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Storytelling after the End

Plotting a Course through Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*

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Abstract:

This article discusses the importance of storytelling and plotting in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006). The novel follows a father and his son who, after a devastating global disaster, move through an ashen landscape in a desperate search for food, while attempting to evade roaming bands of cannibals. In this meaningless postcatastrophic world, the father insists on creating meaning for himself and his son as meaning has been created through millennia: by telling stories. The father tells his son stories of courage and justice and creates a coherent narrative universe around the opposition between cannibalistic “bad guys” and decent “good guys” who are “carrying the fire.” The already vast reception of McCarthy’s novel has discussed the father’s storytelling extensively, but while critics have paid much attention to the moral and mythological dimensions of his stories, they have overlooked a crucial aspect of his narrative fabrications, namely his active construction of a linear, goal-oriented plot. Drawing on the theoretical work of Frank Kermode, Peter Brooks, and Hayden White, the article analyzes this neglected aspect of *The Road* and shows how the father’s active plotting keeps both the story and the protagonists moving through the broken landscape.

Keywords: Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*, storytelling, plot

Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006) follows a father and his son who, after a devastating global disaster, move through an ashen landscape in a desperate search for food and other resources, while attempting to evade roaming bands of cannibals. Everything has been burned away in the firestorms of the catastrophic event, including the forms and institutions through which we traditionally make sense of our lives, and the dominant bleakness and meaninglessness of the situation is underscored...
time and again in the novel. This is evident in the following passage, where the man, after having scavenged yet another house with meager outcome, goes outside in the scant light of day:

He walked out in the gray light and stood and he saw for a brief moment the absolute truth of the world. The cold relentless circling of the intestate earth. Darkness implacable. The blind dogs of the sun in their running. The crushing black vacuum of the universe. And somewhere two hunted animals trembling like groundfoxes in their cover. Borrowed time and borrowed world and borrowed eyes with which to sorrow it. (110)

Enacting the ultimate consequence of this lack of meaning, his wife has abandoned her husband and child and killed herself with a flake of obsidian. With ruthless logic, she has pointed out that the man has no valid reasons for keeping himself and their son alive. “You have no argument because there is none,” she says (49), but in the senseless postcatastrophic world he nevertheless insists on staying alive and on creating meaning for himself and his son as meaning has been created through millennia: by telling stories. The father tells his son “[o]ld stories of courage and justice” (35) and creates a coherent narrative universe around the opposition between cannibalistic “bad guys” and decent “good guys” who are “carrying the fire”—phrases that recur as ritual refrains throughout the dialogue between the two protagonists.

As I show below, the already vast reception of McCarthy’s novel has discussed the father’s storytelling extensively, but while critics have paid much attention to the moral and mythological dimensions of his stories, they have overlooked a crucial aspect of his narrative fabrications, namely his active construction of a linear, goal-oriented plot. Both the former and the latter of these storytelling dimensions can be construed as the father’s attempts to create meaning and coherence for himself and his son in the disjointed, postapocalyptic world, but they differ in important ways, which
have so far not been addressed adequately. Drawing on the classical narrative theories of Frank Kermode, Peter Brooks, and Hayden White, the article analyzes this neglected aspect of The Road and shows how the father’s active plotting keeps both the story and the protagonists moving through the broken landscape. Moreover, it discusses how his narrative construction of a meaningful, goal-oriented story is ultimately challenged at the end of the road. Finally, it draws comparisons to previous novels by McCarthy and argues that the notions of storytelling in The Road represent a new direction in the author’s oeuvre.

**Storytelling in the Ruins**

On the one hand, stories and the language in which they are wrought are disappearing in the shattered world of The Road. We learn that plans of reading bedtime stories are abandoned due to the boy’s exhaustion (8), that language loses its referents and gradually disappears (75), and that the boy—probably due to an awareness of the fading importance of language—skips his writing lessons (206). On the other hand, storytelling remains a crucial ingredient in the relationship between the boy and his father, and a central theme in McCarthy’s novel. Many other critics have previously noted this. Linda Woodson (2013) rightly argues that “for all the dissolution of language that The Road exhibits, the novel serves as an ongoing argument for the power of fiction, the power of storytelling” (23). Kevin Kearney likewise writes that the recurring image of carrying the fire “takes the form of a story the man weaves, a tale of eternal promise that continually confronts a world marked by total collapse and with almost no hope of passing on the fire” (162).

Opinions are divided on whether the father’s narrative constructions should ultimately be seen as secular storytelling or in terms that are more religious. Paul Patton regards the stories as the father’s attempt to “imbue his son with the most rudimentary elements of a moral code” in a world without God (138), while Matthew Mullins sees the image of the fire as a humanistic, nonreligious form of
transcendence. In the opposite camp we find Allen Josephs and Ashley Kunsa, who read the stories of carrying the fire as a primarily religious litany with a redemptive potential (see e.g., Kunsa 59). Thomas H. Schaub situates himself somewhere in the middle. He argues that “storytelling constitutes one of the devices available to the father for raising his child to become a man and as such concerns the passing on of values from one generation to another” (164). At the same time, he does not deny the image of the fire clear religious connotations, and this duality is expressed in his characterization of *The Road* as an “ethico-religious” form of “secular scripture” (153).²

Whether it is considered a vehicle for a secular moral code, a religious motif, or a mixture of the two, most critics agree that the story of carrying the fire is presented in a positive light. I would argue, however, that the image of the fire is somewhat more ambiguous than that. As both Schaub (154) and Paul Sheehan (102) point out, fire is more than just a benign presence in *The Road*. The world has been burned to cinders, and fire is therefore not merely a possible relief from the consequences of the catastrophe: it is also its cause, or at least its primary manifestation. And even in the postcatastrophic world, fire remains a constant threat, both in the many fires on the ridges, which function as synecdochical images of cannibalistic bloodcults (28), and in the conflagrations caused by lightning, which frequently ravage the landscape (27).

Common to the many articles about the father’s narrative constructions is a clear focus on the moral/religious and the metaphorical dimensions in his story of carrying the fire, and on what might be termed the static positions in its actant model (particularly the contrast between good and bad guys). At the same time, critics have not paid proper attention to the linear plot, which is an equally significant element of the man’s storytelling. Christopher T. White thus presents a very convincing analysis of the father’s narrative constructions and describes how they create a strong “joint attention” (540) in the relationship between the man and the boy.³ On the other hand, he states that “[w]e never really know where the plot is going” (541) because most events are filtered through the father’s
perspective. According to White, the novel’s depiction of the protagonists’ experiences on the road therefore consists more of paratactical events rendered in their immediacy than of a proper plot. A similar argument is found in Dana Phillips’s strong reading of McCarthy’s novel. Drawing on Frank Kermode’s *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (which I explain in more detail below), he contends that the ending, which in stories traditionally confers meaning on the preceding events, has already passed in *The Road* in the form of the devastating catastrophe: “What counts in *The Road*, therefore, is not how the narrative resolves or what surplus transcendent ‘meaning’ it makes.” The plots and subplots of which stories traditionally consist “do not seem to be running or unfolding, in large part because the world is too shattered” (183). In an elaboration of this point, Phillips mentions Kermode’s argument that the novel genre always “has to lie” (Kermode 140) as it imposes artificial form on contingent reality. This is not the case in *The Road*, Phillips argues. Unlike most examples of the novel genre, McCarthy’s novel does not have a larger plot that resolves preceding events, but rather “renders narration almost solely as point of view” and primarily consists of simple “duration and description of events” (187).

On the basis of such considerations, White, Phillips, and a number of other critics describe the events in *The Road* as a somewhat directionless accumulation of events, in that sense comparable to *Blood Meridian*. With reference to Steven Shaviro’s frequently quoted description of that novel’s “restless, incessant horizontal movements” (147), Bill Hardwig writes: “In *The Road*, the endless horizontal movement of *Blood Meridian* on horseback becomes the bipedal wanderings of a boy and his father in a post-apocalyptic near future” (42). According to Susan Kollin and others, *The Road* is basically an updated road novel, and a recurring trait of most road novels is just this paratactic depiction of random encounters along the route. Adeline Johns-Putra even states that the events in what she calls McCarthy’s tragic picaresque are dictated by the road (528), and it is certainly the case that the road in this novel functions as both setting, theme, and structuring device.
This view of the novel as a paratactic accumulation of chance encounters has a correlate in the reception’s frequent claim that *The Road* takes its shape after the shattered landscape. This fragmentation is mirrored by the “tattered oilcompany roadmap” (36) that has likewise been much discussed by critics (see e.g., Jergenson). Such discussions usually invoke the fragmented nature of the map, but just as importantly, the pieces of the map have been meticulously numbered, and the father draws a line across the fragments as he charts a course for their quest (36). So instead of considering the map as an image of the broken world, we can adjust our perspective and focus on the father’s active attempt at joining the pieces to a coherent whole. In that perspective, the roads are not merely, as Johns-Putra argues, determinative of events, but can just as easily be regarded as a means to a meaningful end.

**Purposeful Plotting**

In their view of *The Road*’s events as examples of pure successiveness, Phillips, White, Hardwig, and others fail to account for the decisive fact that the novel does have a clear plot, constructed by the father. His storytelling is not just a timeless mythological tale of the good, the bad, and the ugly, and about carrying the fire. Like all plots, it has a clear direction and a well-defined projected ending: moving south toward the coast. In order to lay the groundwork for a better understanding of the implications of this strongly goal-directed plot, I will briefly review a number of relevant arguments from the classical narrative theories of Frank Kermode and Peter Brooks.

Originally published in 1967, Frank Kermode’s slim volume *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theories of Fiction* is an ambitious attempt to discuss how humans use the patterns of fiction to impose meaning on our contingent lives. As Kermode puts it in his introduction, the study seeks to make “sense of the ways we try to make sense of our lives” (3), and it does so by showing that the traditional literary plot, with a beginning, a middle, and an ending, still remains a crucial ingredient
in not only fiction-making, but also the sense-making activities of our day-to-day lives: “[I]n ‘making sense’ of the world we still feel a need . . . to experience that concordance of beginning, middle, and end which is the essence of our explanatory fictions” (35–36).

This basic description of plots can of course be traced all the way back to Aristotle, who saw the unity of plot—a causal sequence of tightly organized and necessary events moving continuously from the beginning to the end—as the most important element of tragedy. According to Aristotle, the events in a well-constructed plot all point forward to the ending and derive their full meaning from it, once all loose ends are tied up. According to Kermode, this goal-directed linearity provides plots with a more charged temporality than what he terms chronos, “mere successiveness” (46) without any larger pattern—or more crudely, “one damn thing after another” (47). The critics who describe The Road as a somewhat shapeless accumulation of chance encounters essentially present the novel as an instance of this mindless temporality, but as my analysis will show, a different temporality is at stake in the man’s narrative fabrications and McCarthy’s novel. This is kairos, which Kermode offers as a counterimage to chronos’s pure successiveness and defines as “a point in time filled with significance, charged with a meaning derived from its relation to the end” (47). As the father continually insists on the importance of reaching the coast, he is thus in essence trying to transform each moment of the journey into a meaningful incarnation of kairos.

Much like Kermode’s study, Peter Brooks’s seminal Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative (originally published in 1984) investigates how literary plots are an expression of “the universal need to impose order on reality” (original jacket copy). While Brooks’s discussion of our universal narrative desire draws heavily on the writings of Sigmund Freud, his description of the basic structure of plots recalls Kermode’s ideas quite closely, even as it goes further with the idea that plots are not only sense-making, but also intentional structures: “[T]he organizing line of plot is more often than not some scheme or machination, a concerted plan for the accomplishment of some purpose. . .
. Plots are not simply organizing structures; they are also intentional structures, goal-oriented and forward-moving” (12). This description captures precisely what happens in *The Road*, which does not merely depict some good guys and bad guys indefinitely duking it out in an enactment of the spatial actant model. The story is also firmly shaped by the man’s relentless insistence “that everything depended on reaching the coast” (25), that he and the boy have to “keep moving” (36), “keep trying” (116), “[k]eep going south” (234) with a clearly defined end-goal in sight.

By bolstering the moral story of good guys carrying the fire with a relentless propulsive drive toward the coast, the man undertakes what Brooks defines as “plotting,” the fabrication of “a line of intention and a portent of design that holds the promise of progress toward meaning” (xiii). Thereby he meticulously creates what Brooks calls an “anticipation of retrospection” (23), where the boy and he can brave a series of trials in the expectation that in the end they can look back on their adventures in safety and find that they made it, that salvation has been reached. A similar Aristotelian description of the strictly goal-oriented nature of plots is found in *The Sense of an Ending*, where Kermode argues: “We project ourselves past the End . . . so as to see the structure whole, a thing we cannot do from a spot of time in the middle” (8). So the journey in McCarthy’s novel is not just a chance series of events precariously connected by a moral code about good and bad guys, as many would have it; it also has a projected end-goal that promises to transform the ongoing experiences of the man and the boy into a meaningful, coherent story. And because the narrative perspective is so close to the father’s perspective, the direction of his storytelling is to a large extent the direction of the novel. The more or less linear journey toward the coast provides *The Road* with a teleological structure that aligns with the roads that have provided the novel with its title.

The importance of moving south and reaching the coast is repeated several times in the novel, and many of the protagonists’ experiences are considered in light of this urge. When the boy discovers an abandoned train in the woods, the man is thus quick to point out that it was probably also heading
south, as if to underscore the universal desirability of this goal (151). The boy willingly lets himself be seduced by the story. He entertains his own fantasies of meeting other children in the south (46) and imagines that the ocean will be blue like in his father’s stories (153)—fantasies which the father encourages in spite of his almost certain knowledge to the contrary.

Even while the father attempts to maintain the boy’s illusions and motivations to keep moving, we learn that he does not really believe in his own stories. This skepticism is introduced early in the novel: “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” (25). As they approach their goal, these doubts do not lessen: “They ate well but they were still a long way from the coast. He knew that he was placing hopes where he’d no reason to” (180). As a natural consequence of such doubts, the man is afraid to find out how things will turn out: “Please don’t tell me how the story ends” (64)—importantly, the father here explicitly thinks of their ongoing experiences as a “story.” Peter Brooks’s general claim about plots—“We cannot do without plots, but feel uneasy about them” (7)—very precisely expresses the man’s simultaneous need and skepticism.

When the main characters finally reach the sea after many trials and tribulations, unsurprisingly it turns out not to be blue after all, and the man’s carefully maintained plot of good guys aiming for the coast to escape the bad guys and find safety does not deliver the promised dénouement. Upon reaching the coast, they are faced with a disappointing anticlimax, which is underscored in this dispiriting passage:

Then they came upon it from a turn in the road and they stopped and stood with the salt wind blowing in their hair where they’d lowered the hoods of their coats to listen. Out there was the gray 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 slowly heaving vat of slag and then the gray 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.8 (181)

To make the letdown even clearer, McCarthy describes the scattered countless skeletons of both cattle (182), seabirds, and fish (187) on the coast; both land, air, and sea are thus depressingly accounted for, and consequently the barren curve of the beach is poignantly described as “an isocline of death. One vast salt sepulchre. Senseless. Senseless” (187). The emphatic repetition of the word “senseless” once again underscores that the postcatastrophic world lacks meaning. The end of the road offers no apocalyptic revelation, no redemptive conclusion, just a continuation of the catastrophe and a confirmation of the “absolute truth” previously seen by the father. Of the arrival, Hannah Stark writes: “The coast only provides temporary respite from their journey and their arrival at any final destination is endlessly deferred.” This seems right, but I do not agree with her concurrent description of the arrival as a “minor textual occurrence” (74). Even though it is played in a minor key, the arrival to the coast and the subsequent events to my mind constitute a decisive moment in the novel. Let us unpack it:

At first, the boy is naturally disappointed that the sea is not blue, as we learn in the passage quoted above. Shortly thereafter, when his fantasies of finding other children are likewise not attained, he needs further assurance and asks his father whether there are any ships on the ocean, or whether another father and his little boy may be sitting on the beach on the other side of the ocean, also carrying the fire (182)—thus seeking a confirmation of the central goal and metaphor of the plot he has been living. The pragmatic father is reluctant to confirm his son’s hopes, whereupon the boy takes off his clothes and runs “naked and leaping and screaming into the slow roll of the surf” (184) in a desperate enactment of an atavistic ritual from the lost world. However, when he returns from his icy
frolic, he starts crying. The father asks him why, and even though he refuses to answer, his tears are clearly caused by his disappointment in the absent climax. This heartbreaking moment, where the boy’s disappointment manifests itself very clearly, makes even the pragmatic father hope that another man and child do indeed walk the beach on the other side of the sea, or at least that great squids still propel “themselves over the floor of the sea in the cold darkness” (184).

Shortly after these events, the pair do discover a sailboat near the shore, but even though it is named Pájaro de Esperanza (Bird of Hope), the bird is far from fledged. The boat has foundered, and the man’s scavenging of it does not provide a climax, only yet another temporary reprieve from the inevitable. Perhaps in an attempt at delivering the promised redemption after all, the man repeatedly returns to the boat, but his visits do not yield much besides a few rusted cans of food and a flare pistol, which in an instance of tragic irony can no longer serve its original communicative purpose, but rather has to function as an improvised weapon. In light of these disappointing results, the boy tries to hold on to his hope of finding life elsewhere and now asks his father whether people may still be alive beyond the bounds of the broken earth, somewhere in the universe (205). The man once again refrains from confirming his son’s hopes, after which the boy expresses a rare moment of doubt about the father’s handling of affairs: “I dont know what we’re doing, he said.” This gives the father pause, but only briefly: “The man started to answer. But he didnt. After a while he said: There are people. There are people and we’ll find them. You’ll see” (206).

When it has been repeatedly emphasized that the father’s plot does not reach its desired culmination, an important dialogue about storytelling unfolds. After they hunt down and, on the man’s initiative, punish a poor thief, the boy refuses to speak to his father, one of many instances in the novel where he stops talking as a reaction to their violent experiences. The man asks the silent boy whether he shall tell him a story, but the boy refuses the offer:
Do you want me to tell you a story?
No.
Why not?
The boy looked at him and looked away.
Why not?
Those stories are not true.
They don't have to be true. They're stories.
Yes. But in the stories we're always helping people and we don't help people. (225)

The boy clearly sees that in their attempt to survive, he and the father sometimes behave dangerously like the bad guys (underscored by the pitiful thief, whom the father has in reality just killed by forcing him to leave his clothes behind). He therefore refuses to listen to the father’s “stories of courage and justice” any longer, and neither does he want to tell his own stories, since he does not “have any stories to tell” (226). The boy then goes on to question the nature of the happy stories told by the father. Their arrival at the coast has made it painfully clear to him that the larger story told by the father does not have the happy ending that he had hoped for, so at this crucial moment in the novel he explicitly starts questioning the worth of the narrative he has been living. He has already done so in short glimpses earlier in the novel, when, for instance, he asks the father about their “long term goals” (135), or states that he does not know what they are doing (206). On the other hand, the father’s storytelling is all he has, so he has demonstrated a considerable willing suspension of disbelief until the moment when they reach the gray sea and the plot literally runs into the sand.

As already pointed out, the man himself has also questioned the value of his stories, and of storytelling in general. In light of his knowledge of his own impending death, he bitterly tells himself that “[e]very day is a lie” (200). Moreover, when he finds a number of swollen books in the “charred
ruins of a library” (157)—anachronistic artifacts from another time and world—he reflects on “the lies arranged in their thousands row on row” (158). Nevertheless, he clings to the value of his storytelling until the very end. After the boy has clearly questioned the validity of his story, he still insists on its value, knowing full well that it remains his primary means of creating meaning for himself and his son in a senseless world where the old forms are dissolving: “After a while the man said: I think it’s pretty good. It’s a pretty good story. It counts for something” (226–27).

In spite of the father’s assurances, we cannot ignore that his plot has failed. His story has literally reached its conclusion; he has come to the end of the road where he does not find a proper ending, only more grayness and death. Here it is worth pointing out that the phrase “going south” is also a slang term meaning “to deteriorate” or “to decline,” which certainly puts the goal of the plot in a new perspective. The anticipated rewards of going south figuratively go south toward the end of the novel. Realizing that the ocean will not provide the promised rebirth, the father and son turn inland again, back to the road, and shortly thereafter the father dies, after which the novel reaches its conclusion.

The missing redemption at the coast and the fact that the novel continues after the father’s death makes it clear that his plot is not absolutely congruent with that of *The Road*. Many of the protagonists’ experiences are indeed brought about as a result of the determined quest for the coast, but the story nevertheless continues after the goal-oriented drive dissipates into the sand. Therefore, the linear plot of good guys carrying the fire as they aim south for the coast is not identical with the novel; rather, it is embedded in the novel as a major structuring device. At the same time, it is important to bear in mind that the story continues even after the death of the plotter. Before his death, the man has carefully instructed the boy how to carry on the story: “Keep going south . . . . You have to carry the fire” (234). And the boy does indeed carry on this narrative legacy as he is picked up by his new family and immediately wants them to confirm that they are also carrying the fire (238).
Storytelling thus proceeds after the father’s demise, and the final pages of the novel therefore repeat the overall situation of *The Road* on a smaller scale, which can also be said to be an instance of storytelling after the planetary ending of the unnamed catastrophe.

**Living (for) the Plot**

The preceding analysis of the father’s plotmaking activities sheds light on a usually overlooked aspect of his narrative constructions, and it provides a better explanation of a number of otherwise peculiar elements in *The Road*, including the father’s insistence on leaving the life-giving bunker that he and the boy discover exactly midway through the novel. Other critics, including Grace Hellyer, have questioned the wisdom of “this apparently unreasonable insistence on leaving a certain good in order to push ahead to the uncertain good of the coast” (51). The miraculous bunker, which appears as they are on the brink of starving to death and offers shelter, warmth, and all the nourishment they desperately spend most of their time scavenging for, has not been discovered in the years since the cataclysm. In many other similar survival stories, the discovery of this horn of plenty could have functioned as a climax in itself, since it seems to provide the ultimate relief from the characters’ hopeless situation. Nevertheless, the man insists that it is not safe to remain there, even though the advantages of building up strength would very likely outbalance the minimal risk of being discovered, and even though the boy in his own words “always want[s] to stop” (79). The plot’s relentless drive toward the coast could perhaps have taken another direction midway through the story, and the bunker is significantly described as a “tiny paradise” (126), and thus a potential release from the surrounding inferno. Still, part of the father “wished they’d never found this refuge” (130), since it constitutes a potential detour from his narrative insistence that everything depends on reaching the coast. Going back to Aristotle’s definition of the unity of plot, the event of discovering the bunker threatens the coherence of the linear drive toward a different intended ending, so according to the father’s narrative
logic (rather than a well-reasoned consideration of their situation) it must be left behind, even while we yearn for the characters to stay in this safe haven.

My argument above should not be read as a condemnatory critique of the man’s storytelling and plotmaking activities. First and foremost, it should be pointed out that his stories to all appearances contribute to making the boy into the unselfish, gracious person that he is. A number of critics have contrasted the boy’s spontaneous goodness with the man’s pragmatic cynicism (see, e.g., White 532), but it can just as easily be argued that the boy’s attitudes are not congenital or instinctive, but acquired via the narrative universe that the father constructs (but does not live up to in his own actions). I also argue that the father’s storytelling impulses are fully understandable and only all too human. He hails from a world, our world, where stories are everywhere. As Peter Brooks argues in the beginning of Reading for the Plot, plots are “basic to our very articulation of experience in general” (xi). He later elaborates on this point:

Our lives are ceaselessly intertwined with narrative, with the stories that we tell and hear told, those we dream or imagine or would like to tell, all of which are reworked in that story of our own lives that we narrate to ourselves in an episodic, sometimes semiconscious, but virtually uninterrupted monologue. We live immersed in narrative. (3)

According to Brooks, we live our lives as if they have a plot in order to make sense of our existence, and as demonstrated in the preceding analysis, The Road very much bears this out.

This universal narrative urge is also thematized in McCarthy’s Border Trilogy in a manner that has clear affinities to The Road. It is worth dwelling for a moment on the treatment of narrative in these earlier novels, since a brief comparison will show how McCarthy’s thoughts on storytelling
have evolved, and how *The Road* in this—as in so many other aspects—remains a special case in the author’s oeuvre.

Some of McCarthy’s most overt reflections on the nature and power of storytelling are found in *The Crossing* and *Cities of the Plain*. Through a number of encounters and conversations with wise and experienced older characters, the young protagonists in these novels learn important lessons about the relation between language and stories on one hand and reality on the other. In *The Crossing*, an old priest informs the inexperienced Billy Parham that “[t]hings separate from their stories have no meaning” (143), and that “[a]ll is telling” (155). These reflections constitute a clear parallel to my preceding discussion of how plotting creates meaning where no inherent meaning can be found, a point also made by both Kermode and Brooks.

The question of storytelling is also central to the epilogue to *Cities of the Plain*, where Billy—now an old man himself—meets a mysterious storyteller (perhaps a stand-in for the author himself), who like the priest in *The Crossing* lectures him on the relation between events and narratives. He says that it is we who assemble the events that befall us “into the story which is us” and that “[e]ach man is the bard of his own existence” (283). Storytelling’s centrality in our lives thus also plays a major role in the Border Trilogy, but I argue that the trilogy’s reflections on retroactively piecing events together into a narrative differ significantly from the father’s proactive construction of a narrative about reaching the coast. The arguments of Frank Kermode and Peter Brooks can once again help us understand this difference, especially if they are supplemented with Hayden White’s related ideas on narrative.

The Border Trilogy’s discussions of creating a narrative out of the events that befall us are similar to Kermode’s already mentioned argument that novels and their “comfortable stories” impose artificial shape on “the non-narrative contingencies of modern reality” (128), something he is fairly critical of in his further reflections on the “absurd dishonesty of all prefabricated patterns” (133).
Such reflections of course have a parallel in the father’s idea that “[e]very day is a lie” (200). However, in the father’s narrative persistence in the face of such doubts, *The Road* seems closer to Brooks’s argument that we live each moment of our life as if it were an episode in a larger plot. This point is repeated and elaborated in the historian Hayden White’s *The Content of the Form* (1987), which like Kermode’s and Brooks’s earlier studies focuses on narrativity, plots, and endings, more specifically the relation between storytelling and the writing of history. While White agrees with the two earlier books that plots play a crucial role in our articulation of experience, he goes even further in his discussion of plotting as a mode of existence, and I find it useful to include his theories here to show how *The Road* differs from McCarthy’s earlier novels.

Hayden White’s book is a strong defense of historical writing’s use of narrative forms against attacks from the *Annales* school of historians. The *Annales* historians saw the use of narrativity in history writing as an unscientific distortion of the actual historical events and pleaded for the use of objective quantifiable data rather than narrativizing methods as the ideal approach to historiography. White disagrees, arguing that narrativity is actually the best means of portraying real-life historical events, since historical actors often act as though they were part of a story:

There is, then, a certain necessity in the relationship between the narrative, conceived as a symbolic or symbolizing discursive structure, and the representation of specifically historical events. This necessity arises from the fact that human events are or were products of human actions, and these actions have produced consequences that have the structures of texts—more specifically, the structure of narrative texts. The understanding of these texts, considered as the products of actions, depends upon our being able to reproduce the processes by which they were produced, that is, to narrativize these actions. Since these actions are in effect lived narrativizations, it follows that the only way to represent them is by narrative itself. Here the
form of discourse is perfectly adequate to its content, since one is narrative, the other what has been narrativized. (54)

White and (to some extent) Brooks consequently do not consider plots as something that is retrospectively imposed on our lives, but as a mode of living which is constantly shaped by our attempt at providing each moment with a kairos- rather than a chronos-aspect and transforming it into “a point in time filled with significance, charged with a meaning derived from its relation to the end” (Kermode 47). In their perspective, plots therefore have an inherent claim on the truth, which differs from the Annales school’s and Kermode’s ideas of the “absurd dishonesty” of plots. In The Road, the depiction of events follows the father’s plot closely, since the events are largely determined by his active plotting, his “lived narrativizations” with White’s phrase.

It is important to stress that my elaborate focus on storytelling in The Road is not an attempt to reduce McCarthy’s novel to postmodern metafiction or a primarily self-reflexive allegory of the nature of stories. The earlier reflections on storytelling in The Crossing and Cities of the Plain sometimes recall such genres, whereas The Road can rather be characterized as a naturalistic depiction of storytelling and plotting as very real survival strategies, as a motivating factor employed by the father to ensure the survival of his son and himself. His goal-oriented plot of moving south toward the coast constitutes a teleological story, which creates a strong anticipation of retrospection (Brooks), provides meaning in a senseless world, gives the protagonists a reason to get up every morning, and inculcates a set of moral values in the boy, but which gradually becomes more and more challenged by the ashen realities. Christopher T. White’s and Dana Phillips’s idea that The Road does not have a proper plot fails to appreciate the importance of the father’s plot, which throughout most of the pages is also the novel’s plot. At the same time, The Road is undoubtedly an example of storytelling after the end. The ability to create coherence and meaning, which has always characterized stories in
general and plots in particular, is more challenged than ever in McCarthy’s novel, where both the map and the landscape are in pieces, and where the roads do not lead to any redemptive endings.

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**Notes**

1 Both Paul Patton and Matthew Mullins also describe the image of the fire as a story told by the father to his son in order to keep up his hope in a hopeless situation.

2 The pervasive religious rhetoric in *The Road* remains a major bone of contention in the reception of the novel. Ashley Kunsa sees the boy as “an Adamic figure, a messiah not unlike Christ himself” (65), and Allen Joseph makes “a textual case for God, or more specifically, a Christ-like figure in the boy” (137). Conversely, critics such as Dana Phillips, Louise Squire, Andrew Hoberek, Casey Jergenson, Inger-Anne Søfting, and Linda Woodson all consider the religious rhetoric an empty sign, the father’s attempt at evoking earlier forms in a formless world. Paul Sheehan is extremely critical of the religious readings of the novel, which he describes as “disheartening” (90). I also consider the many religious images as part of the father’s elaborate narrative constructions, especially those meant for himself. To support such a reading, it could be pointed out that there are significant differences between the stories the man tells to himself, and the stories he tells to the boy. The former portray the boy in overtly religious terms, as a grail or a “[g]olden chalice, good to house a god” (64), while the latter draw more on popular cultural genres and myths. Significantly,
after the father’s death, the boy chooses not to talk to God but to his father. The woman who adopts him sees this as just another way of talking to God (241), while the boy may see his conversations with his dead father as a continuation of their less overtly religious narrative pact.

3 White also points out that this joint attention has a parallel in the narrator’s relation to the reader.

4 For a use of the same phrase to describe Blood Meridian, see Vescio 172.

5 A number of critics have analyzed how close the narrative perspective is to the father, and they have argued that The Road provides an even fuller insight into the consciousness of the main character than Suttree. Rachel Furey has performed a close analysis of how McCarthy uses sentence fragments in Suttree and The Road to provide glimpses into the thoughts of his characters, and White has convincingly shown how the proximity between the narrator and the man’s consciousness in The Road creates empathy to a much further extent than in McCarthy’s previous novels.

6 If the man could decide, he and the boy would even travel “in a straight line . . . as the crow flies” (132), which underscores the intended linearity of his plot, but since they lack the means to fly, movement along the roads is the closest approximation.

7 In a sense, the father’s plot adheres closely to a number of genre conventions. Andrew Hoberek has discussed the question of genre in The Road, and he contends that McCarthy much more uncritically than previously embraces popular genres in this novel. The father’s story of good and bad guys racing for the goal does indeed evince genre traits that recall, for instance, The Lord of the Rings, and Steven Frye likewise lists a number of popular genres invoked in the novel. But since the linear plot does not reach its projected reward, I argue that genre codes are undermined just as much as they are activated. The Road thus distances itself from the father’s genrework in a way that mirrors his own skepticism.
8 David James discusses the same quote and finds that McCarthy’s masterful poetical style gainsays the depressing message, but he does not really present any evidence for this claim other than his own subjective impression of the passage. Personally, I find no critical solace in the bleak sounds and depressing description.

9 It is instructive to compare this scene with the boy’s earlier swim under a waterfall, where he still has the hope of the beach in front of him and accordingly finds no reason to cry (33).

10 Earlier in the novel, the father unequivocally tells his son that no fish can be found in the lakes (17).

11 Woodson (2008) surprisingly finds value in this silence, which she sees as confirmation of her argument that *The Road* deals with important matters beyond language. But the boy’s silence is far from an example of the companionable silence we find in the father’s memory of “the perfect day of his childhood” (12). Rather, the lack of verbal communication clearly expresses a conflict between the boy and his father.

12 The comparison of books and lies also appears in *Blood Meridian*, where the judge tersely states: “Books lie” (116).

13 The boy’s meeting with the family just after his father’s death has often been read as the somewhat unrealistic happy ending that the father’s own story did not provide, but as a number of critics have pointed out, the hope for survival remains very slim, and the happy ending is also gainsaid by the novel’s concluding paragraph, where the narrator insists that the world cannot “be made right again” (241).

14 The treasure trove also literally provides a treasure in the form of a sackful of gold (120), but the total collapse of society and its conventions has of course rendered the treasure worthless, and just like the man’s billfold earlier in the novel (43–44), it is left behind.
15 Some readings treat the father rather harshly, condemning for instance his selfish actions and masculine ideals (see e.g., Zibrak).

16 A similar argument appears in Blood Meridian, where the judge states that “the order in creation which you see is that which you have put there, like a string in a maze, so that you shall not lose your way” (245).

Works Cited


