

Thoughts on Fatigue as Encountered in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

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What's the bravest thing you ever did? He spat into the road a bloody phlegm. Getting up this morning, he said. (McCarthy, 2010, p. 291)

How many of us have ever felt like answering this question in the same manner? I guess it is only a few ultra-enthusiastic ones who haven't. Sometimes, for no particular reason whatsoever, we just feel tired. Tired physically, mentally, emotionally: fatigued – when even rest is tiring. Fatigue is the subject of this article. I will simply discuss fatigue as an element which permeates Cormac McCarthy's famous 2006 work *The Road*. It is not my intention to either produce some kind of book review, or to resolve any fatigue-related life issue. I am rather sharing some musings, on one, single aspect, inspired by this huge, impressive novel. After introducing the book, attempting to be as brief as possible, I shall link a couple of essays, written by Levinas and Schopenhauer respectively, to a few observations on the experience of fatigue, as evidenced in *The Road*.

The Road is a novel which transpires the far-reaching feeling of fatigue through the pores of every detail. One cannot fail to notice, first and foremost, the style in which it is written, which communicates exhaustion through various means, some examples of which are the rhythm of the text, the greyish tones constantly depicted, the limited, repetitive, dry dialogue, the anonymity of the characters, and even limited punctuation (Murphet & Steven 2012,

p. 7). Subsequently, what is held in place by *The Road*'s particular form and style, is the content of the text – the story itself. All the features of the father and son travelling across a desolate wasteland, narratively portrayed by McCarthy, work perfectly to transmit what is called an “aesthetic of decline”. The underlying tones conveyed by the novel are not there by chance; they form part of the greater McCarthean oeuvre, which, in some way or another, always points to some subtle element of decline, such as fatigue. One can fairly say that the general themes of *The Road*, are not only far from being depthless; they are extremely significant to the reader, and in fact, there is more to read between the lines of what may at first glance seem to be another post-apocalyptic story of survival. In the introductory essay of *The Cambridge Companion to Cormac McCarthy*, Steven Frye (2013) accounts for the way the author seamlessly blends a beautiful combination of raw humanity, philosophy and issues of historical and social concern, thus creating an inspiring and almost scholarly work (Frye, 2013, p. 10).

The point is that there is much to reap from *The Road*. It is a text which is imbued with cultural allusions. For Frederic Jameson (1991), the postmodern age tends to treat history and culture like any other commodity, and in so doing, it renders art, in all its forms, shallow and almost void of any substantial and underlying significance to either humanity or to the greater good (Jameson, 1991, pp. ix-x). However, rather than merely scratching the surface of these themes, *The Road* is an exception to this controversial claim since there is an overflow of textual meaning, both when it comes to form and style, and also in reference to the content (Snyder & Snyder, 2013, pp. 30-31). It is in respect to this that I will henceforth

expand on fatigue as I see it in *The Road*. Needless to say, it is by no means the only such element present in the text.

He leaned his forehead on his arms crossed upon the bar handle of the cart and coughed. He spat a bloody drool. More and more he had to stop and rest. The boy watched him. (McCarthy, 2010, p. 292)

The quote above represents the climax of the man's exhausting endeavour, a few days before he slumps never to rise up again. The man is sick, and in the dire circumstances, he has no possibility to restore his health back. The little cough he had at the beginning, which the reader might very easily overlook, has worsened up to the point of no return. The length and frequency of these now bloody coughs have increased, and on the very same page we read again:

They went on. Treading the dead world under like rats on a wheel. The night's dead still and deader black. So cold. They talked hardly at all. He coughed all the time and the boy watched him spitting blood. Slumping along. Filthy, ragged, hopeless... (McCarthy, 2010, pp. 292-293)

Indeed, as the story moves on, the element of fatigue and tiredness is pronounced more forcefully and much more recurrently.

Fatigue, in this case, is a general way of being – the constant heavy feeling of tiredness. Like an illness, which in our case it actually is, it is a state of both body and mind. In fatigue, body and

mind are not easily distinguishable, but one can say that disease, hunger and lack of sleep are characteristics generally felt more in the body, tiredness and weariness, may be experienced in the mind, mental exhaustion, as it were. It is evocative of the Beckettian torment of lassitude, repetition, sameness and the drama of meaningless, depressive existence: like rats on a wheel (McCarthy, 2010, p. 292). Referring to the above excerpts, one observes that the boy is never outside the picture: the boy watched him (ibid.), but there, close-by, living and absorbing it all. In fact, mental exhaustion is perceptible by those close; it is not confined by one single physical entity. Fatigue expands by inflicting itself upon other beings, like a virus. It is strangely reminiscent of Hegel's *Geist* which develops and synthesises dialectically.

French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, in his 1935 essay 'On Escape', writes about the human condition which is, simply put, tired of being, and needs to escape from it. Escape is the need to get out of oneself, that is, to break that most radical and unalterably binding of chains, the fact that the I is oneself. (Levinas, 2003, p. 55) At the same time, Levinas concedes that this is pretty much impossible to do – we are condemned to experience this tension within us all our life (ibid., p. 89). The feeling that Levinas describes is similar to the exhaustion and fatigue which Cormac McCarthy portrays in *The Road*. For Levinas, however, it is the human condition which permits this sensation, whereas in *The Road* it is inflicted from without. Even so, there is a very striking similarity when Levinas goes on to examine nausea as one human state which indicates the struggle to break away from one's being:

The state of nausea precedes vomiting, and from which vomiting will deliver us, encloses us on all sides. Yet it does not come from outside to confine us. We are revolted from the inside; our depths smother beneath ourselves; our innards “heave”. (McCarthy, 2010, p. 66)

This very vivid explanation of nausea might be a very close portrayal of what the adult protagonist of *The Road* is going through. Nausea hurts physically. So does fatigue. Like nausea, fatigue compels its victim to want to disappear because no one can do anything about it. It is the closure of all possibilities. For the mentally exhausted man, despite wanting to escape from everything in order to rest, time stands still so as to surround him with his own suffering self. Nobody wants to be here and nobody wants to leave, writes McCarthy (2010, p. 180).

In addition to this, the endless sense fatigue in *The Road* is further accentuated by the action of natural elements:

The ashes of the late world carried on the bleak and temporal winds to and fro in the void. Carried forth and scattered and carried forth again. Everything uncoupled from its shoring. Unsupported in the ashen air. (McCarthy 2010, p. 10)

This particular extract conveys a boring, repetitive, to-and-fro motion which seems to know no end. In McCarthy (2010), the world and the universe themselves, follow a cyclical, pointless flow of time: The cold relentless circling of the intestate earth (McCarthy,

2010, p. 138). Hence, both in nature and in the human experience, fatigue devalues time.

For the perpetually tired man, whom we encounter in *The Road* and we understand through Levinas, time means as much as it means to rats on a wheel (ibid., p. 292) – nothing. Schopenhauer (2004) writes, Time is that by virtue of which everything becomes nothingness in our hands and loses all real value (Schopenhauer, 2004, §1). In order for Arthur Schopenhauer's cynical and metaphysical statement to ring true, one must grasp the extent to which fatigue drives a man to the brink of nihilism and despair. In fact, the phenomenon of fatigue reduces the passing of time to anguish. When suffering fatigue, the ticking away of the clock is an agonizing sound – it reminds us that we are ensnared within the unremitting boredom of time, with no apparent possibility of evasion. It is in this sense that then, getting up in the morning, is felt to be the bravest thing ever. Furthermore, in the same essay, Schopenhauer asserts:

Satisfaction achieves nothing but a painless condition in which he [man] is only given over to boredom; [...] boredom is a direct proof that existence is in itself valueless, for boredom is nothing other than the sensation of the emptiness of existence. (Schopenhauer, 2004, §5)

He argues that if life were in itself valuable and worthwhile, the tiring sensation of boredom wouldn't subsist since existence on its own would be enough. (Schopenhauer, 2004, §5) The depiction offered by Cormac McCarthy in *The Road* seems to suggest that

Schopenhauer's claim is true. For if fatigue renders life weary and monotonous, it thus reduces existence to boredom, meaninglessness and emptiness.

Out on the roads the pilgrims sank down and fell over and died and the bleak and shrouded earth went trundling past the sun and returned again as trackless and as unremarked as the path of any nameless sisterworld in the ancient dark beyond. (McCarthy, 2010, p. 193)

Neither is the life of each and every "pilgrim" significant, nor is the "trackless and unremarked" earth. Such relentless, heartless insignificance, which is both pointless and boring, arises from the exhaustion that pervades this narrative.

Hence, it is clear that McCarthy's *The Road* is not the usual, depthless, postmodern novel depicted in Jameson's (1991) critique. Moreover, it does not simply stop at dreary fatigue – *The Road* also possesses elements of enchantment, even within the bleak scenario portrayed. That, however, is beyond the scope of this essay. Here, it was rather interesting to note some thoughts on what I consider to be a relevant issue, today as much as in the past. We do experience people who are afflicted by fatigue, people whose very existence seems to exhaust them. In my view, philosophy prompts us to keep a constant watchful eye, so as to seize every opportunity which might trigger our thought, or our pen. Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* presented a brilliant opportunity for this.

8 References

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