagg do not consider or discuss this at all. Instead, when Nagg states that sand "was sawdust once," Nell responds with the exclamation "Once!" (103). What is essential to these characters is not only that at present they live in sand but that this sand can only be defined in terms of a past in which it *was* sawdust. This is one of several iterations of their shared refrain of "yesterday" (101,105). While their discussion of the present is limited, Beckett emphasizes their attitude toward the past through stage directions that insist that Nell's tone in exclaiming "Ah yesterday!" must be "*elegiac*" (101,105, emphasis Beckett's). Both Nell and Nagg repeatedly define their present circumstances solely in terms of the distinction between the present and their pasts. Nagg "had [his tooth] yesterday" (101). They had "sawdust once" (103). Even their shared memory of "rowing on Lake Como" is defined in terms of its own past moment of their

engagement “the day before” (106). The dialogue between Nell and Nagg indicates the impossibility in *Endgame* that characters might understand any moment in isolation from its past.

Although Nell and Nagg share a sense of the significance of the past as well as particular memories such as their experience “rowing on Lake Como” (106), their understanding of that experience is circumscribed by different narratives that reflect something of their own self-images. Nell and Nagg both remember the moment on Lake Como as “one April afternoon” on the day after they were engaged (106). Both accept that Nell was “in such fits that we capsized... [and] should have been drowned” but their shared memory presents two completely different narratives. For Nell the “fits” resulted from her happiness at their engagement: “It was because I felt happy.” Nagg insists “*indignant*[ly],” however that “it was not, it was not, it was my story and nothing else. Happy! Don’t you laugh at it still? Every time I tell it” (emphasis Beckett’s). Nagg then “tell[s] it again,” insisting that their past happiness be understood in terms of its own narrative, a narrative that relies on his own sense of himself as a humorous storyteller. When he finishes his narrative of a tailor and “an Englishman, needing a pair of striped trousers... for the New Year festivities,” Nell’s response indicates that she has heard only her own internal narrative of her happiness at Lake Como as she remembers that “You could see down to the bottom... So white” (106,108). From shared past experience Nell and Nagg become trapped in different monologues.

In *Endgame* narrative repeated infinitely loses its effect because like the circumstances of their current lives, narrative can only be compared to yesterday and found wanting. Nagg’s narrative, which culminates in a classic Beckett punchline at the expense of the world, hinges on a difference of perspective: the Englishman believes pants should be made in less than three months because “in six days... God made the world” (107). From the tailor’s point of view, of

course, the world is no great thing. “Look... at the world” he suggests, “and look... at my TROUSERS!” This joke works in *Endgame* because Nell and Nagg have just emphasized the emptiness of their present world. The joke is also, as Nagg recognizes, on him because the narrative itself no longer works. Chained to the past as a mode of understanding the present, Nagg has offered the narrative of the Englishman and the Tailor because “it always made [Nell] laugh” (106). Even though Nell does not want to hear it and says that “it’s not funny,” Nagg pushes on, retelling himself something he seems already to have told many times before. Midway through the story he recognizes the essential truth of Nell’s judgment. Nagg is compelled to tell the story because it once was funny and the story is not funny because it *once* was funny. “I never told it worse,” Nagg recognizes, “I tell this story worse and worse” (107). Narrative repeated infinitely loses its audience as well as its effect. Stuck in a memory of a shared happy yesterday, nothing can equate Nell’s and Nag’s yesterdays. From shared experience, they become lost in equally ineffective monologues. Meaningful interaction becomes impossible as a result. Nagg “disappears into his bin [and] closes the lid behind him” (108). Nell’s pulse ceases at this exact moment (108). Monologue, repetition, and slavish devotion to the past result in isolation and death.

Hamm’s “chronicle” offers Beckett’s most elaborate and sustained example of the insistence and inconsequence in maintaining old forms after the apocalypse. In this process Hamm’s “chronicle” reveals the ethical and pragmatic questions of the responsibilities between self and other. For Hamm the only responsibility is to recognize that he lives in a world for which there is “no cure” (129). Hamm carefully defines his story as a “chronicle,” embedding a sense of history and time within his narrative framework (134). Hamm’s chronicle is as self-centered as his placement “bang in the center” of the house (111). It is, as Clov tells him, “the

story you've been telling yourself all your days" (134). As part of the routine that structures his day, Hamm announces "it's story time, where was I?" (127) as if "story time" helps to locate him "right in the center" of himself. It allows him the secure but temporary knowledge of where he is, or rather, where he was. Hamm's chronicle—which bears a striking resemblance to the narrative framework of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*—begins with the arrival of a pale and emaciated man at Hamm's door. The man tells Hamm that he has journeyed for three days from an area in which he and his son were the sole survivors of the unnamed terrestrial catastrophe. The man has come to beg for bread or corn for his child. Hamm mocks this request:

But use your head. I give you some corn, a pound, a pound and a half, you bring it back to your child and you make him—if he's still alive—a nice pot of porridge, [*Nagg reacts*] a nice pot of porridge, full of nourishment. Good. The colours come back into his little cheeks—perhaps. And then? [*Pause.*] I lost patience. [*Violently.*] Use your head, can't you, use your head, you're on earth, there's no cure for that! (129)

Pausing like Nagg for comic effect, Hamm utters another joke at the expense of the world. Hamm's rebuke of the man's request denies the potential for the earth's recovery from apocalypse: "But what in God's name do you imagine? That the earth will awake in spring? That the rivers and seas will run with fish again? That there's manna in heaven still for imbeciles like you?" (129-130). There is, Hamm asserts "no cure." Furthermore, Hamm is furious that the man cannot "use [his] head" to realize that the impossibility of renewal or reawakening of the natural world that once was makes the man's effort to save his child especially futile.

In his backwards-looking chronicle, Hamm recognizes the stagnation of narrative itself. His narrative indecision over the boy links human and narrative survival as Hamm ceases his chronicle at the exact moment that the man asks him to “consent to take in the child” (130). Repeating to himself a refrain about the pointlessness of a world that can no longer repeat itself, Hamm’s narrative stalls. In his second attempt to continue the story, Hamm stops at the identical moment in the narrative. Retrospectively but momentarily troubled by his own self-interest, Hamm reflects on “all those I might have helped... saved” before reverting to his earlier logic: “use your head, can’t you, use your head, you’re on earth, there’s no cure for that” (141). Hamm’s obsessive return to the man’s appeal indicates that he cannot “end [his story] and begin another” (141). His narrative, like his physical self, is paralyzed.

Hamm’s narrative, like Nagg’s joke, emphasizes the self-centeredness of backwards looking narrative as well as the disconnection that results from such narratives. In the final moments of *Endgame*, Hamm returns one final time to his chronicle and to the man’s unanswered appeal to save his son. In this iteration, Hamm attempts to refute logically (to himself) his decision not to help others survive. Speaking aloud to himself as Clov silently listens, Hamm emphasizes to the man the disjunction between the world-as-was that Hamm and the father knew and the world-as-is that Hamm, father, and son all now know: “He [the son] doesn’t realize, all he knows is hunger, and cold, and death to crown it all. But you! You ought to know what the earth is like, nowadays.... Well, there we are, there I am, that’s enough” (153). For Hamm the disjunction between the world-as-is and the world-as-was makes the act of saving the father (so that the father might save the son) appear ridiculous to Hamm. After all, they are on the post-apocalyptic earth and there is “no cure for that” (129). The endgame of Hamm’s philosophy may be seen in the diminishment that marks the conclusion of his narrative as the

transition from “we are” to Hamm’s self-location “I am” underscores the isolation of his narrative in a world of rapidly disappearing narrative participants. Hamm’s solitary voice closes the play. His questions and his cries to Nagg in the ashbin and to Clov standing motionless by the door go unanswered. The final scene of the play demonstrates the endgame of the philosophy on which Hamm’s chronicle is based. Vowing to “speak no more,” Hamm remains “motionless” in the center of a narrative where only he “remain[s]” (154).

Clov reveals the discrepancy between the chronicle that Hamm constructs and his actual choices in the aftermath of the apocalypse. For Clov, the failure of Hamm’s chronicle lies in the disjunction between human behavior in the post-apocalyptic aftermath and its more pragmatic articulation in memory. Describing Hamm’s blame for the death of a character named Mother Pegg, Clov condemns Hamm for the same self-centeredness he demonstrated toward the man and boy. According to Clov, “When old Mother Pegg asked you for oil for her lamp and you told her to get out to hell, you knew what was happening then... You know what she died of, Mother Pegg? Of darkness” (Beckett 146). When Hamm “*feebly*” responds “I hadn’t any [oil],” Clov responds “*harshly... as before*” “Yes, you had” (emphases Beckett). In this same exchange, Hamm asks “What’s happened” and commands Clov to “Use your head, can’t you!” again asking “What has happened?” (146). Hamm’s chronicle suggests an attempt to impose a structure that will justify the refusal of aid to others as well as a desperate attempt to understand the enormity of what has happened. As in *The Road*, the removal of the answer to Hamm’s repeated question of “What has happened?” shifts focus from the original catastrophic event to its narrated aftermath. The focus in *Endgame* is less on what has brought about the apocalyptic “end” than it is on the games that facilitate some degree of survival.

Cormac McCarthy's father shares Beckett's backward looking and limited perspective of the potential for narrative after the apocalypse. McCarthy's use of fire imagery suggests that, like the landscape, the memory and the power of stories of the pre-apocalyptic world are beginning to become extinguished. The father and son in *The Road* agree upon a shared narrative in which they are "carrying the fire" (McCarthy 29). Father and son thus link the necessity for warmth ensuring biological survival with the significance of continuing to narrate the world as it was. Like Nagg and Hamm, McCarthy's father remains indebted to old forms. He instructs himself to "Make a list. Recite a litany. Remember" as he watches a forest fire (31). The link between fire and pre-apocalyptic narrative forms recurs when he considers how to inscribe form and order on the new world. "Evoke the forms," the man thinks as he watches his son sleep by the fire, "when you've nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them" (74). The resonance between this description and the novel's repeated tableau of the father and son building fires fuses the relationship between storytelling and fire. Both are presented as key to human and narrative survival: "He banked the fire against the seam of rock where he'd built it and he strung the tarp behind them to reflect the heat and they sat warm in their refuge while he told the boy stories. Old stories of courage and justice as he remembered them" (41). McCarthy repeatedly suggests that by carrying the story the man hopes to carry the fire.

Nevertheless, the man continues to understand structures only in relation to a previous pre-apocalyptic coherence. McCarthy underscores the father's debt to old instruments and measurements. "He'd once found a lightmeter in a camera store," for example, "that he thought he might use to average out readings for a few months" (213). On an abandoned ship, the father contemplates "a brass sextant, possibly a hundred years old. He lifted it from the fitted case and

held it in his hand. Struck by the beauty of it... He held it to his eye and turned the wheel. It was the first thing he'd seen in a long time that stirred him" (228). In this moment the father is not far from the obsessive references Hamm makes in his chronicle to old instruments of measurement that mimic the old form of his chronicle by appearing all the more ridiculous in the aftermath of an apocalypse that has "extinguished" the natural world. In revising his chronicle, Hamm includes repeated notation of various precise instruments of temperature and calendar measurement:

- 1) "It was an extra-ordinarily bitter day, I remember, zero by the thermometer. But considering it was Christmas Eve there was nothing... extra-ordinary about that" (Beckett 127).
- 2) "It was a glorious bright day, I remember, fifty by the heliometer, but already the sun was sinking down into the... down among the dead... Nicely put, that" (128).
- 3) "It was a howling wild day, I remember, a hundred by the anemometer. The wind was tearing up the dead pines and sweeping them... away.... A bit feeble, that" (129).
- 4) "It was an exceedingly dry day, I remember, zero by the hygrometer" (129).

Hamm's compulsive return and repetition highlight his debt to a previous system of measurement as well as his inability to continue the narrative in the face of the absence of the referents for these terms. The attempt to order and narrate and measure has been undercut, as it is in McCarthy, by the fact that the "sun is sinking," the dead are everywhere, and the trees are dead and being swept away by the wind. If the old objects of measurement no longer apply to the landscape, the narrative form appears not to either. McCarthy's father echoes Hamm's emphasis on the significance of readymade pre-apocalyptic forms. Hamm states "I love the old

questions. Ah the old questions, the old answers, there's nothing like them!" (118) and he remains dedicated to the construction of his chronicle. Clov dreams of an ordered and dead world: "I love order. It's my dream. A world where all would be silent and still and each thing in its last place, under the last dust" (133). The man in McCarthy's *The Road* expresses a similar devotion to order when he thinks that "He'd poured over maps as a child, keeping one finger on the town where he lived. Themselves among others, everything in its place. Justified in the world" (McCarthy 182). For both Beckett's characters and McCarthy's father, narrative survival strategies focus on continuing to keep alive the old forms.

Like Nagg's joke, however, the father's stories fail to compare to a vanished world in which they had some relevance. For the man in *The Road* the power of narrative diminishes as the language on which it depends begins to erode:

He tried to think of something to say but he could not. He'd had this feeling before, beyond the numbness and the dull despair. The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true. More fragile than he would have thought. How much was gone already? The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality. *Drawing down like something to preserve heat*. In time to wink out forever. (88-89, italics ours)

The failure of the man's stories is not solely the result of a dimming and dying vocabulary. Rather, language, stories, and narrative verge on extinction as their forms are no longer relatable to a new world in which physical survival itself is suspect.

In *The Road*, Cormac McCarthy aligns the father with Hamm's self-centered survival narrative by offering a version of the death of Mother Pegg. Hamm's abandonment of Mother Pegg to die of "darkness" becomes the father's nightmare vision of his wife's death: "In his dream she was sick and he cared for her. The dream bore the look of sacrifice but he thought differently. He did not take care of her and she died alone somewhere in the dark and there is no other dream nor other waking world and there is no other tale to tell" (McCarthy 32). The passage reveals a deep and significant discrepancy between the dream version of the death of *The Road's* mother (in which she was sick and the father cared for her) and what he fears to be the actual reality (in which he did not take care of her and she died alone somewhere in the dark). This is precisely Clov's narrative of the death of Mother Pegg, one in which she is refused aid and dies alone in the dark. The father in *The Road* sees this as a narrative inevitability in the post-apocalyptic world. As in Nagg's and Hamm's narratives, the statement that "there is no other tale to tell" embeds a sense of narrative closure and of a lack of available alternatives.

The degree to which *The Road's* father inherits and exhibits the tenets of Hamm's philosophy emerges in a series of encounters with fellow survivors throughout the text. But if the father believes that survival in the aftermath of the apocalypse is a closed narrative, his son argues for something quite distinct from his father's philosophy. The boy's questioning of his father suggests that there may indeed still be an alternative "tale to tell" (32). When the father and son meet a man struck by lightning, the father's refusal to help echoes the philosophy behind Hamm's chronicle as well as the Beckettian refrain "Nothing to be done" from *Waiting for Godot* (1953) (Beckett 3,6, 15). The boy, on the other hand, entreats the father to help in a manner that suggests that the boy does not view their behavior toward other survivors as a closed or fixed narrative:

Cant we help him? Papa?

No. We cant help him.

The boy kept pulling at his coat. Papa? he said.

Stop it.

Cant we help him Papa?

No. We cant help him. There's nothing to be done for him.

They went on. The boy was crying. He kept looking back... I'm sorry, he said.

But we have nothing to give him. We have no way to help him. I'm sorry for what happened to him but we cant fix it. You know that, don't you? (McCarthy 50)

This would appear to conclude their discussion, but as often happens in *The Road*, the boy's silence opposes his father's assertion that "There's nothing we could have done" (51-52). In response to his recognition that the boy "didn't answer," the father emphasizes the inevitable and obvious: "He's going to die. We cant share what we have or we'll die too" (51-52). The father again echoes Hamm's chronicle as he essentially asks the boy to "use his head" in order to recognize the logical futility of helping others. Diverging sharply from Beckett, however, McCarthy continues to show the boy's resistance to this story first through silence and questioning and later through the imagination of an alternative narrative that differs from his father's (and Hamm's) by "bring[ing] in other characters" (Beckett 130).

Like Clov in *Endgame*, the boy in *The Road* spots another boy on the horizon, yet McCarthy makes clear the significance of his narrative's divergent response. When Clov's telescope reveals a small boy on the horizon, he relates this fact to Hamm in a voice Beckett describes as "*dismayed*" before he decides to "go and see," taking the gaff with him (149

emphasis Beckett's). This is a deeply ominous moment in which Clov appears ready to do violence to a "potential procreator" and thereby live up to the logical conclusions of Hamm's narrative about existence on a planet without a cure. In contrast, McCarthy's boy chases the boy he sees, hoping to communicate with him (McCarthy 84). The father in *The Road* is furious with his son because he sees this attempted contact as an invitation to death: "There's no one to see. Do you want to die? Is that what you want?" (85). But as in the encounter with the man struck by lightning, the boy refuses to recognize the claim that there is "no one to see" and "nothing to be done." Instead the boy insists on imagining not only an alternative in which they would turn back and help the solitary boy but an entire new world of narrative possibilities that might result from this decision:

What if that little boy doesnt have anybody to take care of him? he said. What if he doesnt have a papa.... 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 my food.

Stop it. We cant.

He was crying again. What about the little boy? he sobbed. What about the little boy? (85-86)

As in Hamm's chronicle, the refusal to take in the boy signals a narrative death. If Hamm's chronicle repeatedly gets stuck because of his inability to bring in other characters, McCarthy shows the reader the boy's belief that the inclusion of others is central to the continuation of narrative and the creation of a community. The boy's silence suggests that the endgame of the

man's philosophy is the same as that of Beckett's play—isolation, death, silence. Later, in *The Road's* harshest depiction of him, the father catches up with a man who has stolen from them. In this moment, the boy begins to reject his father's narrative of carrying fire as the boy begins to recognize the reality of the father's individualist, survivor's mentality. When the boy asks his father to help the man the father has just forced to strip naked, the father simply "looked back up the road" (259). When the boy explains his view that the thief "was just hungry" and now would certainly "die," the father responds only that "He's going to die anyway." The father again echoes Hamm's philosophy: "you're on earth. There's no cure for that" (Beckett 141).

The arrival of the father and the son at the sea represents the end of the father's narrative journey. This arrival reveals that the father's hope that the sea would be a place hospitable to their survival has been yet another story that is "not true." The disappointment with which this story ends is compounded by McCarthy's allusions to *Endgame* in the description of the sea. These allusions suggest that the sea to which the father and son have journeyed offer the greatest temptation yet to echo Hamm's and Clov's question "Do you not think this has gone on long enough?" (Beckett 123). The sea in *The Road* offers one form of narrative end for the father as well as a temptation for McCarthy to end his narrative as well. Yet in arriving at and then leaving the ocean, McCarthy's characters finally begin to move beyond the father's narrative and into a new narrative space. This space is free of the father's preconceived, fixed narrative and a series of textual revisions ultimately free *The Road* from Beckett as its post-apocalyptic progenitor.

Having finally arrived at the sea, McCarthy's father and son do not find the sea the father has constructed through torn maps and abandoned telephone directories (McCarthy 181-182). Instead they see an ocean identical to the ocean that Clov sees through his telescope in Beckett's

play. In *Endgame*, Clov reports to Hamm that the waves of the sea are “Lead” (Beckett 113). Similarly, the father in *The Road* stares out across the “leadcolored sea” (McCarthy 260). Far from offering any hint of life, the sea that since the beginning of the novel has imaginatively functioned as the conclusion of the father’s narrative is described in the same terms as the ruined landscapes across which they have journeyed to find it:

Out there was the grey beach with the slow combers rolling dull and *leaden* and the distant sound of it. Like the desolation of some alien sea breaking on the shores of a world unheard of. Out on the tidal flats lay a tanker half careened. Beyond that the ocean vast and cold and shifting heavily like a slow heaving vat of slag and then the grey squall line of ash. He looked at the boy. He could see the disappointment in his face. I’m sorry it’s not blue, he said. That’s okay, said the boy.

An hour later they were sitting on the beach and staring out at the wall of smog across the horizon. They sat with their heels dug into the sand and watched the bleak sea wash up at their feet. Cold. Desolate. Birdless. (*italics ours*, McCarthy 215)

In *Endgame* Clov gazes through his telescope at a desolate and birdless beach with “no gulls” and “nothing on the horizon,” rebuking Hamm’s repeated questions with his own question, “What in God’s name could there be on the horizon?” Instead, Clov’s telescope finds only “Gray...Gray!...GRRAY!” in a world with “zero...sun” and “lead...waves” (Beckett 113-114). In its textual similarities to the description of the sea in *Endgame*, and in its failure to be the destination that the father hopes it to be, the sea in *The Road* represents the greatest temptation for both McCarthy and his characters to declare with Hamm “Enough! It’s time it ended” (93).

The migration of the father and son from the sea and their return to the road gestures toward a new journey, one that is not fixed on a narrative that depends upon the sea as destination (the father's narrative) or as a space for paralyzed death (Beckett's narrative). Exhausted by the effort of narration, Hamm imagines the shore as his ideal final resting place, a fulfillment of his narrative: "If I could drag myself down to the sea! I'd make a pillow of sand for my head and the tide would come" (136). Rather than end his text on the shore of Beckett's not-blue sea, McCarthy shows this arrival at the sea and the exposure of the last "not true" story of the father to signal the boy's liberation from the stories of his father. Leaving behind the "leadcolored sea shifting in the distance," (McCarthy 260), the father and son return to the road and continue on a journey now without form and with no discernable end. The movement beyond old forms, beyond Beckett, beyond the chronicle, may be seen in McCarthy's use of the sea not as the end of his own novel, but merely as the end of the father's fixed narrative of survival. The father invites the son, "Let's start over," and indeed the final twenty pages of McCarthy's text do "start over" in a manner that moves beyond the old stories of the father and into a new narrative space free of the fixed forms of the past (McCarthy 267).

It is only in the aftermath of the visit to the sea that *The Road* shifts from a text in which the actions of the father and son are dominated by the father's narrative control to one in which the son breaks from this fixed form and advances his own story. Following their departure from the sea and the father's insistence that they abandon the freezing and naked would-be thief, the boy refuses his father's offer to tell him a story: "Those stories are not true. . . . But in the stories we are always helping people and we don't help people" (268). When the father asks the boy to tell him a story instead, the boy replies that his own stories are "more like real life." The father acknowledges that the man's own stories which he has told the boy are not "like real life," to

which the boy replies “Your stories are not. No” (268). For the boy, the discrepancy between the stories of “courage and justice” that his father tells him and the reality of their existence in relation to that of other survivors of the apocalypse reveals the limits of self-centered narratives of survival. This exchange between father and son is immediately followed by a gap on the page. The next section occurs immediately after the boy has told the father a story of his own. It is a narrative that exists in the gap on the page, to which the reader is not privy: “After a while the man said: I think it’s pretty good. It’s a pretty good story. It counts for something” (269). That McCarthy withholds the boy’s story and nonetheless creates a space for its existence both preserves the survival of a new form of story in a post-apocalyptic landscape and withholds from the reader the secret of its form and content. Some hint at the structural and thematic form of such a narrative might come in the passage that relates the boy’s playing of the flute his father has carved for him earlier in the novel: “A formless music for the age to come. Or perhaps the last music on earth called up from out of the ashes of its ruin” (77). McCarthy elects not to represent the boy’s story in the printed text, requiring the reader to imagine it as spoken within the gap. Nonetheless, the moment illustrates McCarthy’s preservation of some unknown form of storytelling that has survived in the apocalypse, one which may be incomprehensible to the man because of its lack of indebtedness to the old forms. That the boy’s story remains a “mystery,” not unlike that which led to the apocalypse, aligns these two textual lacunae. Both events are none the less real for occurring outside of the textual space. While one signals the nearly total annihilation whose aftermath the reader witnesses over the course of the novel, the other signals perhaps the novel’s only indication of creation free from dependence on a narrative of what existed prior to the world’s ruin.

Far from a throwaway moment, McCarthy emphasizes the transformative power of the boy's alternative "story" to move beyond fixed forms through a series of direct textual inversions of Beckett's *Endgame* in the final pages of *The Road*, departures which signal the abandonment of Beckett as the text's literary progenitor. These include dialogue exchanged and promises made and kept, the burial of the father, the man on the road consenting to take in the boy, the conclusion of McCarthy's text as one which elects to "bring in other characters," the return to the space of the road and the beginning of a new communal narrative. Shortly after leaving the sea, the father dies, barely outliving the conclusion of his own fixed narrative. Yet unlike in *Endgame*, the end cannot halt the communication between father and son. Whereas *Endgame* closes with Clov's refusal to speak to Hamm (Beckett 154), the boy promises his dead father that "I'll talk to you every day... And I won't forget. No matter what. . . . He tried to talk to God but the best thing was to talk to his father and he did talk to him and he didnt forget" (McCarthy 286). After the father's death, the boy "just stood in the road and waited, the pistol in hand" (281). But rather than revert back to his father's old narrative form, in which one travels the road ready to shoot others or oneself, the boy makes a different choice. The strange man who approaches the child at the end of the novel tells him "There was some discussion about whether even to come after you at all. You can stay here with your papa and die or you can go with me. . . . But you should go with me. You'll be all right" (283). Thus in the closing pages of his novel, McCarthy shows this man and his family "consent to take in the child," jettisoning Hamm's interrupted and paralyzed chronicle in favor of a narrative that continues. In McCarthy's choice to have the man answer the boy's question, "Are you carrying the fire?" by assenting, "We are," *The Road* ends with an expanding group of characters (at least four) and fulfills what Hamm's chronicle cannot by "bring[ing] in other characters" (McCarthy 283-4). McCarthy indicates here

not only this new man's willingness to participate in the boy's narrative, but a move directly in opposition to the conclusion of Beckett's *Endgame*, a move from singular isolation to collectivity, from "I" to "We." The same move appears in the man's statement that there was "some discussion" about whether or not to come after the boy, suggesting that the group the man is with engages in collective decision making. The boy's desire to bury his father fulfills precisely the promise Clov will not make to Hamm in *Endgame*. Clov refuses to promise to bury Hamm (Beckett 121) and will not even answer Hamm's last request to at least "Cover me with the sheet" (154). In the burial of the father, McCarthy illustrates both the departure from Beckett and the promise-keeping that marks this new community. When the boy returns to say goodbye to his father, he sees that "He was wrapped in a blanket as the man had promised" (McCarthy 286).

The textual moves McCarthy makes at the conclusion of *The Road* come after throwing off the narrative restrictions imposed by Beckett's *Endgame*. The endgame of *The Road* is a refusal to end the game as monologue punctuated by cries that go unanswered, before finally acquiescing to silence. McCarthy instead offers a validation of the boy's desire to play on, to find others, to reinterpret the rules of the game, and to make and exchange contracts through language in the form of promises and a shared collective narrative. In rejecting the apocalyptic endgame of Hamm's "Me to play" as leading ultimately to isolation, silence and death, McCarthy mirrors the boy's journey in the text. McCarthy abandons the "old story" and instead imagines a new set of possibilities inherent in the final move of *The Road*'s narrative game, "We to play."

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