Mapping McCarthy in the Age of Neoconservatism, or the Politics of Affect in *The Road*.

David Holloway, University of Derby.

(i) NEOCONSERVATIVE STRUCTURES OF FEELING

One of the guiding critical orthodoxies of our time is that it is readers, rather than authors, who determine the meanings of literary fiction. This is only partly true, of course, because the terms on which readers are free to determine the meanings of a novel such as Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* are always necessarily hedged and circumscribed by the positions they occupy in the networks of power and contingency that condition the circumstances in which they read. Readers, just like writers and novels, are historically produced, and the freedom they enjoy to make meaning out of fiction is unavoidably enmeshed in, or in tension with, the lived ideologies and structures of feeling shaping their time. The political hegemony in the United States in the years after 9/11, and the dominant structures of feeling of the period, are *neoconservative*—an insurgent ideology whose intellectual and political histories overlap with, but are distinct from, the main currents of American conservatism, and whose doctrinal precepts and policy-recommendations are refined and codified, in their post-9/11 forms, during the 1990s. This essay will suggest that in a reading environment weighted down by the neoconservative hegemony of the time, when considered at the level of affect—as politics enacted at the level of feeling, or as ideology experienced at a level that is prior to articulation in language—the act of reading *The Road* might well have worked for some readers as a powerful affirmation of post-9/11 neoconservatism. This suggestion that McCarthy's prose in *The Road* might embody, disseminate and assist in the naturalising of neoconservative structures of feeling is not, then, a claim about authorial intent. Rather, this essay is interested in the reception of McCarthy's work, or at least the range of possible receptions by readers—the political uses, conscious or otherwise, to which contemporary readers might put McCarthy's prose—in a specific historical time and place as a metabolising of historical experience, or lived ideology, in the form of literary fiction.[1]

"Structure of feeling" is a category first used by Raymond Williams during the 1950s in an attempt to elaborate older, more rigid understandings of ideology inherited from the Marxian tradition. In Williams, a structure of feeling connotes a set of values, beliefs and perceptions that are widely shared by and within a particular generation, with varying degrees of commitment or self-awareness. For the most part, the phrase implies values that are *affective*; values that are felt, rather than values that are cognitively known; values that are sensed or intuited as part of daily, lived experience, rather than values that are coherently or systematically articulated. When Williams uses the phrase, "structure of feeling," he is talking very specifically about the now, about the present, and about how we process the world as we encounter it in an open-ended stream of immediate experience. Structures of feeling, for Williams, are "social experiences in solution" (133). They articulate values that, by definition, are still emerging, still forming, still coming into being, commitments and beliefs that are often inchoate, incomplete, ambiguous, provisional and open-ended. With structures of feeling, as he puts it, we are dealing with human experience at the "very edge of semantic availability" (134), experience that is prior to its own explicit codifying not just by language, but also by ideology.

The neoconservative narrative about 9/11 and the war on terror is itself an account that is grounded in affect; or, at least, it is a version of historical events that positions 9/11 on the very edge of semantic and cognitive availability. In his address to Congress on September 20 2001, the speech in which he declares "war on terror" and formally establishes the hegemonic account of the attacks, President Bush presents 9/11 as an inexplicable, motiveless, irrational, surprise attack, a moment of apocalyptic violence that cannot be processed cognitively because the attacks have no clear intellectual cause or rationale, and certainly no political agenda, beyond what the President describes as blind hatred of the American way and a feral "will to power" (Bush). It is an account of 9/11 that is at odds with the detailed lists of contexts, grievances and rationales supplied by those who directed the attacks, and one that has been widely contested by political scientists and historians in the West, where much of the scholarly discourse about 9/11 has focused instead on the

widespread resentments caused by generations of U.S. foreign policy, particularly in Asia and the Middle East. It is this fetishizing of the attacks, nonetheless, this lifting of 9/11 out of history, this sealing of Ground Zero from the complex geopolitical agendas that develop over decades and that converge on September 11 2001, that is at the heart of the hegemonic, neoconservative narrative about 9/11 and the war on terror.

Abstracted thus from their political and historical contexts, the 9/11 attacks emerge in neoconservative discourse as events inscribed solely by narratives of inexplicable American victimhood and trauma. As well as enabling the neoconservative war on terror, this iconography of inexplicable wounding also seals Ground Zero against other possible appropriations or accounts by encouraging Americans to *feel* 9/11, rather than to think about or explain it. Lacking the historical or geopolitical contexts in which we might situate the attacks—lacking, we might say, a cognitive or intellectual map with which to explain and understand 9/11—the neoconservative narrative is governed instead by a politics of affect, a calculated appeal to feeling, to the gut, to those sensations driving horror, anger, fear or loathing, followed then by a structuring or steering of these affects into doctrinal narratives about transcendent national mission and redemptive military violence in a moment of profound historical rupture. In a world transformed by apocalyptic terror, the old rules no longer apply. On the evening of September 11 2001, as the President puts it in his address to Congress, “night fell on a different world” (Bush). The old order has gone. In its place, new guides to conduct, new moralities and new rules of engagement may legitimately be framed. It is an account of traumatic terror and existential threat that chimes harmoniously enough with the resolutely opaque and inexplicable apocalypse in *The Road*, an event similarly characterised by an absence of clear contexts or causes, by the displacement of intellect by sentiment, and by the presentation of circumstances in which new guides to moral conduct must necessarily take the place of values and actions that are now obsolete.

In this respect—in the opaque and inexplicable nature of McCarthy’s apocalypse—*The Road* departs quite significantly from received tradition and genre. The original meaning of apocalypse in

its Greek usage (*apokalypsis*) invokes a moment of "revelation" in which previously hidden truths are uncovered or unveiled. By shining a generic revelatory light on the destructive or self-destructive qualities of a given society, the aesthetic figuring of the end of the world allows us to see clearly, perhaps for the first time, truths about society that might otherwise remain hidden or obscure. As James Berger puts it, apocalypse narrative "must in its destructive moment clarify and illuminate the true nature of what has been brought to an end" (5), with the existing world "so suffused with moral rottenness and technological, political and economic chaos … that it should end and must end" (7).[2] Perhaps the most striking facet of McCarthy's apocalypse, when it is situated generically in this way, is that it does none of these things. If anything, *The Road* appears actively to refuse the moment of "revelation" that lies at the core of centuries of *apokalypsis*. Readers who come to the novel looking for a revelatory light shone brightly on the causes of the end of the world will be disappointed. There is no clear or overt indictment of technology, or capitalism, or moral rottenness of any obvious kind, no clear causal links established between destructive forces peculiar to the old world and the desolation of the new. It has become conventional to see the end of the world in *The Road* as an environmental cataclysm, or as a meteor strike, or as a nuclear holocaust, and readers will assert these causes with varying degrees of confidence and certainty. But the thing that makes each of these different speculative readings possible is that the novel, in the end, simply refuses to tell. Where, generically, we might expect to find the clarifying light of revelation, in *The Road* we find only a hermeneutic murkiness, an apocalypse that is sufficiently dense, opaque and unreadable to have made speculation about its causes a perennial issue in critical discussion of the book.

In place of a cognitive or intellectual response to catastrophe, highlighting causes, contexts and explanations, like neoconservative narrative about 9/11 the literary power of *The Road* seems essentially visceral or sentimental, with the focus falling, throughout, on the terror of the child and the father's emotive processing of that terror. This sentimental power is fuelled in part by the access the reader is sporadically granted, unusually in McCarthy, to the interiority of a central protagonist—*Suttree*, perhaps, gives us an otherwise unlikely corollary—with the flow of the father's traumatised

consciousness presented to us quite directly, at times, in fragments of memory, in his dwelling on moments of lost plenitude, in the anticipation of his own death, and above all in his feelings for and about the child.[3] These feelings provide the two key affective arcs of the novel—the spiralling terrors of the boy, and the mounting dread of the father—as well the textual pillars on which a traumatic *relationship of affects* might be built with the reader, with this relationship then reinforced in McCarthy's style. The older he becomes, the more McCarthy's prose recalls the affective realism of the young Hemingway, whose experimental early work sometimes lurches in similar fashion from a dominant third-person voice to fleeting moments or sustained passages of interiority, with an additional correlative to the late McCarthy in Hemingway's withholding not only of extraneous detail, but also, at times, of detail that we might otherwise depend upon to inform or guide our responses to the experience of protagonists.[4] Famously, Hemingway claimed that the affective charge of his prose was secured partly through omitting such guidance, with dialogue, characterisation and diegesis presented in such a way that the unvarnished experience of his characters was centrally figured in the prose, but often in such skeletal or impressionistic terms that in order to make sense of the words on the page the reader had little choice but to introject themselves into, and to inhabit empathetically and affectively, the experience of narrators and protagonists. "You could omit anything if you knew that you omitted," Hemingway wrote in *A Moveable Feast*, "and the omitted part would strengthen the story and make people feel something more than they understood" (75). "If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about," he reiterated in *Death in the Afternoon*, "he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them" (192).

Perhaps we also feel more than we immediately understand, at times, in McCarthy's own affective realism in *The Road*, an indicative instance of which might be found in the distinctly Hemingwayesque exchange between father and son that follows the episode of the wrecked boat on the beach (258-61). The fragment begins with the boy asking the man where he thinks the people on

the boat have gone, and then opens out into a series of questions about how many people might still be alive "somewhere else" (260), "anyplace else" (261). Much in the manner of a classic example such as Hemingway's "Cat in the Rain," two very different conversations are unfolding in this exchange, one of which is a series of literal questions and answers about who is left alive, while the other—which is unstated, but forcefully present in the relationship of affects between the reader and the boy—articulates the child's growing anxiety that his father will die, probably soon, and that he will be alone in the world. The man, himself, appears only to realise this right at the end of the exchange.

In passages like these, McCarthy's clean, sparse prose stops *The Road* functioning as pure melodrama, but the narrative emphasis on raw emotion and heightened pathos certainly makes something akin to melodrama a significant generic presence in the novel, and McCarthy's ability to conjure the experience of intense and overwhelming trauma in language has been widely noted in critical responses to the book. One of the more influential of these has been Richard Gray's "Open Doors, Closed Minds: American Prose Writing at a Time of Crisis" (2008), an essay that celebrates *The Road* as one of very few novels to have succeeded in embodying artistically the moment of traumatic immersion experienced by Americans during and after the 9/11 attacks. Gray finds in *The Road*'s opaque and visceral apocalypse a profoundly truthful representation of trauma, whose fidelity to the novel's moment in time lies precisely in its presentation of trauma's inexpressible and unrepresentable nature.[5] In trauma theory, and in Gray's reading of *The Road*, trauma is overwhelming partly because, in its early stages, the traumatic event cannot be coherently articulated, the horror of the moment overriding and circumventing the subject's ability to process it cognitively and express it in language. In order to begin moving beyond this paralysis, the traumatised subject must first integrate the traumatic event holistically within consciousness and memory, with the first step in this therapeutic process involving, therefore, bringing the trauma to narrative by situating it within language. For Gray, the aesthetic achievement and authentic post-9/11 historicity of *The Road* lie in its embodiment of trauma in these very immediate early stages,

before it is brought fully to consciousness, before it can be coherently articulated or expressed, before it exists on any level other than as an overwhelming monolith in the experience of the traumatised subject. Put differently, at least as Gray sees it, it is the very absence of therapeutic narrative in *The Road*—in the form of detail about causes, contexts or explanations for the end of the world, say—that allows the novel to embody so profoundly the intensity of trauma that characterises its moment in time.

Gray offers an important reading of *The Road*, but it is also a problematic reading, not least because, in a geopolitical context governed by the post-9/11 hegemony of American neoconservatism, the novel's stalling of the reader in the immersive experience of trauma is such an ideologically charged move to make. The neoconservative narrative about 9/11 depends for its success on a very similar fixing and freezing of events within the early stages of traumatic experience, before the events of 9/11 can be integrated holistically into consciousness and articulated therapeutically in narrative. Stripped of explanatory context, post-9/11 neocon rhetoric is characterised instead by a compulsive return to the founding moment of trauma, to the time and place of the primal wound, to the morning of September 11 2001, and to the truths this new foundational moment tells us about the damage that terrorists and rogue states might inflict upon Americans. In this regard at least, neocon narrative is anti-narrative, narrative that stalls permanently in the original experience of trauma—just as McCarthy's novel, its protagonists, and some of its readers seem gripped or transfixed within the overwhelming experience the novel so artfully presents. In this respect, perhaps, we might again conceive *The Road* less as Gray wishes to see it, as the authentic embodiment of a generalised moment in time, and more as an affective figuring of a very particular, post-9/11, neoconservative structure of feeling.

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(ii) THREAT AESTHETICS

Dominant post-9/11 structures of feeling in the United States are anchored in the affective ubiquity of *threat*. In the official narrative about the attacks that sustains the neoconservative hegemony of the early war on terror, threat and a heightened awareness of threat are front and centre in daily political discourse: the imminent threat of further terror attacks, of anthrax in envelopes and snipers in Washington; from terrorist training camps in Afghanistan, and from weapons of mass destruction in Iraq; from inscrutable enemies dressed in civilian clothes embedded in American and foreign populations; or from dissenting voices at home or abroad who are either "with us, or … with the terrorists" (Bush). Threat, and the doctrinal need to live in a state of heightened awareness of threat, form central planks in the structures of feeling that help secure consent for the neoconservative Bush Doctrine (including the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the ramping up of homeland security, and the new powers given to state agencies after 9/11), just as exposure to threat is part of the structure of feeling securing tacit consent for a range of other neoconservative measures defended at the time as pre-emptive strikes against terror: political unilateralism, the right to enforce regime change, extraordinary rendition, coercive interrogation, Bagram Air Base and Guantanamo Bay, the tactics of "shock and awe" on show in Iraq, explicitly designed as demonstrations of spectacular American power to deter both Iraqi resistance and future challenges to U.S. hegemony in the region.

This need to live in a state of heightened sensitivity to threat is doctrinal in the fullest sense of the word because it is part of what makes neoconservative intellectual history distinct among other ideological groupings on the American Right. Key strands of this intellectual history, back into the early days of the Cold War, are characterised by a peculiarly paranoid, distinctively dark and pessimistic understanding that history should be seen as a traumatic accumulation of crises and catastrophes unfolding in a universe shaped by dark, unforeseen and unforeseeable threats; with a related understanding that the assemblage of threats confronting the U.S. over time comes from American encounters with Others; political Others, cultural Others, national Others, both within the

U.S. and without. In neoconservative intellectual history from Irving Kristol through Samuel Huntington to the Bush administration and the polemicists of the early post-9/11 period, the moment where the Other is encountered or anticipated is always the moment when the threat-potential, or threat-level, is at its most acute.

In an ideological climate shaped by neoconservative structures of feeling, the lived experience of existential threat is particularly important to securing consent for the neocon doctrine of pre-emptive war. Which is to say that there is a reciprocal, perhaps symbiotic relationship between the fear of threat on one hand, and pre-emptive responses to threats real or imagined, imminent or endlessly deferred, on the other. As affect theorist, Brian Massumi, puts it, "The security that preemption is explicitly meant to produce is predicated on its tacitly producing what it is meant to avoid: preemptive security is predicated on a production of insecurity to which it itself contributes. Preemption thus positively contributes to producing the conditions for its own exercise" (58). Or, as the boy and the man put it in *The Road*, "If you're on the lookout all the time does that mean that you're scared all the time ? / Well. I suppose you have to be scared enough to be on the lookout in the first place. ... Maybe you should always be on the lookout. If trouble comes when you least expect it then maybe the thing to do is to always expect it" (160). Or, reversing the comparative frame again, as Vice-President Dick Cheney put it after 9/11, "If there's a one percent chance that Pakistani scientists are helping al Qaeda build or develop a nuclear weapon, we have to treat it as a certainty in terms of our response. It's not about our analysis, or finding a preponderance of evidence. It's about our response" (qtd, Suskind 62).

It is important, here, to stress Massumi's understanding of the affective dimension of the lived experience of post-9/11 threat. The danger posed by Iraqi weapons of mass destruction was real, he observes,

> because it was *felt* to be real. Whether the danger was existent or not, the menace was felt in the form of fear. What is not actually real can be felt into being. Threat does have an

> actual mode of existence: fear, as foreshadowing. Threat has an impending reality in the present. This actual reality is affective. Fear is the anticipatory reality in the present of a threatening future. It is the felt reality of the nonexistent, loomingly present as the *affective fact* of the matter. (53-54, his emphasis)

How might we position *The Road* within this affective hegemony of threat, and within war on terror threat-politics more broadly? How might the structure and flow of the narrative, and McCarthy's uses of language, embody, foster, trigger or help inculcate in readers the heightened anticipation of imminent threat informing post-9/11 neoconservative structures of feeling? In what ways might some readers find neoconservative values, or their own consent for neoconservatism, validated at this deep affective level of McCarthy's prose? One way of bringing these questions together might be to anchor our responses in Massumi's axiomatic observation that, when it is presented affectively, threat "suffuses the atmosphere," such that "Threat is ultimately ambient" (62), and to note that threat becomes ambient in *The Road* in at least three demonstrable ways.

First, and at the most straightforward critical level, the narrative is suffused with diegetic threat; meaning, simply, that threat inheres in the contents of McCarthy's fictional world, in the detail comprising the literary *mis-en-scène*, turning landscapes and towns into a narrative canvas where threat is always immanent, latent or potential, in everything to which protagonists and readers are exposed. A canvas strewn with corpses and heads impaled on spikes, slavery, cannibalism, billboards threatening violent death, decaying towns and cities, dead and dying nature, the extreme privations of the human body deprived of shelter and food, the mounting trauma of the child, the agonies of the slowly dying father, each and every encounter with Others actual and real, anticipated and deferred; the very road on which they travel—the space that gives McCarthy's diegesis its name—a space not of conventional, generic liberation in the shedding of societal conditioning and restraint, but a space instead of mortal threat, terror and abjection. At this most

basic critical level, in its diegetic contents or literary *mis-en-scène*, the structures of feeling at play in *The Road* signpost threat to the reader everywhere and in everything.

Second, it is also possible to identify what we might call a semiotics of threat at work in *The Road*—an organised and recurring system of signs that bonds the experience of readers closely to the experience of protagonists in moments of heightened alertness to threat. Throughout the novel, the relationship of affects the text builds with readers is mobilised in part through the often banal signs denoting protagonists' heightened threat-awareness that litter the prose. This semiotics of threat is banal not because it is poorly executed or clichéd, but because these very plain and undemonstrative moments become so routine, so regular and so repetitive within the fictional world; so banal, in fact, that it is easy to overlook their significance in the construction and signing of normative experience for readers and protagonists alike. Borrowing again from Massumi, we might say that the repetitive regularity with which the prose throws banal signs of anxious vigilance against existential threat at readers "suffuses" the text in an affective atmosphere of threat that becomes "ultimately ambient."[6]

Explicit signs of the imminence of actual or imagined threat are often located in vigilant acts of looking and listening, and *The Road* opens with a volley of such threat-indicators. The first thing the man does after the dream episode that introduces the novel is walk to the road where he "squatted and studied the country to the south" (2). In the proceeding fragment, "When it was light enough to use the binoculars he glassed the valley below" (2), with the next fragment telling us "This was not a safe place" (3), and the following one describing the man peering in the chrome mirror clamped to the cart "to watch the road behind them" (4), then scanning the wasted country and the empty road ahead. The regular recurrence of similar banal threat-indicators keeps the threat-level high throughout the novel.

"He got the binoculars out of the cart and stood in the road and glassed the plain" (7)

“watching for any sign of a fire or a lamp” (8)

“he lay awake a long time listening” (14)

“A blackness to hurt your ears with listening” (14)

“No sign of life” (20)

“He kept constant watch behind him in the mirror” (24)

“he woke in the darkness to hear something coming” (27)

“No tracks in the road, nothing living anywhere” (29)

“He stood listening” (78)

“They stood listening in the utter silence” (79)

“He sat crosslegged in the leaves at the crest of a ridge and glassed the valley below them with the binoculars” (82)

“They listened” (86)

“He woke in the night and lay listening” (87)

“He was sure they were being watched but he saw no one” (87-88)

“They could find no sheltered place to make a fire that would not be seen so they made none” (91)

“In the evening they tramped out across a field trying to find a place where their fire would not be seen” (92)

“they set out back north through the woods keeping the road in view” (110)

“He came upon the barn from the hill above it, stopping to watch and to listen” (124)

“He stood in the door of the barn and listened” (125)

“He went back to the gable and stood studying what he could see of the house” (125)

“He stood in the back door and looked out at the fields and the road beyond and the bleak country beyond the road” (140)

“Sitting back to back and watching the road” (166)

“They sat for a long time. They sat on their folded blankets and watched the road in both directions” (167)

“They sat on the embankment and waited. Nothing moved” (190)

“he’d return with the binoculars and glass the countryside for any sign of smoke but he never saw any” (200)

“he pulled on his shoes and rose and wrapped one of the blankets around him and walked out and stood looking at the road below” (208)

“They sat looking out through the trees at the road” (209)

“He climbed the bank through the cane to check the road” (215)

“They listened but they could hear nothing” (229-30)

“they’d lowered the coats of their hoods to listen” (230)

These banal signs, piled incrementally and accumulating one on top of the other, are rather more than mere textual litter. Recurring, repeated, regular reminders to the reader that exposure to existential threat forms the bedrock of normative human experience are central to the novel’s aesthetic, and central, too, to the ideological relationship of affects between reader and text that is enabled and prompted by this aesthetic.

There are other ways in which quite familiar aspects of McCarthy’s style also lend themselves to a semiotic threat-aesthetic that becomes ambient in *The Road*; for example, McCarthy’s fondness for writing sentences without a subject or verb, in language that registers and records objects in series, one after the other, so the objects themselves are picked out and heightened in their particularity, freed as they are from extraneous qualification in the prose.

> Beyond the trees the curve of a road. A long drive with dead grass. Dead ivy along a stone wall and a mailbox and a fence along the road and the dead trees beyond. (124)

> The shape of a carpet beneath the silty ash. Furniture shrouded in sheeting. Pale squares on the walls where paintings once had hung. … Their own shapes sectioned in the thin and watery glass of the window there. … A butler's pantry where the door closed softly behind them. Tile floor and rows of shelves and on the shelves several dozen quart jars. … Green beans. Slices of red pepper standing among the ordered rows. Tomatoes. Corn. New potatoes. Okra (220)

This very familiar McCarthyism, which heightens the gaze serially on isolated detail in the scene, fosters a reading experience where the eye is drawn abruptly to the contents of the object world, and is done so urgently, all at a rush, usually in quite short bursts of a sentence, or two, or three, expressing with great economy the restless, anxious movement of a highly securitised eye across landscapes and interiors loaded with diegetic threat.

Third, as well as being produced at diegetic and semiotic levels, affective vulnerability to existential threat is also made concrete in *The Road* through a structured series of what, following Massumi, we might call "threat-events" (Massumi 60)—extended episodes during which protagonists and readers are exposed to sustained and heightened levels of imminent, mortal danger, with the agglomeration of these events into a narrative, *The Road*, again casting exposure to threat as the fundamental condition of human being in the world. Once the tone of the novel is established and the opening exchanges complete, we might see the remainder of the narrative as structured around a succession of seventeen set-piece scenes that function explicitly as threat-events.

One. The episode of the burned man struck by lightning, first encountered by the protagonists through tracks he has left in the road (50-53). Here, it is tempting to use the normative language of post-9/11 neoconservatism by describing the choice the man makes, in following the tracks, as essentially pre-emptive—he confronts and engages the threat before it can fully materialise.

Two. The roadrat episode, from the moment the man is woken by the sound of the truck until the discovery of the roadrat's skin and bones—the first threat-event in the novel where imminent physical danger to the protagonists is actually and materially present (62-74).

Three. The episode in the small town with a mill and watertower (82-85), explicitly flagged as a threat-event by the man's observations that, "We'll have to take a risk. We need to find something to eat" (83).

Four. The episode in which the man and the boy hide from the gang of cannibal roadagents (94-97).

Five. The sequence during which the man and boy are threatened by falling trees (101-103).

Six and seven. Two threat-events folded together, first in the discovery of tracks of a wheeled vehicle in the snow and alarm that "someone's coming" (108-10), segueing into the long scene at the plantation house with the cannibal dungeon (111-122).

Eight. The discovery of the underground bunker filled with food (143-159), the initial stages of which emphasise both the uncertainty of the man and the anxiety of the boy. This is one of several threat-events that open out into transient moments of plenitude where the tension is abruptly released, in this instance by the discovery of the food and the absence of threatening 'others' in the bunker. This ostensible relaxing of threat into plenitude, however, remains characterised by vigilance and a heightened alertness to danger. The man's urgent and unsuccessful searching of the bunker for guns and ammunition keeps their vulnerability fully in the frame, and their residence is punctuated by iterative restatements of the boy's anxiety (148, 149, 155, 157), and by acts of cautious looking as the man climbs the stairs, lifts the door and peers out, acutely aware, the narrator tells us, of how easily he might be seen by others (152).

Nine. The episode where the pair encounter Ely (171-185). Here again, as in the earlier encounter with the man struck by lightning, the father chooses to follow, engage and pre-empt the threat before it can fully materialise.

Ten. The passage where three men armed with lengths of pipe step from behind a truck to confront the protagonists in an unnamed small town (197-98).

Eleven. Soon after, and independently of each other, the man and the boy both suspect they are being followed. They are—by three men and a pregnant woman (205-208).

Twelve. Immediately after this, the pair approach a campfire whose tenants have fled, and discover the spit-roasted child. Again, here, the choice the man makes is to engage and confront the potential threat before it can materialise (209-12).

Thirteen. The episode of the house half-hidden from the road, where they again discover food and stay for several days (another passage that begins explicitly signed as a threat-event, before opening out into plenitude) (216-27).

Fourteen. The sequence where the man explores the wrecked boat, while the boy waits on the beach—a threat-event that is prolonged by the simple plot-device of having the boy forget the revolver, meaning that the pair have to return to the vulnerable open spaces of the beach to retrieve it (236-49).

Fifteen. The episode where, having been robbed on the beach, the protagonists set out in pursuit of the thief (270-76).

Sixteen. The sequence where the pair are attacked by a man with a bow and arrow in an unnamed port town, and the father is wounded (280-89).

Seventeen. The conclusive episode after the death of the man, where the boy, bereft and alone, is confronted by the stranger on the road (300-306).

Despite the feelings of ambient threat that suffuse the narrative, the episode where the man is injured by the arrow is only the second time in the whole book that the protagonists are confronted with actual, imminent, physical violence—the other instance being the earlier encounter with the roadrat. The important thing here, of course, is that the reciprocal and ideological relationship between affective threat and pre-emption means that threats do not need to be real in order to suffuse the text, any more than they need to be real to become ambient or normative in

everyday life. In neoconservative structures of feeling, "the affective fact of the matter" does not require a referent in order to be factual (Massumi 54). As Massumi suggests, when gauging the truth-value of heightened neoconservative states of threat, the measure of a threat-alert's correctness

> is the immediacy and specificity of the preemptive actions it automatically triggers. The value of the alert is measured by its *performance*. Rather than referential truth-value, it has performative *threat-value*. More than any correspondence between its semantic content and an objective referent, it is the performed commensurability of the threat and the triggered actions that qualifies the alert as correct. (59, his emphasis)

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(iii) ENTROPY, VIRTUE, TRUTH AND POWER

The distinctive, neoconservative sense that social experience is a traumatic accumulation of crises and catastrophes unfolding in a universe shaped by dark and unforeseen threats, is informed by a particular understanding of how history works. The chronic condition of history in the political philosophy of Leo Strauss, the thinker most commonly identified as the primary intellectual influence on late twentieth and early twenty-first century neoconservatism, is a corrosive state of advanced entropy. More specifically, in Strauss entrenched entropy is the chronic condition of modern western liberalism, a political tradition whose roots Strauss traces back not to the Enlightenment or the revolutions of the eighteenth century, but all the way back to the ancients, particularly Greece, and especially Plato in whom Strauss finds the most highly developed model of natural rights and civic virtue in all canons of political philosophy. For Strauss, western modernity, and particularly the twentieth century, is the history of entropic decline into "nihilism" in the liberal

tradition, brought about, he contends, by the spread of permissive egalitarianism and pernicious doctrines of universal rights and entitlements, and above all by the corrosive influence of relativism in all its forms (under whose influence Strauss suggests we witness the destruction of moral truth, and with it the destruction of virtue) (Strauss, "Political Philosophy" and "Crisis"). From this base, Strauss sets out to uncover the traditions in modern liberal thought that lead us to this point, using the classical political philosophy of the ancients as a yardstick against which to measure the poverty of twentieth century liberalism. As another key figure in neoconservative intellectual history, Irving Kristol, would later put it, Strauss

> turned one's intellectual universe upside down. Suddenly, one realized that one had been looking at the history of Western political thought through the wrong end of the telescope. Instead of looking down at them from the high vantage point of our more 'advanced' era, he trained his students to look at modernity through the eyes of the 'ancients' and the premoderns, accepting the premise that they were wiser and more insightful than we are. ... [O]ne read them in order to understand ourselves, products of the modern age, better than we were able to do so on our own." (8)

The legacies of Strauss are clear in post-9/11 neoconservative polemic like Lawrence Kaplan and William Kristol's *The War Over Iraq: Saddam's Tyranny and America's Mission* (2003), where moral relativism is equated with the weak and apologetic Americanism of Bill Clinton, and where the absolute moral virtue of the Bush Doctrine is guaranteed because it derives from "our founding values" (Kaplan and Kristol *passim*), and thus from a virtuous moment in history before the corrosive entropy of moral relativism sets in. The original moment of pure, absolute virtue is different here—in Strauss it is ancient Greece, in Kaplan and Kristol it is "our founding values"— but the argument about entropy and how to reverse it is the same, as is the model of looking at history from "the

other end of the telescope," using the wisdom of moral absolutes from a more virtuous past to gauge the wisdomlessness and virtuelessness of a present mired in relativism.

Entrenched entropy is also the chronic condition of the world in *The Road*—a world, McCarthy tells us, in one of the book's more widely-quoted passages, now "shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true"; a world "Drawing down like something trying to preserve heat. In time to wink out forever" (93).[7] Entropy is also entrenched in the novel aesthetically: presented thematically in the novel's discussion of language and memory fading from the world; evoked generically (or perhaps meta-generically) in the implicit exhaustion of the 'road' narrative and—in the novel's refusal of revelation—in the hollowing out of *apokalypsis*; and figured formally in the absence of chapter breaks, so that the narrative becomes a single structure or aesthetic pulse winding slowly down to an end. Entropy is also entrenched in the narrative in the other writers McCarthy appears self-consciously to echo, whose work appears intertextually, sedimented into his own apocalypse—Eliot's wasteland, Fitzgerald's valley of ashes, the end of the world landscape (and the trout) from the opening to Hemingways's "Big Two Hearted River," in all three of which, as in *The Road*, modernity means the obliteration of the past in a sterile culture where language is shattered and memory is fading, fragmented or illusory.[8]

Given its extended meditation on entropy and sterility on one hand, and the Pulitzer Prize-winning quality of its prose on the other, it may be tempting to ascribe something analogous to Strauss's re-telescoping of history to those shifts in register that punctuate McCarthy's prose in *The Road*. Longer term readers of McCarthy will be familiar with these shifts. They have shaped his style for decades, in the juxtaposition of sparse, flat realism with words, phrases or entire passages sketched in his signature borrowings from the King James Bible, Melville and Faulkner. In *The Road*, the contrast between what is conventionally described as McCarthy's plain style and his high style is particularly marked because of the preponderance in the narrative of the Hemingwayesque realism

that has increasingly shaped his writing from the Border Trilogy onward. When the high style arrives in *The Road*, then, it does so in particularly obtrusive, disjunctive ways. “Cannonading” (49). “Rachitic” (65). “Catamites” (96). “Mendicant” (133). “Envacuuming” (204). “Something nameless in the night, lode or matrix. To which he and the stars were common satellite. Like the great pendulum in its rotunda scribing through the long day movements of the universe of which you may say it knows nothing and yet know it must” (14).

These fragments of arcane language and phrasing are carefully chosen and placed. They add linguistic weight and depth to the prose, and they generate intellectual effects as well as sentimental affects among readers. Most important, perhaps, is the simple quality of pastness they invoke, the sense of belonging to a time that is undefined and open-ended, but whose significance lies less in its historical specificity or lack of it than in the contrast it provides with a narrative present characterised by cultural sterility and linguistic entropy. Dropped into this context, McCarthy’s arcana approximate a return to a moment where language itself *feels* richer, more complex, more cultured, more capable of carrying truth, and therefore in Straussian terms more capable of embodying virtue, with the arcana opening sink holes in the text, draining entropy from the now of the narrative as the reader is gripped, momentarily, by a linguistic remnant or trace—a reverse telescoping out of an acculturated present back into a past of nuance and sophistication—against which the poverty of the present might again be felt with particular intensity and force.

In the hands of other writers, this affective bringing of the trauma of linguistic entropy to language might signal the onset of some form of therapeutic movement in the prose, as the paralysing event or process is integrated into narrative. In McCarthy, however, the telescoping of history invoked in the arcana of *The Road* merely reconfirms the paralysis of the world in relativism posed in the preceding novel, *No Country for Old Men*, where Sheriff Bell’s description of recent American experience as a process of traumatic decline prompted by the erosion of older moral frameworks sounds at times like an almost parodic reworking of main currents in neoconservative intellectual history. Leo Strauss, for example, would have found little he didn’t already know in Bell’s

vision of history as catastrophic entropy and social rupture, and even less to disagree with in the insistent moral clarity of the Sheriff's world view.

Bell's confidence in the persistence of robust moral absolutes is complicated somewhat by the distinctive sense of moral paralysis or seizure built into the deep structures of *No Country for Old Men*—a structure of feeling that derives, in part, from the unspoken exercise in intellectual relativism that underpins the relationship between Bell and Anton Chigurh. One of the main structural principles around which the narrative is built is the paralleling of Bell's and Chigurh's respective codes for living. On one hand, Bell says "People anymore you talk about right and wrong they're liable to smile at you. But I never had a lot of doubts about things like that" (158-59); on the other, Carson Wells describes Chigurh as a man with "principles. Principles that transcend money or drugs or anything like that" (153). On one hand, Carla Jean asks Bell "Is your word good", and Bell gives "my word" no harm will come to Moss from him (214); on the other, when Chigurh tells Carla Jean he's come to kill her, he says it's because he gave his "word" that he would (255). And where Chigurh claims to live what he calls "a simple life" (177), Bell says he set out to live his "in the strictest way I knew how" (282).

The relationship between Bell's and Chigurh's very different applications of similar sounding values is highly problematic in *No Country for Old Men*, because while Bell's narrative offers a sustained moral critique of Chigurh, the sheriff's point of view is itself repeatedly ironized and undermined in the text; a procedure that is under way as early as the opening sentence of the novel, where the lawman presented to us as the notional antithesis of the killer talks to the reader about the part he played in sending a "boy to the gaschamber at Huntsville" (3). This ironising of Bell's voice helps reinforce further the parity, of sorts, that the novel appears to propose between the alternative versions of the same values espoused by the two men. The novel stops short of openly positing a moral equivalence between Bell and Chigurh, but it does offer us two different versions of essentially the same thing, both of which claim to be universally true, and both of which are depicted in the novel as flawed and provisional, and arbitrary, by way of their relationality with the

other. Amid the carnage of *No Country for Old Men*, the real horror of the text, a trauma that is built into the deep structures of the novel as well as the language spoken by the main protagonists, is a horror at the very possibility of moral equivalence suggested by these parallels in the characterisation—a very neoconservative horror, perhaps, at what Strauss describes as "nihilistic" doctrines of liberal relativism, according to which good and evil are not absolutes in a fixed, vertical hierarchy of values, but fluid things, social constructs, in a broad and open-ended horizontal play of difference.

This neoconservative figuring of the paralysing trauma of liberal relativism stands in a conflicted, and sometimes contradictory relationship with a major fissure in Straussian ideology that can be traced forward, again, into the politics of the war on terror neocons, and that is also embodied aesthetically in the fictional catastrophe of *The Road*—an awkward tension or balancing act between the virtuous truth of moral absolutes on one hand, and pure relational pragmatism on the other. This fissure reveals itself with particular clarity in the context of what Strauss thought of as 'noble lies' (Strauss, "The City"), an idea he extrapolates (problematically) from Plato, and that contemporary neoconservatives extrapolate in turn from Strauss.

In Straussian political theory the need for noble lies derives from the relationships posited between wisdom, truth, virtue and power. For Strauss, only the truly wise—meaning those capable of knowing absolute truth—are capable of governing virtuously, and so power and privilege accrue to educated elites as a matter of natural right (Strauss, "Liberal Education"). The uneducated mob, lacking both the wisdom required to understand truth and the ability to act virtuously in the face of it, must be shielded from truth, partly for their own good, but also in the interests of preserving the stability and integrity of the metropolis, both of which may be threatened if alarming truths are made openly accessible to the wisdomless and the virtueless. In Straussian theory, therefore, governing elites can lie to their people with impunity in the name of defending truth (and virtue, and social cohesion), and they can do so routinely as a mundane tool of governance.

The noble lie is also necessary, in Strauss, to bulwark the virtue of the wise. Their wisdom is itself an absolute truth, because it gives the wise their natural right to a place at the top of the pile, and therefore to a hegemony that is to be defended at all costs and by any means necessary, including the telling of lies to a populace unable to cope with truth. In Straussian political philosophy, then, lies are necessary to secure truth, and the defence of absolute values demands the practising of moral pragmatism—propositions that critics of the Bush administration have suggested inform the neoconservative narrative about 9/11 and the war on terror in a variety of ways. In the exaggeration of imminent terror threats, for example, signalled publicly in the raising of colour-coded "threat-levels"; in the characterisation of the attacks as a hatred of American values, rather than American foreign policy, and as an Islamist "will to power"; in the calculated campaign led by the White House to link 9/11 to Saddam Hussein, and in the claims about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq; in the gathering of these virtuous lies together in a rhetoric of national mission that might bond Americans together, at least in Straussian terms, into a unified, stable and cohesive mass (where the telling of unblemished truths, instead, would cause discord, dismay, disharmony, dissent).

How might we trace this awkward, but ostensibly noble balancing of moral pragmatism and absolute virtue in *The Road*? The story the father tells the child, and the story he tells himself, about good guys carrying the fire, might be one place to begin. In an amoral universe transformed by the trauma of the apocalypse and the final stages of catastrophic entropy, the trope of good guys carrying the fire seems rather empty, an archaic hangover from character types and moral codes that no longer have relevance or meaning. But if good guys carrying the fire is a fabrication or a lie, it is a lie with distinctly noble aims, and it is an idea that has considerable Straussian traction in the narrative. It helps keep the child going when the truth might cause him to falter, and it feeds and reinforces the cohesion of the bond between the man and the boy.

More interesting, perhaps, because it is pervasive in both *The Road* and in post-9/11 neoconservatism, is the awkward balancing of pragmatism and absolute virtue that is central to the

relationship between the man and the boy generally. It is commonly assumed that because the boy is presented to us by the man as a figure of virtue and redemption, then it must be the boy that functions as the moral core of the novel. This is a persuasive argument, not least because it meshes neatly with moments in McCarthy's earlier work; particularly, perhaps, from the Border Trilogy, where, if redemption exists at all, it may do so in those small acts of kindness and moments of generosity to others that certainly seem in a lineage of some kind with the post-apocalyptic civic virtue of the boy in *The Road*, as he repeatedly protests the man's reluctance to give aid and assistance to others. Viewed through a prism shaped by neoconservative, war on terror structures of feeling, however, it might be that the moral centre of the book lies not in the boy, but in the man; or at least, in the sometimes tense and conflicted space between the two of them, as they negotiate and disagree on the competing demands of a fluid morality driven by self-referential survivalism, and the virtuous truth of extending help to others (while not eating people or dogs). If we accept Richard Gray's persuasive suggestion that *The Road* is a novel characterised above all by its authentic historicity—a quality that this essay has interpreted rather differently, as a frame of reference infused with neoconservative structures of feeling—we might argue that it is not the boy's virtuous objections to the pragmatism of the man that form the moral core of *The Road*, but the man's overriding of those objections in the facing down of existential threats. The boy may be presented to us from the outset as the embodiment of something akin to pure virtue, but without the pure pragmatism of the man that keeps him alive the "word of God" the boy is said to embody (3) cannot be defended, secured and delivered at the end of the book. Without pragmatism, and thus without moral relativism, there is no absolute truth. Without pure self-interest there is no virtue, and no civic virtue. Without the morality of the man, at the end of the story there is no boy, and the traumatic process of entropy is complete.[9]

Just as the politics of affect in *The Road* might, for some readers, have chimed harmoniously with key pillars of neoconservative narrative about 9/11—the opacity of apocalyptic disaster, the ambience of threat, a melancholic fixing of social experience in trauma, the absolute necessity of

pre-emptive responses to terror—so too, then, might readers familiar with, and predisposed to positions taken in neoconservative intellectual history generally, have found much they instinctively agreed with in the discourses of entropy, virtue and truth framing *The Road*. Contextualised historically, there are all manner of ways of reading *The Road* as a counter-hegemonic or liberal text. It might be viewed as a deep-ecology fable about the planet's rejection of the human race. It can be seen as a warning about nuclear proliferation. It has been read as a refusal of American exceptionalism, a critique of consumer capitalism, and in its hollowing out of the generic road narrative it can certainly be seen as a meditation on the mutability of mainstream American iconography and popular culture. In each of these readings, and in many possible others, *The Road* is a novel that can accommodate in quite straightforward ways the liberal politics that liberal readers might bring with them to the act of reading the book. Viewed through the prism of the neoconservative hegemony in which it is written, first published and read, however, this essay has suggested that *The Road* also offers other readers multiple opportunities to discover, affirm, or engage their post-9/11 neoconservatism, either cognitively or affectively, at or beyond what Raymond Williams calls "the very edge of semantic availability" (134). A second suggestion then follows: that the temptation among liberal critics to default to readings of the novel that simply map to and reflect their own liberal sensibilities may facilitate a misunderstanding of the variegated ways in which McCarthy's audiences read, while closing down the complex, ambiguous, and sometimes discomforting relationships the text displays with the ideological hegemony of the time. Across the political and cultural spectrum, the temper of the post-9/11 period was often one of intense revisionism. Another suggestion this essay has tried to make is that the fiction of Cormac McCarthy, and the assumptions sometimes made about his readership, should not necessarily be immune from that temper.

NOTES

[1] For discussion of *The Road* in the context of 9/11, see Richard Gray, Nell Sullivan, Dianne C. Luce, Francisco Collado-Rodríguez, and Kristjan Mavri.

[2] Matthew Mullins finds apocalyptic "revelation" in *The Road* in precisely these terms (76). See also Linda Townley Woodson's suggestion that *The Road* is generically "post-apocalyptic" partly because it embodies "Wordsworth's sense of the heightened vision of the artist" ("Mapping" 87).

[3] As Ashley Kunsa notes, "the reader has greater access to the father's thoughts than to those of any other McCarthy character" (62). On memory and nostalgia in *The Road*, see Marie-Reine Pugh, Laura Gruber Godfrey, and Patrick Damien O'Connor.

[4] Andrew Hoberek refers to McCarthy's "terse Hemingwayesque" prose in *The Road* (488), and discusses the novel's interplay of Faulknerian 'high' style and Hemingwayesque 'flat' style (491-97).

[5] See also Collado-Rodríguez, who describes the condition examined in both *The Road* and *No Country for Old Men* as one of structural trauma. Pairing the novels in this way yields some fascinating insights—for example, both the boy in the former and Sheriff Bell in the latter are said to display classic signs of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

[6] As Hannah Stark notes, *The Road* unfolds in a "context of constant surveillance" where "looking occupies a central place," and in which "The man and the boy are repeatedly described as observing their world" (75).

[7] In O'Connor's reading of *The Road*, "McCarthy certainly thinks there is human participation in something larger than ourselves. However, that something greater is the material negation of the universe. … Basically, all systems, anything that exists, including the universe, progressively devolves into a state of disorder. … To understand McCarthy, it is necessary to see humans as in some way participating in this type of interminable destruction" (3).

[8] On modernity as a condition of crisis and collapse in *The Road*, see Matthew Mullins, and Ty Hawkins. For a penetrating analysis of modernity as a destructive agency in McCarthy generally, see Nicholas Monk. Critics to have noted *The Road*'s detailed intertexuality with Hemingway include Russell M. Hillier, "'Each the Other's World'" (671), Kenneth Lincoln (173), Julian Murphet (112-13), and Kenneth K. Brandt. References to the novel's intertextuality with T.S. Eliot include Collado-Rodríguez (51, 52, 63), Kunsa (71), and Hillier, "'Each the Other's World'" (671), with Hillier also noting intertextual references to Dostoevsky, Ovid, the Book of

Genesis and the Book of Job. Murphet, and Hunt and Jacobsen, also discuss *The Road*'s intertextuality with Plato.

[9] On moral and ethical frameworks in *The Road*, see Patrick Damien O'Connor, Christopher Pizzino, and Rick Elmore and Jonathan Elmore. On moral and ethical frameworks in McCarthy generally, see Lydia R. Cooper, Edwin T. Arnold, and Russell M. Hillier (*Morality*) and Linda Townley Woodson ("Battleground").

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