

## Originary Translation in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

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Although it might not be immediately evident, Cormac McCarthy's 2006 novel, *The Road*, is a work of translation. By this I am not suggesting that there is a hitherto unacknowledged original version of the book in another language. Rather, I would like to reclaim the primary sense of translation and offer it as a description of *The Road* as a work of "transference; removal or conveyance from one person, place, or condition to another" ("Translation," def. I.1.a)—a definition of translation now so peculiarly remote as to appear almost catachrestic.

*The Road*, famously, is the harrowing story of a father and son embarked upon a desperate journey of survival in what appears to be a post-apocalyptic world, forced—one could justifiably say conveyed or even removed—by a non-specific catastrophe, from one place to another, from one condition to another.<sup>1</sup> More specifically, the place from which they feel compelled to flee, while the boy is still in his infancy, is their *home*. The place where they end up in the final pages of the novel is a relatively unremarkable site by the road, having travelled south to the coast in the vague hope of rescue or some other form of release. That these events have resulted in a radical alteration in the condition, broadly construed, of the man and the boy is of course obvious. The complete nature of this change is revealed to the reader in the stark contrast between their current hellish, death-in-life existence and the comfortable late-capitalist fullness of the man's former life, disclosed in flashback dreams and memories, warmly sepia-toned but now utterly, almost incomprehensibly, alien.

What makes all of this so disturbing and *The Road* so haunting and powerfully elegiac is the knowledge that what has befallen them has befallen all humankind, so that the singular fate of the man and his child—which throughout the novel hangs in the balance—converges, almost unbearably, with the general fate of humanity itself.<sup>2</sup> The man's realization of this

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fact seems to be what drives a further "translation" in the novel, namely, the interpersonal and intergenerational transference of what is repeatedly referred to as "the fire," which might be interpreted, hastily but perhaps not unreasonably, as the human spirit. Thus, to call *The Road* a work of translation, understood as a transference between persons, places and conditions, seems entirely justifiable.

Besides accounting for *The Road* as a work of translation in this sense, however, I would like to suggest that McCarthy's novel betrays a deep preoccupation with what one might call the *work* of translation; and here I would like to retain some of the more familiar connotations of the word *translation*—to wit, interpretation and the expression of one thing in terms of another. As the singular lives of the father and son—both their bare existence and their familial intimacy—are translated, with breathtaking violence, into life *itself*, humanity *in toto*, it becomes clear that the future of both—that is, futurity itself—depends on the boy, and more particularly on whether he is able to negotiate his own personal *translation* of the dehumanized world to which he is exposed, while still holding on to his own humanity.<sup>3</sup> I will argue that this particular translation is most accurately understood as an *originary* translation insofar as it produces and sustains ethical subjectivity.

In order to arrive at this point, however, we must go back and examine more closely the notion of translation as the transference from one place or condition to another, for it is, I shall argue, out of McCarthy's careful manipulation and compulsive reiteration of a particular translationary paradigm in this regard that the notion of originary translation, which I develop through Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Jean-François Lyotard, emerges as one of the novel's primary concerns. As *place* tends to determine *condition* in the novel, our first task must necessarily be to analyze the way *The Road* is constructed in terms of place and space.

Fortunately, McCarthy makes this relatively easy for us as the spatial construction of *The Road* is starkly simple. Indeed, although the basic schema permits many variations, I would like to suggest that there are qualitatively only three spaces in the novel. These are the road itself, the sea, and chanced-upon, variously manifested domestic space. These closely interdependent spaces, perhaps better thought of as chronotopes, structure the narrative and allow for the staging of an exploration of memory and childhood, as well as providing the context for a compelling but never fully articulated ethical demand to emerge.<sup>4</sup>

Roads are common chronotopes in novels, but McCarthy's road is of course far from ordinary. It is a threateningly exposed place: the harshness of its endemic violence and barbarism set against the comfortlessly soft carpet of ash—a bleakly anti-Wordsworthian pall—that the road doth like a garment wear.<sup>5</sup> It is an entirely desperate place that offers no refuge or sustenance. Roving gangs of half-starved cannibals travel the road, as does

their food, the last remaining, pitiful detritus of humanity, aimlessly and hopelessly wandering. Where the road passes through towns, the remnants of civilization are evident, but they offer little enduring resonance of the once-living world. Even the remaining, intermittently inscribed signs of early attempts at survival and organization mounted in response to the catastrophe seem oddly, impotently, irrelevant. Chronotopically, the road exists in the pitiless zero hour of a present bereft of past and future.<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, the man, and to a lesser degree the boy, choose to travel along the road, and ultimately it is a choice, albeit a terrible one. We know that the boy's mother, the man's wife, chose suicide rather than what she saw as the far worse fate awaiting her if she were to continue on the road. Considered unemotionally, we might be inclined to think that she was right. Choosing to travel the road, submitting oneself to its awful translations, seems gravely foolhardy; but, foolhardy or not, the man and boy's decision involves at least some degree of calculation. They hold to the vague and never fully articulated belief that if there exists any alternative to the anti-life of the road, their only chance of finding out about it is to head south to the coast. Thus, what encourages them on their journey through the hostile space of the road is another of the novel's three chronotopes, the sea.<sup>7</sup> The potency of this space, the reason why it counts in McCarthy's novel, is that it is an indeterminate space, an idea expressed with poetic concision when the father tells his son that he does not know whether the sea is still blue (194). "He didn't know what they'd find when they got there" (212), we are told. It is, then, a vast blank canvas upon which they can project the precarious, weakly entertained hopes that will give them just enough motivation to continue. For the man, this is little more than the realization that unless they find somewhere warmer, they will die. So he heads south, hoping that the coast will "be brighter" (228). The boy, we are told, "had his own fantasies [of] [h]ow things would be in the south," fantasies at the center of which are always "[o]ther children" (55). Temporally, the sea is futural, an idealized time of fantasy and projection that allows both of them to indulge in the fleeting thought that there might be an alternative to the searing *jetztzeit* of the road. The man is aware all along that any hope is misplaced: "everything depended on reaching the coast, yet waking in the night he knew that all of this was empty and no substance to it" (29). "He knew," we are told again, "that he was placing his hopes where he'd no reason to" (228). When they eventually reach the coast this is confirmed, and its possibility-rich indeterminacy is, at a stroke, terminated by the desolation they encounter. The sea is not blue, it is "gray and freezing" (246), "shifting heavily like a slowly heaving vat of slag," giving way, further out, to a "gray squall line of ash" (230). The beach is littered with the "bones of seabirds" (237). The man registers the boy's disappointment, and the closing down of this source of hope, vague and vitiated though it was, threatens an absolute finality. In the event, however, the boy's encounter with the friendly and concerned stranger at the end of the book—a *deus*

*ex machina*, had there been no hints suggesting the possibility of such an outcome—provides a substitute, and more tangible, source of hope that, surprisingly, makes for a guardedly optimistic conclusion.<sup>8</sup>

But let us go back a little, because although the coast provides the space out of which a motivation to travel along the road emerges, it does not do anything to facilitate that journey. And this is where the third and final space of the novel comes into play, allowing the journey to take place. The space in question, perhaps the most important chronotope of the three, is that of the *oikos* or home. The idea of home has long been recognized as important in McCarthy's work, most notably by Terri Witek in her influential though uneven 1994 essay, "Reeds and Hides: Cormac McCarthy's Domestic Spaces," and Jay Ellis' 2006 book, *No Place for Home: Spatial Constraint and Character Flight in the Novels of Cormac McCarthy*. Witek notes a curious pattern: "Nearly all the protagonists in Cormac McCarthy novels flee from or lose their homes...and yet McCarthy's characters seem compelled toward imitations of domesticity" (n.p.). This pattern is apparent in *The Road* too, where, as we shall see, in its multiple iterations it constitutes an ongoing process.

But what is meant, in this context, by "home" or *oikos*? Although some of the domestic spaces in the novel are architecturally houses, and were once homes, this is by no means an essential condition, and is certainly not always the case. Often the places that allow a domestic space to emerge, albeit always fleetingly, are house-like only in the barest, most reduced sense. Typically, this amounts to space that offers little more than basic shelter. In fact, recognition of this basic incommensurability between architecture and interior space underscores just how minimally constituted, and thus translatable, domestic space is in the novel.<sup>9</sup> This notion that, as Charles Rice puts it, "Space emerges as non-identical to the architectural structuring that would make it possible" ("Inside of Space" 188), is in line with modern theories of interior space, which can trace a genealogy back to Gottfried Semper's 1851 theory of the foundational four elements of architecture—the hearth, the roof, the enclosure and the mound ("Inside of Space" 186).<sup>10</sup>

This understanding of interior space is explored in Gaston Bachelard's 1958 work, *The Poetics of Space*. Bachelard, in a peculiarly heady admixture of the philosophical and the poetic, recognizes the basic shell or nest-like seclusion offered by the house, but what is implied is that this is only the bare condition that allows the domestication of space to occur. That domestic space is, ultimately, incommensurable with its bare architectural condition—that it is, in other words, more culture than concrete—is supported by Bachelard's suggestion that "all really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home." Materially, all that is required is "the slightest shelter," and from this "the imagination build[s] walls of impalpable shadows [or] comfort[s] itself with the illusion of protection...the sheltered being," then, "experiences the house in its reality and in its virtuality, by means

of thought and dreams" (5). Thus, for Bachelard, the incommensurability between interior and architecture does not negate or proscribe the peculiar symbiosis that exists between the two. Shelter provides the minimal condition for the imaginative production of the *oikos*, the domestic space that harbors memories and dreams. It is on this point that Bachelard's topophilic panegyric takes full flight: "if I were asked to name the chief benefit of the house, I should say: the house shelters day-dreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace" (6). His task, he believes, is to "show that the house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind" (6). "Without it," he suggests, "man would be a dispersed being" (7), and here we might recall Wallace Stevens's speculative hypothesis in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven": "Suppose these houses are composed of ourselves." As such, Stevens suggests, foreshadowing Bachelard, they would be properly "impalpable" (397). Similarly, Henri Lefebvre comments that for Bachelard "[t]he relationship between Home and Ego... borders on identity" (121).

This identity develops out of the fertile ground of memory. In this strange chiasma of ego and *oikos* the house must be understood as preserving the memories it generates,<sup>11</sup> memories that are, as one would expect, rooted in childhood. Bachelard asserts that the house is "the human being's first world" (7), "our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word" (4). Contra Heidegger, it is the cradle one occupies before being cast into the world (7). Temporally, then, home is always behind us, in our past, and yet, as such, it remains in some sense always ahead of us, having arrived before us. The domestic spaces in *The Road* assume this backward-looking temporal profile, complementing the temporal characteristics of the novel's other two chronotopes.

If anything, McCarthy is even more parsimonious than Bachelard in his understanding of the minimal constitution of domestic space. McCarthy's is an austere aesthetic, of course, and so we would expect a certain economy in his rendering of such space, but it is more than just that. In the post-apocalyptic wasteland of *The Road*, any alternative to, or shelter from, the prevailing conditions, no matter how temporary or inadequate, can seem protective and sustaining and, as such, can open the space required for reflection and memory.

We encounter the first space suggestive of such domesticity in the opening pages of the book. It is not a house, but a "roadside gas station" (4). Nor do the man and boy stay there overnight. And yet it provides for them, offering a small amount of motor oil that they will be able to use in their "little slutlamp" (6), thus sustaining and protecting them, albeit in the most meager and indigent manner. In this brief reprieve from the road, the gas station becomes also a place of memory and of childhood associations. The man feels compelled to pick up an old phone and dial "the number of his father's house in that long ago" (5), a completely illogical action that

puzzles the boy (though the boy's puzzlement is due not, perhaps, to the illogicality of the action, but rather to the fact that it is unlikely that the boy has any recollection of telephones). A few pages later the boy and his father enter "an old batboard smokehouse," and find a ham, "[d]eep red and salty meat inside. Rich and good" (16). It quickly becomes clear that although the chronotope of the sea provides the motivation to travel on the road, it is the domestic spaces that provide the sustaining physical, emotional and intellectual nourishment required for such a journey.

This gives us the basic spatial structure of the road. The man and his son travel down the road toward the sea. There is nothing on the road itself that will sustain such a journey, so they regularly leave the road seeking to discover or improvise the basic characteristics of a house—shelter, warmth, dryness, food. Almost invariably they find at least one of these things, often a combination of them, or they find fuel or tools or something else that helps support and sustain human life, and in this process of recovering some of the basic elements of domestic life other, more intangible, characteristics of domesticity and childhood are evoked, and the mood becomes decidedly retrospective. This happens at least a dozen times in the novel.<sup>12</sup>

In one abandoned house the man reads old newspapers while the boy sleeps. He is struck by "[t]he curious news. The quaint concerns" (28). In another house and barn he notices "a child's bicycle" and retrieves seeds, "a grape flavoured powder to make drinks with," a spoon, a boxcutter, a screwdriver and dried apples, as well as discovering a cistern full of clean drinking water (124–29). "They spent the afternoon sitting wrapped in the blankets and eating apples. Sipping the water from the jars" (131). In another house, he finds a candle (138). At one particularly grand house, we are told that they "wandered through the rooms like sceptical housebuyers" (220). They end up spending a lengthy sojourn of four days at the house. They discover jars of green beans, red peppers, tomatoes, corn, new potatoes and okra. They light a fire to heat the food and make what is twice described as a "nest" in front of the hearth, enjoying the warmth and comfort while the rain pours outside and the windows rattle (222–26). They eat out of bone china bowls at a dining table with a candle burning between them (224). They bathe in hot water and find new clothes, blankets and shoes. Prior to coming upon this house, during a long night of sleeping rough, the man wonders to himself: "Do you think that your fathers are watching? That they weigh you in their ledgerbook? Against what? There is no book and your fathers are dead in the ground" (209). Fifteen pages later, in the midst of gloriously rekindled domesticity, the man says to his sleeping son: "I think maybe they are watching... They are watching for a thing that even death cannot undo and if they do not see it they will turn away from us and they will not come back" (224).

These episodes in which houses are reanimated should not, however, suggest a reassertion of what might be understood as a premodern commensurability between architecture and interior. The novel underlines the



dissociation of the two, both by depicting homely spaces in unhomely places, as well as unhomely spaces in what are usually regarded as homely places. An example of the latter would be the “once grand house sited on a rise above the road,” which they come upon having had “no food and little sleep in five days” (111).<sup>13</sup> Out of all the houses in *The Road*, it is this building that receives the most complete architectural description *as a house*:

[They stood] in the yard studying the façade. The handmade brick of the house kilned out of the dirt it stood on. The peeling paint hanging in long dry sleavings down the columns and from the buckled soffits. A lamp that hung from a long chain overhead.... Then they stepped into a broad foyer floored in a domino of black and white marble tiles. A broad staircase ascending. Fine Morris paper on the walls, water-stained and sagging. The plaster ceiling was bellied in great swags and the yellowed dentil molding was bowed and sprung from the upper walls. To the left through the doorway stood a large walnut buffet in what must have been the diningroom. The doors and the drawers were gone but the rest of it was too large to burn.... They crossed the foyer to the room on the far side and walked in and stood. A great hall with ceilings twice the height of the doors. A fireplace with raw brick showing where the wooden mantel and surround had been pried away and burned. (112–13)

This house, however, contains a disturbing secret. In the basement—but where else?—is human livestock, kept as food by the cannibals who, unbeknownst to the man and boy, now occupy the house. Architecture alone, then, does not constitute an *oikos* in the sense that we have seen being developed throughout the novel as one of its principal concerns.

This point is given further emphasis by means of the numerous homely spaces in unhomely places that we are presented with in the novel. For instance, there is the camp that they make by a river pool at the base of a waterfall. The boy immediately recognizes it as “a good place,” and the father agrees (41–42). They cook food, including dried morels that they have foraged in the wood. The man banks the fire “against the seam of rock where he’d built it” and arranges a tarp shelter behind them “to reflect the heat.” They sit “warm in their refuge” and, as we have come to expect, this has a humanizing effect and the past is recollected and childhood evoked. The man tells the boy stories, “[o]ld stories of courage and justice as he remembered” (42), stories befitting their self-identification as “the good guys.” Such stories would, of course, be wildly inappropriate on the road, but this is not the road, it is an *oikos*, the environment proper to such stories, the environment that shelters, protects and preserves the past as it sustains life in the present. Here, it is a space without walls, without a roof, without doors; but it is unmistakably a domestic *interior* nonetheless.

An example of a sheltering space that is even further removed from traditional notions of a home, but which nevertheless provides for and sustains life, would be the partially capsized sailboat they spy upon reaching the coast. The man swims out to the boat called, significantly, the "Pájaro de Esperanza," or Bird of Hope (239), and finds clothes, soap, tools, bottles of gas, a "rubberized canvas seabag," some rope, olive oil, cans of milk, tea, coffee, grain, tins of food (which, however, the man thinks are now probably no longer safe) and the serviceable parts of a stove (241–46). On a second visit to the boat he discovers a flare pistol and a first-aid kit that includes antibiotics and aspirin (256).

There are two domestic spaces in the novel that warrant special mention, however. One is the man's now-abandoned childhood home, "the house where I grew up," as he puts it. It is "an old frame house with chimneys and gables and a stone wall." "The peeling wooden clapboards [are] largely gone from the lower walls for firewood leaving the studs and the insulation exposed. The rotted screening from the back porch [lies] on the concrete terrace" (24). Inside, it is "[a]ll much as he'd remembered it. In the small room off the diningroom there was a bare iron cot, a metal foldingtable. The same castiron coalgrate in the small fireplace. The pine panelling was gone from the walls leaving just the furring strips" (25). The man runs his thumb over the pinholes in the wooden mantelpiece, where forty years earlier he would hang a stocking at Christmas. They pass through the diningroom and the livingroom and go up the stairs. They come to the room that was once the man's bedroom. As they enter, we sense an almost Bachelardian topophilia. For Bachelard, as we have seen, the house is a secluded shell-like space that shelters childhood and daydreams. The man's room is "[a] small space under the eaves." The man notes where he used to sleep: "My cot was against this wall. In the nights in their thousands to dream the dreams of a child's imaginings, worlds rich or fearful such as might offer themselves but never the one to be" (26). Momentarily transported, he opens "the closet door half expecting to find his childhood things" (27).<sup>14</sup>

The importance of the final domestic space to which I wish to refer can hardly be overestimated. It appears approximately halfway through the novel, at the nadir of the narrative's inverted arc. The Man and Boy are exhausted and starving. The man estimates that they are ten days to death (141). They enter "a solitary house in a field." They are so utterly transformed that upon being confronted by their image in a mirror the man almost raises his pistol in defense (139). The gap between *who* they believe they are and *what* they have become has never been so great. Across the yard from the house is a garden shed where they find two cans of motor oil. Coming back from the shed something prompts the man to stop. He returns to the shed, collects a spade, and thrusts it into the ground where he had been walking. The spade strikes something hollow and wooden (141–42). What he has discovered, of course, is perhaps the ultimate *oikos*



in the narrative, a nuclear bunker comprehensively stocked with provisions: "Crate upon crate of canned goods. Tomatoes, peaches, beans, apricots. Canned hams. Corned beef. Hundreds of gallons of water in ten gallon plastic jerry jugs. Paper towels, toiletpaper, paper plates. Plastic trashbags stuffed with blankets" (146). There are rows of stencilled cartons. Chile, corn, stew, soup, spaghetti sauce. The richness of a vanished world." The boy asks whether it is real (147).

The discovery marks the beginning of a glorious retreat. For the next few days they eat well, bathe in warm water, wash their clothes, cut their hair, and rest. On what they think will be their last night in the shelter, the sense of domestic comfort is almost palpable.

They ate a sumptuous meal by candlelight. Ham and green beans and mashed potatoes with biscuits and gravy. He'd found four quarts of bonded whiskey still in the paper bags in which they'd been purchased and he drank a little of it in a glass with water. It made him dizzy before he'd even finished it and he drank no more. They eat peaches and cream over biscuits for dessert and drank coffee. The paper plates and plastic tableware he dumped in a trashbag. Then they played checkers and then he put the boy to bed. (162)

That night the man dreams, vague dreams of creatures crouched by the side of his bed, or "cot," as he calls it. On waking, the dream is forgotten and "[a]ll that was left was the feeling of it" (163).

The experience of domesticity in the novel is, likewise, always fleeting. No sooner have the father and son discovered and taken advantage of a sheltering, home-like space, fear for their safety and a desire to reach the coast compel them to abandon it to rejoin, once again, the road. And this takes us back to Witek's original insight that in McCarthy's novels the protagonists flee from or lose their homes as well as apparently being drawn to approximations of domesticity. McCarthy's domestic spaces are rooted in tradition and memory, but otherwise they are transient. Location inexorably heralds dislocation; place gives way to displacement. In a novel that is, as we have seen, full of translations of one sort or another, this is its translational heart. The experience of (self-)conveyance from domestic space to its *other* (here symbolized by the road) is the novel's compulsively reiterated translational pattern. It is a translation from one chronotope or cultural space to another that in turn makes necessary the translation of the two chronotopes or cultural spaces into a way of thinking about the world capable of accommodating both in a manner that will allow them to remain distinct, their differences recognized and preserved. Translation, in other words, necessitates the work of translation, where the latter corresponds with a *coming-to-terms-with* the transference from one culture (the *oikos*) to another (the road). Furthermore, this translation of translation produces a further cultural space, the space of ethical subjectivity, about which more will be said later.

First let us look a little more closely at the repeatedly replayed move from the *oikos* to the road. It is, in effect, a *cultural translation*.<sup>15</sup> The *oikos*, as we have seen, provides the space in which the man can be a father and the boy can be a son. It is, essentially, a private space. It sustains and shelters and offers enough of a sense of security for thoughts to rise above an immediate concern with survival and instead reflect backwards. It is a space of stories, memories and dreams, where the world is remade—not as it is, not even as it was, but as it ought to be. It is where the man and boy reinscribe their moral identity as the good guys, the people who carry the fire. At the heart of the *oikos*, then, is a symbolic hearth sheltering a fire that they are protecting and carrying or translating, translating from one generation to another, translating from one culture to another. A translation, it is implied, upon which everything depends.

The road, as should be clear by now, is everything that the *oikos* is not. Whereas the *oikos* is secluded and private, the road is unremittingly exposed and unsparingly public. It is no place for memories or stories or childhood. To have any hope of surviving, one must have an unflinching understanding of what it *is*—how it *ought to be* is irrelevant. The man travels the road without illusions and is fully conversant with its ways. He is able to conjure the discourse of the *oikos* for the benefit of his son, but he hardly believes in it anymore. He has accepted the harsh survivalist logic of the road and exercises it freely. For instance, upon confronting a man who has stolen all of their possessions, he forces the man to denude himself in the middle of the road—not just any road, of course, but *the* road—and hand over his clothes; not killing him, then, but leaving him to face certain death (274–76) (qualifying him, in Agamben's appropriation of a term taken from Roman criminal law, as a *homo sacer* [literally, sacred man]—a man so worthless that he can be killed but not sacrificed, bare life, in other words, that “is included in the juridical order solely in the form of its exclusion” [8]). This ultimate denial of privacy, which exposes the thing itself, *unaccommodated* man, is a stark demonstration of the power and reach of the road, and it reveals the extent of the man's complicity with it.

He is thus deeply resistant to the boy's inclination toward acts of selflessness. Quite naturally, having been inculcated in the culture (one might say *law*) of the *oikos* (its *economy*, that is), the boy's expectation is that the empirical “is” must be made to submit to the ethical “ought,” the law of the road to the law of the *oikos*. His first instinct, in other words, is to export unmodified, untranslated, the culture of the *oikos* to the road.<sup>16</sup> The Boy's father realizes that this is incompatible with survival on the road and this leads to clashes with his son, who, of course, is deeply troubled by his father's attitude, finding it very difficult to reconcile with their self-professed identity as the fire-carrying good guys. Out of this conflict of the domestic, pre-subjectival culture of the *oikos* and the rapaciously politicized life of the road, comes initial disappointment, followed by negotiation, readjustment,

and, gradually, tentative, conditional, unsatisfied acceptance. This process is of central importance in McCarthy's novel. As a motif it builds in significance throughout, impressing upon us the possibility that the repeated forced abandonment of domestic spaces, traumatic though that is, might in fact be more appropriately understood in the context of a more general cultural tension, or translation, between the chronotope of the *oikos* and the chronotope of the road. There are many examples in the narrative of this tension manifesting itself in the father and son relationship. Relatively early on in the novel they come upon a man on the road, "shuffling along ... dragging one leg slightly and stopping from time to time to stand stooped and uncertain before setting out again." The boy is unsure of how to handle such an encounter, but his impulse is to assist him: "What should we do, Papa?" he asks. His father says, "Let's just follow and watch" (50). When they get closer, the boy becomes more insistent: "Cant we help him? Papa?" "No. We cant help him," replies his father, suggesting that the man has been struck by lightning. The boy pleads with him, but his father is decided: "There's nothing to be done for him" (51). They move on but their failure to help the man stays, as a trauma, with the boy. Realizing this, his father tries to explain his refusal to help the man, translating his position in more *oikos*-amenable terms: "I'm sorry ... But we have nothing to give him. We have no way to help him. I'm sorry for what happened to him but we cant fix it. You know that, dont you? ... There's nothing we could have done. ... He's going to die. We can't share what we have or we'll die too" (53). Finally, the boy accedes to the logic of his father's position: "I know," he says. But in the face of the ethical demand felt by the boy, there is something about this logic that does not quite appease. The man asks if he will now talk to him again. Guardedly, the boy says "Okay." And this word, "okay," becomes the word used to signal the boy's carefully considered, though far from satisfied, acceptance of a course of action that seems to conflict with his *oiko*-centric ethics. This does not mean that the boy approves the course of action, but it does signify that he has rethought and perhaps rendered more wide-reaching and complex his ethical perspective in relation to it.

This is, undoubtedly, cultural translation at work, an act of mediation between the culture of the *oikos* and the culture of the road, and there are many other instances of it in the novel. There is the important encounter with the ancient and rather biblical Eli (171–85). When they spot him on the road, the man—suspicious, cynical—suspects he is a decoy. The boy sees things entirely differently. He perceives that Eli is scared and puts his hand on his shoulder to comfort him. He urges his father to tell him that they will not hurt him and he begs him to share some of their food with him. His father, hardened by the road, distanced from the *oikos*, does not even want the boy to touch Eli, and yet he gives in to the boy's requests, putting his foot down only to foreclose any possible requests for Eli to go with them. The boy, however, though conflicted, is accepting. When they leave Eli behind,

the man realizes that the boy is not happy. "I'm okay" (185), responds the boy diffidently, slowly coming to terms with the compromises he is finding himself making. But compromise, of course, is what translation is all about. Tellingly, Eli and the man agree on one thing: neither of them would give up their food in the way that the boy does (184). The boy, then, bridges cultures, interpreting situations anew, opening up common ground. His role, one might say, is that of the *hermeneus*, or translator, working between two distinct languages or cultures.<sup>17</sup>

The boy, again acting as the *hermeneus*, attempts to intervene in a similar way in their encounter with the thief whom the man forces to strip and then leaves for dead. The boy is utterly distraught at his father's treatment of the man, but the best he can do—and it is significant—is get his father to return to the spot where they abandoned the naked man, and leave his clothes under a rock for him. For the boy, this is yet another traumatic experience where the discourse of the *oikos* is contradicted by events, leaving him disenchanted and suddenly dismissive of his father's stories because they're not like "real life" (287). This disenchantment is not enough for him to abandon the discourse of the *oikos*, but it does lead to a questioning both of its culture and of the culture of the road, and from that questioning there arise readjustment and deepening of his understanding of both chronotopes and of the relationship between them.

The experience of cultural translation, in which the boy momentarily suspends, worries deeply about, and then recasts some of the very things about which he was previously most assured, positions the *hermeneus* as an essentially ethical figure. That the boy is the only ethical voice in the novel is clear. And when his father rebukes him, saying, "You're not the one who has to worry about everything," the boy's response and its implications are deeply resonant: "Yes I am . . . I am the one," he says (227).<sup>18</sup> The suggestion of an ethics of cultural translation finds compelling support in Paul Ricoeur's later work, as well as in the writings of Dominico Jervolino. Ricoeur identifies what he calls "*linguistic hospitality*" (*hospitalité langagière*) at work in translation, which would involve "the work of memory and . . . the work of mourning" in order to arrive at "a correspondence without adequacy" (10). Ricoeur goes on: "Linguistic hospitality, therefore, is the act of inhabiting the work of the Other paralleled by the act of receiving the word of the Other into *one's own home, one's own dwelling*" (10; emphasis added). Richard Kearney calls this the "double duty" of the work of translation: "to expropriate oneself as one appropriates the other" (xvi). For Ricoeur, such linguistic hospitality "serves as a model for other forms of hospitality" (23).<sup>19</sup> This positions the "incessant work of translation," Jervolino comments, as "an inescapable commitment of humanity in its millenarian history" ("Rethinking Ricoeur" 230).

But even taking this ethical dimension into consideration, is there not something more than cultural translation going on here? Or is it, perhaps, a *special case* of cultural translation? To try to answer these questions, I would

now like to turn to two essays, one by Jean-François Lyotard and one by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. In an essay from 1988 entitled "*Oikos*," Lyotard asks us to question the received wisdom that would have us believe that the *oikos*, the home, is a place of safety. On the contrary, he argues, the Greek *oikos* (and the Latin *domus*) "is above all the place of tragedy" (97). With this precedent in mind, he sets about refashioning the Greek notion of *oikeion* as an alternative to common notions of *Umwelt* and ecology. *Oikeion* is traditionally translated as, variously, "one's own" or "appropriate" or "familiar,"<sup>20</sup> and, as Lyotard points out, "[i]n Greek, there is a very clear opposition between *oikeion* and *politikon*" (101). The *oikeion* is "everything that can be called 'domesticity' in the old Latin sense, that which is the *domus*." "In the final analysis," Lyotard writes, "*oikeion* is everything that is not *öffentlich* [public]" (101)<sup>21</sup>: "The political is the public sphere, while the *oikeion* is the space we call 'private'" (Lyotard calls this "an awful word," preferring "secluded") (102).

Lyotard wishes to suggest, similar to the idea that at the heart of the *oikos* is tragedy, that at the heart of the *oikeion* there is anxiety and repression. Lyotard's thesis is that the human being is born too soon and that our original *oikos*, our body, is ill-prepared in relation to its *Umwelt*. At the same time, however, in another sense "we are born too late because a lot of meanings or stories have already been narrated about our birth." "In this sense," writes Lyotard, "we are already the object of a lot of meanings" (103). On both counts, Lyotard seems to suggest, the outside (outside the body, note; he is not speaking of subjectivity here) is disclosed as a source of anxiety, which our "psychic apparatus" (104) defensively represses. Thus, Lyotard identifies what he calls "a large element of childish anxiety that is a result of the fact that something is given, has been given, and will have been given to us before we are able to receive it, before we are in the condition of agreeing to it, before becoming aware of it." What results from this—Lyotard says, "Call it what you will, the 'unconscious' or whatever"—is an opacity that resists openness and communication. "One can only describe this something," Lyotard writes, "as contradiction, tension, repression, deferral, displacement and in general distortion. All these concepts," Lyotard adds, "are terms of transport." Translations, in other words, that place at the heart of the *oikeion*, "the thing that has not become public, that has not become communicational, that has not become systemic, and that can never become any of these things" (105).

For Lyotard, this inherent complexity makes "us" who we are, makes "us" what we are. It is a considerable claim: "I am describing a situation of distress, of suffering that is at the same time the mere condition of thinking and writing" (106). It is, he suggests, "the source of every invention, creation, and writing." Lyotard's general worry is over what the consequences might be if in the course of our technological development we were to erase "the question of birth, the question of childhood, the question of a certain anxiety." Giving flight to a posthuman fantasy, Lyotard writes:

If we are sent to space after the explosion of the sun (I don't even know if it will be us), if something is sent to space without this extraordinary complexity that is precisely the paradox of childhood, I am afraid that this complexity is not complex enough. In this case, we could call this by the terrible name of mere survival, which is not very interesting. I am not interested in surviving, not interested at all. I am interested in remaining a child. (107)

What Lyotard has set out, then, is a type of cultural translation that is constitutive of *us*, whatever that might mean, constitutive, certainly, of subjectivity. A cultural translation, in other words, between a pre-individuated entity and its surroundings, a cultural translation out of which we—all of us—emerge.

In an essay entitled "Translation as Culture," Spivak, drawing on Melanie Klein and without reference to Lyotard, theorizes a very similar procedure. And she gives it a name: "originary translation." She writes:

The human infant grabs on to some one thing and then things. This grabbing of an outside indistinguishable from an inside constitutes an inside, going back and forth and coding everything in to a sign-system by the thing(s) grasped. One can call this crude coding a "translation." In this never-ending weaving, violence translates into conscience and vice versa.... Thus "nature" passes and repasses into "culture," in a work or shuttling site of violence... the violent production of the precarious subject of reparation and responsibility. (13)

Her conclusion is striking: "the human subject is something that will have happened as this shuttling translation, from inside to outside, from violence to conscience: the production of the ethical subject" (14). Spivak therefore acknowledges that "the human infant, on the cusp of the natural and the cultural, is in translation" (14), but implies that this condition of being in translation is coterminous with ethical subjectivity. Thus, although both Lyotard and Spivak locate a sort of originary translation in childhood, it is in fact a site or space of birth that endures and is carried with us for as long as we exist as ethical subjects. It is the condition of being open to the possibility of radical uncertainty and reappraisal, where, in Jakob von Uexküll's terms, we are displaced to the extent that our *umwelt* becomes an object for us. Being lost in translation, in other words, is the condition of ethical subjectivity. And this seems to be what Lyotard means when he urges us to remain children. If we are no longer children in precisely this respect, if we are, that is to say, no longer open to the experience of originary translation, then we lose our ethical subjectivity and become mere survivors. In his essay "The Survivor," published in the same year as "*Otkos*," Lyotard writes: "I understand childhood... as obedience to a debt (which we can call a debt of life, of time, of event, a debt of being there in spite of everything), a debt for which only the persistent feeling of respect can save the adult from being



no more than a survivor, a creature living on reprieve from annihilation” (149). Originary translation, then, is the translation of an initial debt, and to lose sight of that is to lose sight of what we are. The law of the *oikos* out of which we emerge—that is, our *economy*—means that we are always in debt; we emerge, overdrawn, out of a negative balance. IOU therefore I am, we might say.

But if all of this depends on the experience of childhood and the *oikos*, then suddenly what is really at stake in *The Road* becomes very clear, namely, the possible eradication of the *oikos* and, with it, the experience of originary translation. Indigent life may continue to *survive*, but that is the most it can do, and survival is barely life. Thus the man’s quest in the novel, his real reason for travelling the road, is to preserve originary translation. And he seeks to do this by cultivating the discourse of the *oikos* in approximated spaces, nurturing and guiding his son, though not always sympathetically, through an originary translation that, as we can see, is bearing the fruit of an ethical subjectivity. A subjectivity the worth of which the man recognizes but that now lies dormant in him. The symbolic fire that they are carrying and wish to pass on, to translate, is, therefore, literally rekindled and strengthened in each impromptu hearth, in each improvised *domus*.

This worry about the loss of the *oikos* as a distinct space is not, of course, without precedent, and it is in light of this that I would argue that the wider concern of *The Road* is, paradigmatically, modernity, not the posthuman. Or, if one were to insist on this latter dimension, one might argue that *The Road* is concerned with a *posthumanism* already inherent in modernity, a conception of human being, in other words, that exceeds and supersedes conventional liberal-humanist definitions; certainly, the novel scarcely takes any pleasure in the thought of a future entirely bereft of human life, and shows no interest in the burgeoning discourse of what might be called *post-human* posthumanism, in which fetishized technological augmentation and fantasies of cognitive disembodiment vie for prominence.<sup>22</sup>

How, then, might modernity be understood in this context? Michel Foucault, in *The History of Sexuality Vol. I*, addresses what he calls the “threshold of modernity”: “For millennia, man remained what he was for Aristotle: a living animal with the additional capacity for a political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question” (143). We have seen Lyotard contrast two distinct realms, the private space of the *oikos* and the public space of politics. What Foucault is here drawing our attention to is the idea that these two realms designate two different understandings of life—*zoē* and *bios*. As Agamben asserts in his influential book *Homo Sacer*, the proper sphere of *zoē*, or bare reproductive life, is the *oikos* (2). *Bios*, on the other hand, was understood to be public life in the political sphere. Referring to Foucault, Agamben suggests that “the decisive event of modernity” is ‘the entry of *zoē* into the sphere of the polis—the politicization of bare life as such” (4).

On this diagnosis, then, modernity marks the loss of the private, the loss of a domestic space that resists and remains opaque to the political. The idiomatic, the singular, the secret, are forced into their opposite without translation. In *The Road*, the effect of this is often uncanny—derelict houses displaying evidence of past life, the man's dreams of his past intruding with shocking inappropriateness. These things strike an oddly discordant tone, and so they might: as Schelling is once supposed to have claimed, "'Unheimlich' is the name for everything that ought to have remained ... secret and hidden but has come to light" (qtd. in Freud 345).

If, therefore, modernity announced the gradual exposure and negation of the *oikos*, and, thus, the inevitable decline of an originary translation that opens and yet is dependent upon the space of ethical subjectivity, McCarthy's *The Road* might very well be read as a warning from the near-future about our present and recent past. If this reading holds, then the father and son's struggle is our struggle, and originary translation is the only thing standing between us and survival.

## NOTES

1. Dana Phillips has argued that to call *The Road* apocalyptic is misleading, as "*in The Road there has been no apocalypse: the end of the world is simply the end of the world*" (188). Here I, and I suspect most commentators on *The Road* who resort to this term, use "apocalyptic" less in the sense of "revelatory" or "prophetic," and more in the sense of "relating to, or characteristic of a disaster resulting in drastic, irreversible damage to human society or the environment, esp. on a global scale" ("Apocalyptic").

2. "The last instance of a thing takes the class with it" (McCarthy 28). Quotations from *The Road* will follow McCarthy's idiosyncratic use of punctuation.

3. Although it is beyond the scope of this essay, the question of how gender bears upon the possibility of a future in *The Road* is intriguing. How might women in general and mothers in particular fit into the schema of ethical domesticity that the man and the boy establish during the course of the novel? This is not simply a question of procreation, since procreation alone, divorced from ethical commitment, is no guarantee of a future worth living, as evidenced by the novel's cannibals. Although the fine detail of any potential answers to such questions must necessarily remain undecided, it seems reasonable to think that women would play a similar role to the men, cultivating the sort of ethical translation that, I argue, might be considered a condition of future life.

4. I am using "chronotope" (literally, "time space") in the way Bakhtin defined it:

In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope. (84)

5. The implied reference is, of course, Wordsworth's "Composed Upon Westminster Bridge."

6. This is evident throughout, but McCarthy is explicit: "There is no past... The hour. There is no later. This is later" (55–56). For Bakhtin, the chronotope of the road is a chronotope of encounter and "in such a chronotope the temporal element predominates" (243). "Time," Bakhtin writes, "fuses together with space and flows in it (forming the road)" (244). This is "empty... adventure-time" (91).

7. For a schematic overview of the chronotopic function of the sea in the history of the novel, see Cohen 647–66.

8. The hints are not obvious, but they are there. The most important one is when the boy fleetingly encounters another boy and is left disturbed and upset. This happens just after the man felt "sure they were being watched" (88). A day earlier they had the unusual experience of hearing a dog, the very

existence of which suggests that there might be people—good people, of course—caring for it (86). The boy worries that the “little boy doesn’t have anybody to take care of him” and his father reassures him: “There are people there. They were just hiding” (89). As his father is dying, he urges his son to find “the good guys” (298) and shortly afterwards the boy asks: “Do you remember that little boy, Papa?” His father again reassures him that the little boy is “all right” (300). His father then dies and the boy encounters a friendly stranger who tells him that he has a little boy and girl and that he does not eat people. In John Hillcoat’s film adaptation of *The Road*, the connection with the earlier encounter is made clearer: the boy meets the whole nuclear family at the end and the boy of the family is clearly the “little boy” of his earlier encounter. The family even has a dog, though in the film there is no barking dog preceding the boy’s glimpse of the other boy.

9. Charles Rice, the architectural historian and theorist, writes:

The very emergence of the interior in conditions which were often antagonistic to architecture as discipline and practice points to a certain non-commensurability between architecture and the interior. This means being able to conceive of the interior’s spatiality and its particular conditions of enclosure in ways beyond the stasis and structured internality architecture had conventionally provided the domain of the domestic. (“Inside of Space” 188)

10. Rice goes on: “What is most remarkable about Semper’s claim is the way in which his definition of space comes about through the suppression of what is conventionally architectural. Architecture as structure has no role in the definition of space, except that it allows for a more primary sense of enclosure to be produced” (187). Rice explores this idea more fully in *The Emergence of the Interior: Architecture, Modernity, Domesticity*, where he suggests, “The interior was articulated through decoration, the literal covering of the inside of an architectural ‘shell’ with soft ‘stuff’ of furnishing” (3), and that this emergence of the interior as distinct from, but related to, architecture is in a sense “constitutive of modern domesticity” (4). Michael McKeon, in *The Secret History of Domesticity: Public, Private and the Division of Knowledge*, links the interior space of domesticity to modernity even more strongly, suggesting that “[i]n ‘modernity’ the public and the private are separated out from each other” (xix) and that “the coalescence of the category of domesticity is perhaps [the] most visible and resonant expression” of this division (xx). Arguably, it was recognition of the importance of the interior space that paved the way for the emergence of purely functionalist architecture, where the building is made to serve the lived interior in a way that attempts to reestablish commensurability between the two. Exploiting the basic architectural conditions of domesticity became the ambition of certain proponents of extreme functionalism in the early twentieth century, including the avant-garde artist and architectural theorist Karel Teige. Teige hoped to solve the contemporary housing crisis suffered by the European proletariat through the development of what he called the “minimal dwelling,” which he saw as “the most pressing architectural problem” (234). For a contemporary reevaluation of the legacy of Teige’s *The Minimal Dwelling*, see Owen Hatherley, *Militant Modernism* (particularly 78–79). On the development of the specifically “American” domestic interior, see Elizabeth Cromley, “Domestic Space Transformed, 1850–2000.”

11. “Of course, thanks to the house, a great many of our memories are housed” (Bachelard 8).

12. *Oikos* candidates, besides the roadside gas station and the old batboard smokehouse, include the house on page 21; the supermarket on pages 21–23, where they find a can of Coca Cola; the man’s childhood home on pages 24–27; the abandoned house of page 28; the “camp by the river pool at the falls” of pages 41–44, which as we will see later they agree is “a good place”; the impromptu den under a fallen tree of pages 102–03, the “once grand house” with a ghoulish surprise in the basement of pages 111–17; the house, barn, and garage of pages 124–31; a house on pages 137–38 where they find a candle; the house with an underground bunker of pages 139–65; the shed with the concrete floor of pages 194–97; the house and outbuildings of pages 219–28, where they “made a nest... in front of the hearth,” and, perhaps finally, the boat, the Pájaro de Esperanza of pages 239–56. I will comment in more detail on a number of these locations later on.

13. For a more general exploration of the theme of unhomey houses, see Vidler 17–44.

14. Lefebvre remarks on the “nostalgic aura” that has grown up around the house in “art, poetry, drama and philosophy”, and it is worth reminding ourselves that “nostalgia” is, properly, the mental distress provoked by memories of a now spatially or temporally distant home (120–21).

15. “Cultural translation” is a term often associated with Homi Bhabha. He develops the term as a way of understanding cultural hybridity in a postcolonial setting (226–29). Judith Butler explores the notion of “cultural translation” in the context of universalism (11–43).

16. This might rather roughly be understood as similar to the Stoic notion of *oikeiōsis*, an obscure and difficult to translate term that implies rendering things *oikeion* (approximately, familiar) to us. Referring to *oikeiōsis* Tad Brennan comments: "Etymology tells us that the process-word, adjective, and related verbs all come from the word for a house or household, *oikos*, so we might expect the adjective *oikeion* to mean 'having to do with the household'; and so it does" (154).

17. *Hermeneus* is one of the earliest Greek words for a translator; it carries the sense of "an intermediary labouring between two distinct languages or speakers" (Kearney xiii). See also Jervolino, "Hermeneutics of the Self" 63.

18. The messianic overtone here is unmistakable. Its full exploration is beyond the scope of this essay, but a couple of points ought to be made with regard to the boy as a religious figure. Early in the novel we are told that the man "knew only that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke" (3). "Warrant" here has the sense of "one who or something which protects or authorizes" ("Warrant," def. 1). Yet, one might also bear in mind warrant's now-obsolete significance as "a place of refuge, shelter" ("Warrant," def. 1.3.a). This becomes particularly significant when, later in the novel, the boy is described as "Golden chalice, good to house a god" (78). Later still we are told that the man looks at the boy "glowing in that waste like a tabernacle" (293). The boy, then, is being figured as a particular type of *oikos* in his own right. In Latin, *tabernaculum* signified "tent, booth, shed" ("Tabernacle"). Its primary meaning according to the OED is still "A temporary dwelling; generally moveable, constructed of branches, boards, or canvas; a hut, tent, booth" ("Tabernacle," def. 1). An improvised *oikos*, one might say. Recalling its more familiar religious definition serves to recast in a strongly religious light the man and boy's claim to be carrying the fire along the hostile road for the sake of a coming community: "The curtained tent, containing the Ark of the Covenant and other sacred appointments, which served as the portable sanctuary of the Israelites during their wandering in the wilderness and afterwards till the building of the Temple." In biblical phraseology, tabernacle can also indicate "A dwelling-place. *spec.* The dwelling-place of Jehovah, or of God" ("Tabernacle," def. 3).

19. See also Jervolino, "Translation as a Paradigm" 68–69; and Bottone, "The Ethical Task of the Translator in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur."

20. A brief sample of the way *oikeion* is understood in the appropriate scholarship: "one's own" (Ludwig 208); "roughly 'appropriate'" (Whiting 279); "familiarity" (Eden 246); "appropriate to us" (Annas 189); "that which is our own" (Remes 90); "the noun *oikos* 'household' or 'family' is cognate with the adjective *oikeion* 'belonging with' or 'akin to'" (Rudebusch 193).

21. One might wish to question the orthodoxy that this view seems to echo. McKeon comments: "Half a century ago scholarly consensus conceived the distinction between the public and the private in the classical world as ... a fundamental separation. ... In recent years this paradigm has been questioned on a number of grounds. The putative antithesis between *polis* and *oikos* draws strength, it has been argued, from a confusion of two distinct "family" categories: the *oikos*, the household of persons and property; and the *genos*, the cult-oriented blood kin or clan. When the tension between ancestral *genos* and the emergent *polis* in preclassical Greece is taken to bespeak also a historical estrangement of *polis* from *oikos*, the ongoing correlation of the latter two entities becomes obscured" (7). Although a full exploration of this is beyond the scope of this paper, my present argument aims to trouble, at least implicitly, the distinction between *oikos* and *polis* by suggesting that they both emerge to consciousness through a process of "cultural translation" and that they thus remain tied to each other in manner that does not permit "fundamental separation." That fuller exploration would also have to examine closely Agamben's appropriation of the Aristotelian terms *zoē* and *bios*, about which he makes claims that are, Finlayson contends, "either straightforwardly false or at very least unwarranted and misleading" (107). Also relevant here would be Esposito's suggestion that today, more than ever before, the role of technology needs to be taken into account in any attempt to understand the relationship between *zoē* and *bios* (15).

22. I take Hayles's *How We Became Posthuman* to be the standard example of what I am here referring to as posthuman posthumanism. An example of the more cautious and sober sort posthumanist scholarship that is sceptical of the desire for a technological transcendence of biological life would be Wolfe's *What is Posthumanism?* Callus and Herbrechter's "What's Wrong with Posthumanism" articulates the broad division within the field thus:

*Posthumanism*, as the name of a discourse, suggests an *episteme* which comes 'after' humanism ('post-humanism') or even after the human itself ('post-human-ism'). Implicit in both these articulations is a sense of the supplanting operations wrought by time, and of the obsolescence in question affecting not simply humanism as displaced *episteme* but also, more radically, the notion and nature of the human as fact and idea.

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