Figures of Violence in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*: “No Remedy for Evil but Only for the Image of It”

Kelly S. Walsh  
Underwood International College  
Yonsei University, South Korea

Abstract

Much criticism has been devoted to Cormac McCarthy’s vision of violence as foundational to American civilization. *The Road*, his last novel to date, ostensibly pushes this idea to its limits, giving shape to a post-apocalyptic, post-America in order to investigate the violent social consequences of near-total ecological disaster. What has yet to be adequately addressed is the essential rhetorical character of this violence; McCarthy’s privileged technique for conveying the irrepressibility of violence, I argue, involves drawing attention to its figures, to the displacements of violence inherent in tropes and figurations. While language and the world are shown to be “shrinking down,” figures remain, and the process of making them continues unabated. In self-reflexively using literary tropes and figurative language, McCarthy suggests that figuration is not only a precondition for human acts of violence, it is also, perhaps, the capacity that distinguishes human life from “mere life.” The novel’s stark pessimism indicates that there is no human way out of figuration and the violence that dwells at the heart of conceptions like evil. In provoking the reader to become more aware and suspicious of the process, though, McCarthy’s critique of violence, albeit negatively, signals toward some constructive potential in the human endeavor to forge better, or less-worse, figures. But this is an eminently frail affirmation, for, in the last analysis, *The Road* insists that there has always been, and will likely always be, a violent human affinity for figures of violence themselves.

Keywords

Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*, rhetoric, violence, evil in literature, post-apocalyptic fiction
But that same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all.

—Herman Melville
*Moby Dick*

It is a violence from within that protects us from a violence without. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality. It seems, in the last analysis, to have something to do with our self-preservation; and that, no doubt, is why the expression of it, the sound of its words, helps us to live our lives.

—Wallace Stevens
“The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words”

I.

Violence is a persistent fact in Cormac McCarthy’s literary universe, and there is no shortage of criticism addressing the author’s vision of its foundational role in American civilization.¹ “There’s no such thing,” said McCarthy in a rare interview, “as life without bloodshed” (Woodward 31). *The Road*, his last novel to date, seemingly pushes this sensibility to its limits, giving shape to a post-apocalyptic, post-America as a means to imaginatively investigate the violent social consequences of “biospheric collapse” (Sheehan 91). In this lawless and stateless world, “largely populated by men who would eat your children in front of your eyes” (McCarthy 152), there are truly horrific and gratuitous scenes of violence. To give just two instances: the unnamed man and son, whose pilgrimage south in search of warmth and food structures the novel, stumble into a cellar where humans are being harvested for flesh (93) and, at an abandoned campsite, they behold “a charred human infant headless and gutted and blackening on the spit” (167). The image is revolting, but perhaps even more appalling, as this representative parataxis suggests, is the sense that horror will continue to pile upon horror, indefinitely, or, at least, until humankind finally expires.

Although violence in *The Road*, at one level, simply exists as brute fact, it is not simple,² and the text expends significant energy exploring the myriad forms it

---

¹ For instance, see Arnold; Brewton; Gallivan; Kollin; Murphet; Phillips; Sheehan; Walsh; Woodward.

² Writing of McCarthy’s earlier works, particularly *Blood Meridian*, Phillips says that “violence tends to be just that; it is not a sign or symbol of something else” (435). While I certainly agree that
assumes and the ultimate aporia of its origin. Acts of violence are a human affair, exerted in and through the survivors, and violence itself is both an ever-present threat and an essential means for survival. But, more importantly, the novel, in adopting a sort of binocular view, attending to the worlds before and after the unnamed cataclysm, reveals violence, in various guises, to have been constitutive of the lost civilization, while remaining the basic ground of human relations, subjectivity, and thought. This strongly suggests a certain economy of violence—no more or less, proportionally at least, after than before. My basic argument, then, will be that a key technique for McCarthy in expressing the fundamental continuity, and irrepressibility, of violence involves drawing attention to its figures, to the displacements of violence inherent in its tropes and figurations. The novel, that is, self-reflexively uses literary tropes and figurative language to illuminate the ways in which violence has always been registered through figures and forms; at the same time, this tendency conveys the notion that figuration, while inseparable from violence, may very well be a precondition for human life, an existence that rises above what Giorgio Agamben calls “simple natural life” (HS 9). Ultimately, it would seem, McCarthy tells us that there is no human way out of figuration. In making us more aware and critical of the process, though, The Road, perhaps despite itself, suggests some constructive potential in forging finer, or less-pernicious, figures. What they might consist of remains unclear, but this provocation does seem topical, particularly if we consider the current American political climate, in which the rhetoric of evil is being indiscriminately wielded to transfigure the refugee into presumed terrorist.4

While Chris Danta rightly notes “the propensity of McCarthy’s protagonists to personify in the face of the apocalypse—to humanize the dying biosphere” (13), neither he nor any other commentator on The Road has taken account of the violence contained in the very act of “humanizing” a world, whether the ruined one of the

---

3 Hellyer writes: “The consciousness of the man is split between memories of the departed world and a present experience in which those memories no longer have any traction” (46). Such memories, it is true, contain a world which no longer exists, but it is equally clear that the man uses the images and names of the lost world in order to make sense of, to figure, the post-apocalyptic one. For this reason, I also disagree with Kunsa’s assertion that “as the past world itself becomes meaningless . . ., the names of the past become meaningless as well” (63).

4 I am referring to the discourse in North America regarding the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Syria. Sheehan, who believes The Road to have a “serious political agenda,” argues that its “most sinister ‘ghost’ . . . is the Western response to the ‘worstness’ of Islam” (91, 104).
novel or one of relative abundance like our own. In its singular manner, McCarthy’s prose seems to instantiate Paul de Man’s assertion that anthropomorphisms, tropologically shaped and intensified, are driven by a “sheer blind violence” (*Rhetoric* 262). That is, what Friedrich Nietzsche calls the “metamorphosis of the world into man” (34) entails the rhetorical transport of the prefigured, phenomenal world into an absolutely different sphere.\(^5\) What the novel demonstrates, through its alienating and ironizing techniques, is that the “dying biosphere” it presents is not the apocalypse; instead, what the “cauterized terrain” (McCarthy 12) unveils is an all too human proclivity for figuration—the diminishment of the world is not accompanied by a decrease in figures for that world. The “apocalypse” itself, then, is an anthropomorphism, a figure, “like a grave yawning at judgment day in some old apocalyptic painting” (131), that reveals, at most, more veils.\(^6\) As for violence, the novel’s emphasis upon its figural nature also asserts that human conceptions of it inevitably entail misprision, which, in itself, is violent. For this reason, I am arguing that it is the irreducible *rhetoric* of violence that a lucid critique of violence in *The Road* must engage. Basic need and hunger, it goes without saying, are powerful drives, but the scarcity of food, the novel makes clear, is not alone sufficient to explain the imperishability of violence. To account for this fact, we must look to its specific forms and figures.

II.

Perhaps a useful place to begin addressing *The Road*’s figural reflections on violence is with Slavoj Žižek, who argues that violence, properly conceived in our modern, globalized world, exists in three interrelated forms: “subjective,” “systemic,” and “symbolic.” The first refers to “directly visible” violence, which is “performed by a clearly identifiable agent” (1). The latter two are what he calls “objective,” meaning that they constitute the field that both generates individual acts of subjective violence and makes them perceptible. Systemic violence, then, is generally invisible, inhering in “the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems,” while symbolic violence is “embodied in language and its forms” (2, 1). Central to Žižek’s “sideways” reflections is the principle that subjective and objective violence cannot

---

\(^5\) Nietzsche adds: “between two such absolutely different spheres as subject and object there is no causality, no correctness, no expression, but at most an *aesthetic* comportment” (36).

\(^6\) This is, I believe, much like Miller describes in his reading of *Heart of Darkness*: “Each veil lifts to reveal another veil behind” (“Should?” 472). Conrad’s novella is clearly an important intertext for *The Road*; Steven, for one, explicitly makes this connection (69).
be apprehended from a single vantage point, that the workings of objective violence can only be adequately perceived when the lure of the subjective is resisted. I am not suggesting that we map Žižek’s schema onto McCarthy’s novel, for the literary work refuses such containment, but the philosopher can offer guidance in terms of accounting for The Road’s insistence that violence always involves something other than, or in excess of, its visible manifestations. At the same time, this encourages an approach attentive to the particular ways in which literary techniques, perhaps violent in themselves (Pryor 35), carve out spaces for oblique and newly troubling glances at violence. Moreover, Žižek’s conception of symbolic violence, the sense that “humans exceed animals in their capacity for violence precisely because they speak” (61; emphasis in original), suggestively resonates with the novel’s treatment of figuration as inseparable from and constitutive of human violence.⁷

Figures, that is, give shape to objects, be they actual, no longer existent, or imagined, in ways that allow violence to be exerted on or through them; and the tenuous, humanly-contrived relationship between figures and their referents, furthermore, actually gives rise to violence. My contention, then, is that to appreciate what is most forceful and trenchant in McCarthy’s critique of violence, we need to attend to the work’s figural violence, rather than the shocking and visible instances of human cruelty. In part, such an approach allows for the less perceptible forms of systemic violence imbued in “civilized” society to be brought into relief. More generally, the imperishability of figuration in The Road suggests a violent and enduring human affinity for figures of violence themselves.

In his reading of the novel, Paul Sheehan briefly touches on the synecdochical figure of the road, arguing that “the best-and-worst qualities” of American capitalism “are embodied in the road itself—an industrial feat refigured into an arena of violence” (102). While he is mistaken that the road is “the only remaining marker of . . . an auspicious industrial civilization” (95), Sheehan does point us toward the idea of the road as a figure that links, to use Žižek’s terms, the systemic violence of the vanished civilization with the heightened subjective violence of the present. As the man and boy follow the road south, the narrative gazes upon the detritus of American civilization and power: abandoned cities, old billboards, a wrecked semi-trailer and train, looted gas stations and supermarkets, a dam and derelict shipyard, not to mention Coca-Cola. Like the road, these ruins simultaneously stand as material signs

---

⁷ What I am calling figural violence includes, but involves more than, “insert[ing] the thing into a field of meaning which is ultimately external to it” (Žižek 61). For McCarthy, there is an irreducible rhetoric of violence, which, through devices like personification, figures the world and people in such ways that violence can be directed at a recognizable target.
of America’s achievement and its ultimate fragility. The novel’s treatment of these ruins, then, resists any simple, unmediated nostalgia for that America:

They passed through towns that warned people away with messages scrawled on the billboards. The billboards had been whitened out with thin coats of paint in order to write on them and through the paint could be seen a pale palimpsest of advertisements for goods which no longer existed. They sat by the side of the road and ate the last of the apples.

(McCarthy 108)

Tim Edwards argues that a recurrent tendency of the narrative involves “a juxtaposing of a seemingly Edenic past with a clearly hellish present” (58). Even as the withered brown apples, scavenged from a ruined orchard, self-consciously activate Edenic associations, the conjunction of the tasteless fruit with these layered billboards points to a much darker vision of the lost civilization. This is to say that the palimpsest provides a succinct, though suggestive, figure for the irreducibility of violence, for the transformation of systemic violence into more immediate (threats of) violence, without erasing the marks of either one. Although white paint has been used to cover the advertisements, they are still visible, achieving a sort of simultaneous presence with the new messages written over top. The content of the advertisements no longer exists, but the aim of making fetishes of consumer goods, while effacing the exploitation inherent in global capitalism, remains on the same tableau as the more explicit violence of the newer warnings. It is as if the violence and ruthlessness of global capitalism is articulated in subjective form, conveying, figuratively, what Žižek calls “the very nature of capitalism at its purest . . ., a ‘nature’ much more threatening and violent than all the hurricanes and earthquakes” (96). And this is perhaps one of The Road’s most disquieting provocations, the suggestion that the force of systemic violence contained in the modern state exceeds that of any “natural” violence, including the proverbial meteor.

A close reading of The Road thus suggests that one of McCarthy’s preoccupations is making intelligible the systemic violence that quilts together today’s late-capitalist American society. This is essentially an argument made by Mark Steven, who also points out that the “response to the event from within The Road is significant for reasons that are both historical and literary” (82). I agree with the emphasis on these two dimensions of McCarthy’s critique, but his claim that the author’s language directs us towards “a truth whose actualization will utterly transform [the] situation” (81), seemingly sidesteps the novel’s radical finitude and
its sense that truth, like violence, always involves “tropological displacement” (de Man, Rhetoric 239). What Steven calls The Road’s “regressive process of global denomination” (82) does not involve a concomitant process of de-figuration; names and things, the narrative tells us, are inexorably disappearing, yet figures remain, and the process of making them continues apace. For instance, McCarthy’s free-indirect discourse speaks of the “ashes of the late world carried on the bleak and temporal winds”: “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” (McCarthy 9-10). While the tenor of these sentence fragments signals toward the total disappearance of foundations, the indefinite pronoun “everything” is “uncoupled” and “unsupported,” the idea and image are sustained by the personification “breath.” What is actualized here is not truth but displacement, an anthropomorphism, however “trembling and brief,” that functions to impose human form upon the real or phenomenal world. It is clear that the increased frequency of subjectively violent acts in the novel is a product of the obliteration of preexisting social and legal foundations; but here, we can discern a sort of violence in the act of humanizing the bleak and hostile landscape with a figure that has no inherent correlation with it.

“If only my heart were stone” (10), thinks the man in the concluding phrase of this passage, suggesting a type of Weltschmerz that emerges from a recognition of both the groundlessness of figures and the impossibility of not figuring. The violence activated in the tension between figural and literal is made more apparent if we consider the discrepancy between the man’s figuring of his son as a “Golden chalice, good to house a god” and the boy himself, illumined by the campfire: “He looked at the boy’s face sleeping in the orange light. The sunken cheeks streaked with black. He fought back the rage. Useless” (64, 81). Below, I shall suggest that the man’s figuring of the boy as “the word of God” or an “angel” (4, 145) is part of an essential survival strategy; here, though, the narrative explicitly points us to the reservoir of violence contained in the mismatch between figure and referent.

Formally, this figural self-consciousness is mirrored in the uneven cobbling together of plot and “a stubborn stylistic singularity” (Steven and Murphet 5). To begin with, The Road, with its odyssey, appropriates one of the oldest generic forms in Western literature, even as the man is well-aware of the trip’s likely futility: “He said that everything depended on reaching the coast, yet waking in the night he knew that all of this was empty and no substance to it” (McCarthy 25). The substance of their voyage may be “empty,” but the form possesses its own force, giving the boy, however illusorily, the idea of a different future, while providing both of them a
quasi-material impetus to go on. At the same time, the narrative momentum is continually checked by self-conscious bursts of grim figural eloquence. The tension is accentuated by incorporating well-worn tropes, such as the Edenic apple or Promethean fire (109), and situating them in a context that is almost, but not entirely, alien—these figures, as Joseph Conrad’s Marlow might say, “throw a kind of light” (Conrad 7), but it is inevitably a gray one, drawing attention to the opacity at the heart of figuration. This is to say that form and content, style and narrative, are forcibly, though skillfully, sutured together, without achieving any sort of “organic” coherence. And this is seemingly appropriate for a universe in which the survivors are framed as the abandoned surplus of an “intestate earth” (McCarthy 110), left to work with and interpret its inorganic remainder.

III.

One evening, some days after the man has shot a “bad guy”—a knife-wielding cannibal—through the head in order save his son, the two sit silently before the fire. They have eaten the last of their meager rations, a handful of dry raisins, and the man, seemingly afflicted by the grim ongoingness of life, unsuccessfully struggles to say something that might buoy the boy’s spirits. While the imminent threat of starvation and lingering trauma would appear to be the most pressing concerns, the man’s thoughts stray, melancholically, to the entropic decay of language itself:

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 trying to preserve heat. In time to wink out forever. (75)

The continual impoverishment of reality, here, as elsewhere in the novel, is framed as being coincident, but not identical, with the loss of names, what Steven

8 I concur with Pryor’s assessment that “the thick rhyme and assonance” of McCarthy’s prose constitutes “a bid for attention” (31). However, I depart from him in his insistence that these rhythms reveal “an order to a cosmos” (32).
terms “global de-nomination.” But while this “shrinking down” is presented, at several junctures, as bleakly epiphanic—“The frailty of everything revealed at last” (McCarthy 24)—there is, as Sean Pryor notes, “nothing specifically post-apocalyptic about that truth” (38). What is suggestive, though, is the uncertain relation between the existence of things one believes in and the names of those things. As the slippery phrase “the names of things one believed to be true” shows, there are distinctions to be made between the names, the things, and, with belief, the truth of those things. Whatever it was that yoked them together, it would seem, was (and is) fragile, but despite the shearing of referents and “reality,” idioms themselves persist. In this case, the earth’s and language’s inexorable atrophy is expressed analogically, in terms of a willing agent. The vehicle remains indefinite, but the novel’s obdurate reliance upon using vehicles to engage “reality,” to give shape to the real, testifies to an irrepresible figural impulse that can be, depending on the situation, life-affirming, distressing, or homicidal. The Road suggests that whatever the case, this drive is based in misrecognition: “They came upon themselves in a mirror and he almost raised the pistol. It’s us, Papa, the boy whispered. It’s us” (McCarthy 111). As Euan Gallivan rightly says, this reaction emerges from the father’s inability “to reconcile this image of himself with those he is so wary of” (104). The inverse image of this violent reflex would then seem to be the work of forcing the unfamiliar or ungraspable into a recognizable framework. And this, as we shall see, is nowhere more the case than with the novel’s treatment of “evil.”

One of the ways the alienness of The Road’s world is conveyed is through the use of analogies, many of which employ as their vehicle a pre-disaster image. For example: the man and boy stand “in the rain like farm animals” (McCarthy 17); “They moved through the streets like sappers” (67); “They plodded on, thin and filthy as street addicts” (149); “More than once they woke sprawled in the road like traffic victims” (170); or “They wandered through the rooms like skeptical housebuyers” (174). This is, in part, a literary technique that stiches together the pre- and post-apocalyptic worlds, emphasizing the latter’s uncanniness, its simultaneous strangeness and familiarity. It also intimates, with terms like “sappers,” “street addicts,” and “traffic victims,” a certain continuity and recalibration of violence. Because the boy was born after the disaster, the man must verbally represent the lost world for him, which he cannot do “without constructing the loss as well” (129-30).

---

9 De Bruyn coins the term “disepiphany” to describe the absence of “kinship between man and nature” in The Road; this seems to be an appropriate term, but I disagree with his assertion that the novel ultimately “reaffirms the logic of [this] kinship” (788). What it suggests, precisely, is the arbitrary and figurative, humanly-driven nature of kinship between humankind and the world.
Often, he recounts “Old stories of courage and justice as he remembered them until the boy was asleep in his blankets” (35). But the very act of telling these stories, which bear tenuous connection to their lived reality, drives the man, on several occasions, to outbursts of impotent rage that are sustained and driven by figuration. In a characteristic example, the man, “rais[ing] his face to the paling day,” uses apostrophe to anthropomorphize, and thereby confront, a silent God: “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” (10). While I take issue with Susan Tyburski’s claim that such a passage instantiates McCarthy’s challenge for us to rekindle “the remaining embers of our faith,” her sense that, in the absence of “evidence of the divine,” “a naked intent toward God” (127) will be created rings partially true. The drive to seek a higher meaning in this wasteland is palpable, but the “intent,” here, as elsewhere in the novel, is never “naked”; it is always garbed figurally, and it involves a type of violent rhetorical transformation. In this case, the man forces a contingent, contiguous relation between the morning silence and the silence of an unseen God-figure as a means of virtually rebuking it.10

Another variation on this figural “intent” occurs early in the novel, when the man mentally gives shape to a cosmic order: “Like the great pendulum in its rotunda scribing through the long day movements of the universe of which you may say it knows nothing and yet know it must” (McCarthy 13). This forced attribution of sentience to the figure of the pendulum is initially drawn out through a synesthesia, which transfigures the darkness of the night into a silence that metaphorically assaults the ear: “The blackness he woke to on those nights was sightless and impenetrable. A blackness to hurt your ears with listening” (13). The move from the visual to aural register, from sightlessness to a virtual, and figuratively violent, soundlessness, is an entirely rhetorical one, which, in the imminence of the unnamable and ungraspable void, brings forth more figures. Semantically, we are presented with an admixture of belief and unbelief, an idea of order oscillating with an idea of chaos or nothingness; but there is no escaping the fact that this pendular movement is enacted rhetorically. The intent, whatever it may be, is shaped and registered by means of figures.

To a significant extent, the man’s relationship with his son is mediated through figures. His hatred of existence, punctuated by feelings of impotent despair, is

---

10 It is also important to note that the novel presents several instances in which there is a figural drive to renounce belief: “Do you think that your fathers are watching? That they weigh you in their ledger book? Against what? There is no book and your fathers are dead in the ground” (McCarthy 165).
channeled into a fierce paternal love: “He knew only that the child was his warrant”; “That the boy was all that stood between him and death” (McCarthy 4, 25). Seeing the boy as his justification for living and going on, the man makes him into a figure of impossible virtue. Just before disappearing to commit suicide, taking death as her “new lover,” the wife had said: “The one thing I can tell you is that you wont survive for yourself. I know because I would never have come this far. A person who had no one would be well advised to cobble together some passable ghost. Breathe it into being and coax it along with words of love” (48, 49).\(^\text{11}\) Having a figure to love is here presented as a precondition for survival in this declining world; there is also the clear inference that the beloved figure is not identical to the beloved. Although Grace Hellyer is right to note the man’s “unnerving tendency to describe [the boy] as if he were actually an incarnation of the godhead” (57), she does not address the fundamentally violent thrust of this recurrent gesture. Positing the boy as a Christ-like figure may be seen, on the one hand, as a poignant gesture of love; the force of it, however, is so absolute that it must also be described as violent. The man, that is, is prepared to do anything to spare his son from the full brunt of their world’s horror, including, in the last resort, killing him: “Could you crush that beloved skull with a rock? Is there such a being within you of which you know nothing?” (McCarthy 96). The form that this love may be called upon to take is appalling, but it is clear that the figuring of it is integral to its unconditional quality. Facing a ubiquitous violence from without, the violence of the imagination within, to borrow Wallace Stevens’s model, unearths a self—through a figure of love—that is perhaps capable of doing what was heretofore unthinkable.

IV.

In “Critique of Violence,” Walter Benjamin famously distinguishes between “mythic violence” and “divine violence.” The former, he says, is legal violence, which the state exercises on its subjects as a means for maintaining and creating laws and “regulating conflicting human interests”: “All violence as a means is either lawmaking or law-preserving” (287). Opposing mythic violence, then, is divine violence, “a pure immediate violence” that is, at once, “law-destroying,” expiatory, and “lethal without spilling blood” (297). For Benjamin, divine violence can be registered through “revolutionary violence, the highest manifestation of unalloyed

\(^{11}\) Snyder argues that the wife, “in figuring Death as a lover,” is “cobbling together just such a ghost” (77). If this is so, it seemingly reinforces my claim that figures are inextricable from violent actions, like her suicide.
violence by man”; one such form it may take is that of the “proletarian general strike,” which “sets itself the sole task of destroying state power” (300, 291). My purpose in referencing Benjamin in this context, it should be made clear, is not to insinuate that there are equivalences between his critique and McCarthy’s novel. However, the distinction between mythic and divine violence, I believe, can be productive in terms of elaborating some of the figural dimensions of legal violence suggested by The Road.

To begin with, the unnamed cataclysm, while not a manifestation of divine violence in Benjamin’s sense, has obliterated lawmaking and law-preserving violence, purifying the survivors, if nothing else, of law. The cleaving of “the nexus between violence and law” (Agamben, SE 88) has not, as far as the novel is willing to show, opened a functional space between life and law for a new politics; nevertheless, something like mythic violence provides the man a framework or figure for trying to interpret the human disaster that has unfolded. In one of his memories, we find a description of the inexorable descent, in the aftermath, from a type of communitarian ethos—“Others would come to help them”—to a violent state of anomie:

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. (McCarthy 28)

What is particularly noteworthy in this passage, I would suggest, is the way in which violence seems to be, as Judith Butler writes, “circumscribed in advance by the questions we pose of it” (201). For one, “What had they done?” underscores the dearth of existent coordinates with which to make sense of “murder,” now that life has been sheared from law, law from violence. The question and its pseudo-response signal a nonrelation between punishment and crime, as well as the fact that their existence is now purely figurative, detached from any actual referents. But the gesture of attempting to situate these gratuitous manifestations of violence within such a

---

12 “The only truly political action,” Agamben writes, “is that which severs the nexus between violence and the law” (SE 88). The specifically political dimensions of The Road lie somewhat outside the purview of this inquiry; I would argue, however, that the narrative offers an essentially negative political critique. Its conservative disposition insists that humankind, particularly in this extreme state, is incapable of making affirmative, constructive political use of whatever space might be opened between life and law.
framework indicates that McCarthy’s critique is also one, albeit negatively, of legal violence. Speculatively, the passage points to a longstanding discrepancy, in “civilized” society, between state-defined “crime” and “punishment,” the latter of which may or may not have been legally sanctioned; the excess would thus seem to result from some idea of crime, rather than its actuality. The full force of “What had they done?,” furthermore, registers only when we consider that the interrogation can function either rhetorically or literally. If it is a literal question, it would perhaps be a surreptitious expression of the wish for there still to be “crime,” which would at least make “punishment” less than wholly arbitrary. Taken rhetorically, the question functions more or less as a statement: they had done nothing to deserve such “punishment.” The lack of comfort, we might then say, stems from an awareness of the human need for figures to interpret—and ultimately enact—violence and the unnerving groundlessness of those figures.

For the man, in this new world where the survivors are no longer subject “to a form of life conceived by law” (Sheehan 91), everyone else has been transformed into a likely threat, figured, we might say, as a “subject supposed to cannibalize.”

A number of critics have thus insisted that what is at stake in the novel is a particular notion of bare life, the question of “how much can be pared away from human existence for it to still qualify as ‘life?’” (Sheehan 91). One obvious response would be that the threshold between “mere life” (Benjamin, “Critique” 299) and human life is marked by whether or not one eats other people (Dominy 145–46). But this only provides negative knowledge, to the extent that eating human flesh is equated with life that is inhuman. It seems, therefore, that the question of the human is also a rhetorical issue. The cataclysm of The Road, I have said, remains indecipherable, existing as a persistent provocation for violent figuration, most frequently in the

---

13 Žižek, in his analysis of Hurricane Katrina, argues that sensationalized media accounts of the aftermath led to the “pathological” creation of a racialized “subject supposed to loot and rape” (98; emphasis in original). The man’s reflexive habit of figuring anyone they come across as a presumed thief and/or cannibal is not “pathological,” being, as it is, part of a well-considered survival strategy. Nevertheless, the novel does work to preserve a space between the “real” violence of their world and the man’s violent, figural construction of it.

14 Interpretations of The Road have generated a number of figures with which to identify the survivors. Murphet refers to the “Hobbesian condition of homo homini lupens” (121); Steven claims that the survivor has “entered the arena of the homo sacer” (70); while Sheehan sees “McCarthy’s bare life” as resembling “not Homo sacer but Homo vivere” (91). My concern is not so much with which figure is the most appropriate—though it seems clear that Homo sacer, a political figure produced by the sovereign exception (Agamben, HS 12), is not accurate in this context. Instead, I wish to highlight the ways in which the distinction between (unpoliticized) “mere life” and human life in the novel is figuratively shaped and determined, providing negative knowledge of what makes one fully human.
man’s recriminations of the silent and absent one “Who has made of the world a lie every word” (McCarthy 64). This particular reprehension of the divine, significantly, is juxtaposed against a figuration of the cannibal he has just killed. In the aftermath of this immediate violence and gore, the narrative crafts an image that could be taken for mere life itself: “My brother at last. The reptilian calculations in those cold and shifting eyes. The gray and rotting teeth. Claggy with human flesh” (64). The mordancy with which the man invokes this kinship points to a post-apocalyptic disaggregation of human life from human form; but this is, nevertheless, registered rhetorically. The face is evoked through unsettling fragments of it, the eyes, teeth, and flesh, which are, themselves, inscribed through grammatically fragmented sentences. Such “verbless asyndeton” (Stephen and Murphet 5), a sort of syntactical violence, reinforces a sense of the violent recursiveness of figuration in a world that is considered “a lie every word.” That is, the detestable “lies” of words and figures can only be given shape through acts of figuring, by means of figures, which, like the “human flesh” clinging to the cannibal’s face, are also detestable.

In the absence of laws to compel restraint, McCarthy’s literary universe presents a fairly bleak choice between violent life or violent death, human life or barbarism (Sheehan 104-05); at the level of style, what is conspicuous is the manner in which figures seem to deliberately grasp after depravity or “evil” as a means to clarify and isolate it. “Like an animal inside a skull looking out the eyeholes” (McCarthy 53), the cannibal is described when he first appears before the man and boy. The simile feels clumsy, in large part because its intent seems so “transparent,” to dissociate mere biological life from human form and tell the reader that this is an animal, parasitically inhabiting a human body. The apparent artlessness on display here should give us pause. It is not as if this man isn’t a deadly threat, but the strained, figurative construction of the cannibal insists upon a difference, however immaterial, between the figure and figured. On the one hand, this figuration helps to clarify the danger and facilitate the man’s violent and lifesaving action. Nonetheless, we may be prompted to consider whether what is called “inhumanity” or “evil” has an existence distinguishable from the figures we give to them.

V.

A persistent tendency of the narrative, as I have mentioned, is to figure the present world in terms of entities or phenomena proper to the vanished one. This draws attention to the fact that intelligibility is predicated upon a recognizable context, even if that context no longer exists in actual form. But furthermore, it reiterates the
human impulse to impose, however imperfectly, intelligible forms in order to apprehend and confront things, people, and concepts. In *The Road*, a trope for this figural compulsion is found in the “effigy,” a figure used three times in the novel: “in the bottom of the bins they found a few ancient runner beans and what looked to have once been apricots, long dried to wrinkled effigies of themselves” (19); “The tank beneath was filled with charcoal, pieces burned out of whole sticks and limbs in carbon effigies of the trees themselves” (103); “A vast low swale where ferns and hydrangeas and wild orchids lived on in ashen effigies which the wind had not yet reached” (232). The “effigy,” then, might offer what J. Hillis Miller describes as “that peculiar sort of figure that can be called a figure of figure or a figure of figuration” (“Should?” 470). As with much else in this world, vegetal life persists only as a withered vestige of its former being. The effigy, though, as a crude and disfigured semblance of the thing, person, or idea, also carries with it an unmistakably violent connotation, as in the phrase “burned in effigy.” The circuitous, entirely human, act of designating a crude figure for an elusive concept as a means to enact violence upon it is reflective of a number of instances of figural violence in the novel. Perhaps the most suggestive depiction lies in the father’s childhood memory of a group of men setting fire to a den of hibernating snakes:

Standing at the edge of a winter field among rough men. The boy’s age. A little older. Watching while they opened up the rocky hillside ground with pick and mattock and brought to light a great bolus of serpents perhaps a hundred in number. Collected there for a common warmth. The dull tubes of them beginning to move sluggishly in the cold hard light. Like the bowels of some great beast exposed to the day. The men poured gasoline on them and burned them alive, having no remedy for evil but only for the image of it as they conceived it to be. The burning snakes twisted horribly and some crawled burning across the floor of the grotto to illuminate its darker recesses. As they were mute there were no screams of pain and the men watched them burn and writhe and blacken in just such silence themselves and they disbanded in silence in the winter dusk each with his own thoughts to go home to their suppers. (McCarthy 159)

The man’s sense that “each memory recalled must do some violence to its origins” (111) invites us to consider the ways in which this particular memory may have been altered as a means to “illuminate” the “darker recesses” of “evil” in this literary world,
which lacks snakes or any other ready-made symbols for it. This line of thought would suggest that the snakes function as an effigy for “evil,” evil, it must be emphasized, “as they conceived it to be.” Linda Woodson, I think, is essentially correct to argue that the passage “demonstrates that language provides a signifier—the word evil—that both transforms the way humans understand reality and obscures the truth of that reality” (91). But it is more than this; it is seemingly allegorical, in Benjamin’s sense of the term: “Evil as such . . . exists only in allegory, is nothing other than allegory, and means something different from what it is. It means precisely the non-existence of what it presents” (OGT 233). Evil, whether or not it exists, remains an “ungraspable phantom,” to use Herman Melville’s phrase, and the irrepressible desire to know it, and thereby judge it, as the passage shows, means imposing a recognizable form upon it. But this act of figuring the snakes as evil in order to immolate it only succeeds in transfiguring the act itself into another semblance of evil. What is revealed, instead, is a violence generated in the very non-appearance of evil. In this instance, we see how figural violence, largely shaped, it would seem, by Christianity’s tradition of spectacular and iconographic figures of evil, is made incarnate—given its own figure—in the subjectively violent act.

At one level, the fate of these mute snakes also suggests a figure for the insensate violence to which humankind has always been subject, as well as for the oblivion to which so many of The Road’s victims have been consigned. But more fundamentally, it unveils the violence inherent in personification, especially in its allegorical inflections. For the men in this memory, the snakes are made to stand in for something “that cannot be named directly” and “can only be inferred by those that have eyes to see and ears to hear and understand” (Miller, “Should?” 471; also see Vanderheide 112). The belief that one has such eyes with which to discern evil in a den of snakes is itself violent, and it is driven figuratively. The snakes, which the men labor to unearth, are a simulacrum; in their being, they have absolutely nothing to do with evil, which is an entirely human conceit. It is as if the men need the pathetic fallacy in order to act at all. “[T]here were no screams of pain and the men watched them burn and writhe and blacken in just such silence themselves and they disbanded in silence”; whatever it is they hear and understand in this awful, paratactically conveyed silence, it is not evil or the obliteration thereof. It is, rather, the virtual sound of what they insist upon hearing. Randal Wilhelm argues that “the presence of evil is palpable” in the novel, and “it serves as a primal force in the world” (129). A passage such as this, with its complex textual layering, shows, however, that this is

---

15 Murphet sees “the mute cry of all nature condensed into a single writhing figure of serpentine agony” (127).
not strictly the case, for it is, in fact, the force of the figure of evil that is palpable. The sole simile: “Like the bowels of some great beast exposed to the day,” underscores the difference between nature as such and the figurative meanings or judgments imposed upon it. The men are not disemboweling a monster and bringing some dark truth into the light. If there is a truth to be gleaned, it is in their act: the seemingly imperishable drive to eradicate evil—evil which is frequently perceived in violence—requires figures of violence and is itself an enduring source of violence. In this regard, the structure of violence is abyssal, and it is as if, to echo Stevens once more, the human violence within actually needs to figure a violence without.

The self-conscious differentiation of evil from its figures enacts perhaps The Road’s highest manifestation of integrity, to the extent that it resists ascribing any higher, nonhuman meaning to the anomic world left in the wake of the catastrophe. The narrative certainly foregrounds the human tendency to situate meaning in relation to a higher power: the knowledge we gain, though, is not of the divine, but of its virtually infinite figures—a negative understanding that “it” is always something other than the figures humans give to it. But despite the suspicion of figures and the ways in which they shape meaning, it is clear that meaning persists, and this, much like Stanley Cavell argues of Samuel Beckett’s Endgame,\textsuperscript{16} constitutes an ongoing source of suffering (151). “I think in times like these the less said the better” (McCarthy 145), says the filthy, decrepit survivor who calls himself Ely, expressing, with bleak humor, his utter mistrust of figures that might create new meanings for and in this dying world:

What if I said that [the boy is] a god?

The old man shook his head. I’m past all that now. Have been for years. Where men can’t 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.

They will?

Sure they will.

\textsuperscript{16} Danta explicitly connects Beckett’s play with The Road, specifically through the grayness that inhabits both post-apocalyptic works (11-12). Sheehan makes a similar move (96-97).
Better for who?

Everybody.

Everybody.

Sure. We’ll all be better off. We’ll all breathe easier.

That’s good to know.

Yes it is. When we’re all gone at last then there’ll be nobody here but death and his days will be numbered too. He’ll be out in the road there with nothing to do and nobody to do it to. He’ll say: Where did everybody go? And that’s how it will be. What’s wrong with that? (145-46)

Ely’s “how it will be” suggests the ultimate end of figuration, yet this idea is conjured up by the use of figures, specifically the prosopopeia, which transfigures “death” into a fellow wanderer on the road. In this way, we are presented with an aporia, in that the end is a figure, yet the end, whatever “it” may be, means the end of figures. The irony is heightened by the old man’s admission that Ely is not his real name (144); while suggesting the Old Testament prophet Elijah, the precursor to the eschaton (Malachi 4:5), this gesture of self-naming focalizes the very artifice of figuration. Like evil, the end, or the apocalypse, the passage indicates, death will remain a catachrestic figure, “a displaced name for something that has no proper name” (Miller, “Revisiting” 21). “When we’re all gone at last,” there will be an end to figures. Until then, the novel seems to say, their persistence will continue, and the compulsion to find and construct images for ungraspable phantoms will remain a distressing and violent one.

VI.

In closing, I would like to reiterate my sense that The Road’s privileged narrative mode is “metafigural: it writes figuratively about figures” (de Man, Allegories 14). For McCarthy, though, figuration is not simply a literary or linguistic

---

17 See Sheehan (97) and Snyder (81) who argue that the figure of Ely alludes to the first book of Kings.
affair. It is constitutive in terms of how good and evil are conceived and presented, as well as how violence is engendered, shaped, and exerted. Within the borders of the text, I would argue, the novel’s technique of self-consciously drawing attention to figuration is not simply meant to enhance our receptiveness to and admiration for moments of figural eloquence; it is also designed to make us more aware and critical of the process itself. That is, the instruction manual for reading *The Road*, as Joshua Landy would say (12), involves attending to figures, pondering their persistence and suggestiveness, while remaining skeptical of them and any deeper truth they might appear to unveil. This is perhaps nowhere more important than in the novel’s final passage, which, through a sort of parabasis, “the interruption of a discourse by a shift in the rhetorical register” (de Man, *Aesthetic* 178), offers an evocative and distressing glimpse at a world which is no longer:

Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery. (McCarthy 241)

Pryor, in his representative gloss on this passage, argues that the fate of the world, as *The Road* presents it, was inevitable: “What looks like a lament for a genuine apocalypse is really a recognition that the fires of the wasteland were lit long ago” (38). This is certainly a plausible interpretation, but it is predicated on accepting the “truth” of the narrative’s figuration, its claim that the wavy lines on the trout actually constitute “patterns.” For Ben De Bruyn, the loss of nature suggested here engenders a profound disenchantment: “Man could once project himself and his thoughts onto the natural world . . . but this anthropomorphic possibility has now evaporated” (788). This is irrefutable to the extent that there is almost nothing of nature left; the novel, however, most certainly shows that humankind continues to project itself and its thoughts into the world. Figurativeness, it would thus seem, is a precondition of human seeing, even as McCarthy’s prose relentlessly strives to denature this figural

---

18 Landy argues: “Each work . . . contains within itself a *manual for reading*, a set of implicit instructions on how it may best be used” (12).
19 See also Steven (65); Edwards (55).
compulsion, to reveal it for what it does and how it constructs a world for each of us. Snakes and fish only exist in *The Road* by virtue of analepsis, but the drive to anthropomorphize remains, and perhaps, we might surmise, it is this capacity that makes one, for better or worse, fully human.

What the novel seems to teach us about reading it, then, is that such things as “maps and mazes” are and have always been figures; if there is meaning inscribed in the trout, it is because we have insisted on putting it there. The imposition of such figures, *The Road* stresses, is fundamentally violent. But, at the same time, it is potentially humankind’s most poignant and generative capacity: “Evoke the forms. Where you’ve nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them” (McCarthy 63). The man, shortly before dying, directs his son’s attention to the dead landscape all about them: “Look around you, he said. There is no prophet in the earth’s long chronicle who’s not honored here today. Whatever form you spoke of you were right” (233). It is not a matter of truth or content here, but of form, of creating affirmation, in the absence of hope, through whatever figures are available. To see prophets in this dying world, to invent larger meaning, is nothing more or less than the figurative enactment of a vital and violent life force. The boy, it is true, is adopted soon after the father’s death by a family of “good guys” who live in a commune and “don’t eat people” (238, 239). But rather than providing “a small promise of hope against that dimming away of the world” (Ellis 36), this conclusion to the plot, by its very contrivance, seems to betray the author’s ironizing hand. We might, therefore, sense in this ending the idea that the best hope, which is an eminently frail one, is for us to be vigilant toward forms and figures, while striving to conceive of better, or less-worse, ones.

**Works Cited**


—. “Should We Read *Heart of Darkness*?” *Conrad* 463-74.


Pryor, Sean. “McCarthy’s Rhythm.” Murphet and Steven 27-44.

Sheehan, Paul. “Road, Fire, Trees: Cormac McCarthy’s Post-America.” Murphet and Steven 89-108.


Steven, Mark. “The Late World of Cormac McCarthy.” Murphet and Steven 63-87.


About the Author
Kelly S. Walsh is Associate Professor of World Literature at Yonsei University’s Underwood International College. He has written on modernist figures, including Beckett, Rilke, Woolf, Faulkner, Stevens, Mansfield, Joyce, and Pak T’aewŏn, as well as literature pedagogy. His work has appeared or will appear in publications such as Ariel, Journal of Modern Literature, Seoul Journal of Korean Studies, Woolf Studies Annual, New Global Studies, and Journal of Literature, Language and Culture. Currently, his research concerns the style, rhetoric, and global circulation of modernist literature and the relations between modernism and literary reading.

[Received 18 December 2015; accepted 12 April 2016]