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The Road Is Mapped: Cormac McCarthy's Modernist Irony

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To reduce Fredric Jameson's *Valences of the Dialectic* to a motto may appear unfair, but it would not be the first time Jameson's characteristic complexity was subject to crystallizing clarity. Just as the imperative "always historicize" emerges as Jameson's own branding campaign in the "Preface" to *The Political Unconscious* (1981), the 2009 *Valences* urges its audience to "make History appear." Both imperatives serve as slogans for Jameson's methodology that centers around an allegorical impulse in which anything might be read as something else — insofar as the latter of these is in service of some totalizing dialectical method of reading. Jameson's ultimate desire for History to subsume Time is the allegorization of his desire for the collective to subsume the individual. I want to pause, however, over this directive to "make History appear" and fix my attention on how to make Time appear. Given Paul Ricoeur's argument that "there is no pure phenomenology of time" and its central importance for Jameson's larger historical directive, it is important to see how both Time and History appear within other relationships more resistant to, if not altogether apart from, the dialectical process Jameson exemplifies.¹

I will focus on how one particular contemporary novel, Cormac McCarthy's 2006 *The Road*, articulates what making both Time and History appear looks like in an aesthetic, and not political, form. Indeed, to remain at the level of time rather than history, and aesthetics rather than politics, is to resist allegorical reading more generally. What concerns me is how contemporary aesthetic production can make time, over and against history, appear. Jameson ultimately cares about the articulation of the historical and collective — the moment of the "insertion of the subject into narrative" — and the sublation of individual temporality.² Ricoeur's three-volume *Time and Narrative* illuminates the importance of history against time even if, as Jameson contends, Ricoeur ultimately "refus[es] to theorize any agency on the level of the collective."³ History is the process of objectifying "human or existential experience." According to Jameson's account, Ricoeur's "narrative humanism" prevents him from properly configuring a sense of collective historical narrative, instead "discover[ing]

anthropomorphic characters behind a system that may transcend them.”⁴ If this is Ricoeur’s failure, it is McCarthy’s success. McCarthy’s novel presents “distinct forms of time” under the guise of one form of time represented by two characters’ senses of time and history given their particular existential conditions. Namely, these conditions are precisely those that allow both Time and History to appear at once, which is to say at the moment of their simultaneous conclusion. Such is the benefit of post-apocalypse as narrative device for McCarthy. In part, it allows McCarthy to register the “long countdown towards Utopia or extinction” by offering glimpses of both at the moment in which “the conflation of Good Luck and Bad Luck” happens and arrests their dialectical opposition.⁵ The possibility of thinking “Good and Evil simultaneously” is not the trademark of post-apocalypse per se, but it is the mark of McCarthy’s novel that marks its difference from other likewise imaginings.⁶

At a time when making History appear seems the political task par excellence, to make Time appear—as I argue *The Road* does—is the negative task of aesthetic production read collectively. The novel presents an opportunity to think how the temporal orientation “now,” contrary to what Jameson maintains, can be registered while not remaining “strictly attached to individual (private or subjective) experience.”⁷ To allegorize the man is to desire a winner; to ironize him, on the other hand, is to see how winners lose and losers win.

Despite the social entailments of narrative, it begins with individual experience. For both Ricoeur and Jameson, narrative networks depend upon a time between “existential” and “objective” times. Ricoeur’s “mediatory ‘instruments’” — “the calendar; the succession of generations; and the archives or traces” — provide the framework for how we get glimpses of history (objective time) in everyday individual (subjective time) experiences of temporality. History does not saturate the social; rather it comes in and out of temporality but always depends upon “the possibility of a public space as opposed to a private one, a space in which the intersection of historical and existential temporalities can happen as an event.”⁸ Behind Jameson’s claim that these instruments “presuppose” public space is the stronger claim that these instruments help to constitute such public or social spaces. What is lost if these markers of “universal time” are absent from “lived time” — if the collective instruments for marking time are alienated from the individual’s experience of time? Does History disappear? *The Road* both explicitly and implicitly negates the social functions of these “instruments”; in so doing, how it figures the effects of such absences shows how the novel produces Time without reproducing History.

Contrary to making it appear, history’s *disappearance* arguably serves a better oppositional function in the contemporary period. Allegory “practice[s] interpretive violence upon human life and history...by reading history without density.”⁹ Given this characterization of allegory’s relationship to history, making history disappear more forcefully reveals the realities and possibilities involved in configuring time. Therefore, the proper movement for this critical work is from a collective to the individual rather

than vice versa. On one hand, making time appear works through techniques of misrecognition whereby identifications with collective configurations—or those “mediatory instruments” — of the world break down. On the other hand, making history appear relies on the techniques of recognition that ground both Ricoeur’s mimetic network and Jameson’s methodology of allegorical reading. If we pay proper attention to a negative reading of History then we begin with the individual and sustain intense focus there. My reasons for suggesting so are at least twofold. The first is in the proposal to read the individual as the negative image of the collective. As much as this misrecognized individuality seems to oppose a Marxist approach to reading, it remains a dialectical project that differs from those with political ends in its insistence on the disarticulation of subjective and objective time. The second reason is to argue against the possibility of reading *The Road* as endorsing a kind of “monumental history” that drives the man’s insistence on “carrying the fire.” In so doing, we can refuse at least one strand of allegorical reading that works by invoking a past in order to envision a future beyond the present.¹⁰ For example, Walter Benjamin’s theory of allegory draws a connection between allegory and mourning in the way he thinks about the fragmentariness of allegory and how ruination instantiates nostalgic temporal configurations that resemble those of Nietzsche’s monumental history.¹¹ What is more, I want to exploit the temporal difference between two worlds: historical experience on one hand and aesthetic experience on the other, historical production versus aesthetic production. In contrast to many literary critics, my position is one in which maintaining this demarcation is essential to short-circuiting allegoresis and the mimetic networks in which both Ricoeur and Jameson are invested. In just one recent paradigmatic example, Nancy Fraser’s article in *New Left Review* expresses her interest in the movement from fiction to practice.¹² I, on the other hand, am not interested in bridging this temporal gap between, to put it another way, aesthetic and historical practice. In fact, this gap preserves aesthetic production from becoming a space in which authors enact political fantasies and critics configure political narratives.

Jameson is interested in mediating the temporal and spatial aporias left between individuals and collectives, time and history, bodies and spaces, and aesthetics and politics. In short, these are the desires of cognitive mapping. According to Bill Brown’s 2005 essay on Jameson, allegory is intimately connected to configuring effective cognitive maps.¹³ Jameson becomes the “epic hero” of postmodernity in the attempt to allegorize his individual experience of the Bonaventure Hotel’s uncanny and “absolutely packed” space and render postmodernism legible by drawing most everything under its purview. Or, to put it in other topological terms and a provisionally dialectical way, Jameson desires allegory because of his final antipathy toward irony, which is to say his final antipathy toward the time of individual experience and the disorientation postmodernism produces and his absolute desire for the totalizing clarity of those objects and experiences of allegory (e.g., cognitive mapping) achieves.

We would be remiss if upon reading the closing sections of *Valences* we did not remind ourselves of Jameson's debt to humanist materialist historiographers like Hayden White, Erich Auerbach, and Giambattista Vico. Jameson's 1976 review of White's *Metahistory* focuses intently on the potential dangers of relativizing history to the degree that all narrative becomes merely text and threatens to leave history in the lurch of individual interpretation rather than the testament to and promise of collective action.¹⁴ It is wrong, however, to confuse the ironic position with one of mere relativity simply because of the centrality of individuality. More appropriately, the ironic position is one that pushes back at the dialectic by indefinitely prolonging the moment of recognition the dialectical image necessitates.¹⁵ It is in the potential moments of recognition provided by dialectical images that we might understand, and therefore evaluate, the propensity to narrate eruptions in both time and space. In Brown's version of Jameson's allegorical moment in the Bonaventure Hotel we see how the body is overcome by bewilderment, but the faculties of "vision" remain. We need not think of the visual faculty literally; rather, we can think of it as the desire and ability to narrate after-the-fact of experience, to provide a means through which a necessary distance from experience is created and maintained. This is the form of the appearance of the process from immediacy to mediation. Jameson's allegory begins with subjective experience; but "allegory exists entirely within an ideal time" we might provisionally relate to "objective time" where the subjective is overcome by a collective sense of temporal intelligibility.¹⁶ Allegory demands mediation, by which I mean narrative. Indeed, Jameson's "leap of faith" here is a leap back to the experience from a certain point of intelligibility only possible once that experience is conceptualized, narrated, and finally enveloped by the historical imperative to totalize subjective time.¹⁷ Each of these processes become ways to think how experience as such, though fundamental to allegory, must be mediated by narrative and collective configurations of time and space if individuality is to function as a means of collectivity.

Irony, on the other hand, resists totalization because it precipitates a permanent stoppage rather than a momentary bewilderment to be overcome by mediation; irony need not return home. Hayden White saves himself from Jameson's critique by understanding his own ironic position, which emerges as a result of White's own recognitive moment. In his own words, White knows "the recognition of this Ironic perspective provides the grounds for a transcendence of it."¹⁸ Insofar as White recognizes his own ironic position he realizes its unsustainability; he has already begun to mediate irony and privilege history over time, narrative persistence over "permanent parabasis."

While not having the space here to give a thorough reading of de Man's writing on allegory and irony, some reference is necessary to make clear the force of my claims. De Man argues "any theory of irony is the undoing, the necessary undoing, of any theory of narrative, and it is ironic, as we say, that irony always comes up in relation

to theories of narrative, when irony is precisely what makes it impossible ever to achieve a theory of narrative that would be consistent.”¹⁹ While de Man’s suggestion that any theory of narrative will “always be undone by the ironic dimension which it will necessarily contain” seems to exaggerate the case, looking at the period between Jameson’s 1976 *Metahistory* review and the final sections of 2010’s *Valences* corroborates de Man’s assertion.²⁰ Add de Man’s description of irony to Hegel’s “infinite absolute negativity” as a condition of the Absolute and we might ask: What is at stake for Jameson in irony’s ultimate sublation? And we might answer it is Jameson’s reassertion of dialectical reading at moments in which time poses its greatest threat to history — where time remains in the ironic moment with no recourse to past or propensity toward future, a subjectivity eternally at a present moment of simultaneous “self-creation” and “self-destruction.”²¹ Irony is a temporal mode of self-consciousness, dislocated from “narrative intelligence,” that desires a subjective experience of phenomenological time unfulfilled by narrative configuration. Put analogously, irony is to time as allegory is to history.

In contrast to Jameson’s allegorical journey through narrative toward mutual intelligibility, we have the endlessly wandering characters in *The Road*. McCarthy is interested in the experience of fact rather than the fact of experience-turned-narrative. The novel imagines the contradiction of being both object and subject — giving the characters a kind of negative freedom otherwise impossible under the constraints of social forms and desires for mutual intelligibility. The experience of fact in such a world disrupts the functions of an allegorical text; which is to say the novel resists figuring a world other than what is given. For McCarthy, what matters “is not the logistics of our demise but the fact of it.”²² In place of logistics, we have the destination of individuals amidst the collapse of collectivity. The novel, in this factual sense, is closed, unable to speak otherwise as a result of how it figures, or more appropriately disfigures, time and knowledge in the world. It fails to function as an Adornian apocalyptic story in which the imagination inoculates. To be factual, in this sense, is a refusal to be allegorical.

What follows is a collection of examples from *The Road* that illustrate how the novel makes time appear. In so doing, at times it inevitably and paradoxically makes history appear as an effect of its disappearance. In order to do so, however, the novel shows ways of experiencing and knowing the world that rely not only on social and historical particulars but also on a metahistorical sense of the human capacity to make the world. McCarthy exhausts history and nature to highlight not history as collective project but the power of an individual’s claims on knowing and unknowing that world. Most evidently, the novel’s premise involves an all-too-perfect “axial event” in which history would have no other choice but to appear. Whatever indeterminate apocalyptic event has happened it leaves the remaining population “creedless shells of men,” nature “motionless and precise,” and space a “cauterized terrain.”²³ Rather than use this event negatively to judge history or positively to envision a collective

project, McCarthy uses it to produce the man's individual problem: how to locate a "lived time" in the now "universal time" after the event. This problem makes evident the differences in experiencing time after the failure of those mediating instruments that translate time into history.

Reading *The Road* from within the confines of the ironic moment highlights its anti-utopian impulse, not by its favoring dystopia but rather by representing the "long countdown towards Utopia or extinction." The novel occupies the ironic mode by both denying and affirming a collective project that is grounded in the extinction of collectivity itself. In a final ironic twist, the metahistorical conception of human action in the world the novel offers is figured by collectivity. Insofar as the novel figures collective action it does so through its negation — that is through its extinction. The father's mantra of "carrying the fire" echoes Vicoan collective human action and wisdom. For Vico, collective action results from the dialectic between nature and history and men projecting themselves as gods. Once this collectivity is established, it is maintained by differentiating the natural from the historical, the unmade from the made. In one sense, irony emerges in *The Road* when the two characters first encounter an individual other than each other. Indeed, it is the first and last real expression of collectivity from the father.

This was the first human being other than the boy that he'd spoken to in more than a year. My brother at last. The reptilian calculations in those cold and shifting eyes. The gray rotting teeth. Claggy with human flesh. Who has made of the world a lie every word.²⁴

This passage undermines any account that aims at reducing the novel to a conflict between good and evil. By positing both identity and difference at this moment of recognition, the novel affirms both judgments. Moreover, the encounter helps to configure the father's ironic position in which the collective human project is at once affirmed and exhausted or produced and consumed. The brotherhood between the father and the cannibal scavenger figures the exhaustion of the dialectic between production and consumption that characterizes social life. The objective world produced by collective human action becomes a lie. A representation of Marx's "civilized person in whom social forces are already dynamically present," the man is "cast by accident into the wilderness."²⁵ The brotherhood marks the exhausted circulation between production and consumption in which only consumption remains — literalized by the human flesh between the scavenger's teeth. The subject is the object in this world; their difference is their similarity. The event makes history appear when at once it denies a future collectivity while it affirms the universal conditions of post-event life for those who are the remaining parts of the human project.

The father's duty is at one time singular and collective; but it is only collective in the sense of being metaphysical and metahistorical. The father's use of the fire ironizes

the collective human project as his experiences negate its future possibilities; in this sense, *The Road* denies the providence of history — the dialectic of winners and losers — by occupying an ultimately ironic position toward future collectivity while also concerning an originary collectivity that defines human action in the world. To clarify, we can revisit briefly McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*'s figuration of fire:

The flames sawed in the wind and the embers paled and deepened and paled and deepened like the bloodbeat of some living thing eviscerate upon the ground before them and they watched the fire which does contain within it something of men themselves inasmuch as they are less without it and are divided from their origins and are exiles. *For each fire is all fires, the first fire and the last ever to be.*²⁶

If we empty the fire as it is used in *The Road* of any possible moralizing effect we better understand the collective human project it symbolizes. But the irony comes clear in the act of erasing a collective historical project in favor of a metahistorical conception of human world-making denied its origin in collectivity, and replaced by the father's singular project to withhold creeping social life. One way to express the problem asks if history can be represented only by an ahistorical concept. Or, that the father ironizes Vico's "eternal history" by using its empty form and erases collectivity through a radical, but not natural, individualism. *The Road* articulates Jameson's critique of Ricoeur in its enacting a "refusal to theorize any agency on the level of the collective" except by way of radical subjectivity.²⁷ The novel replaces the traditions of history with the father's "narrative intelligence" as it arrives at various ironic moments where time and history are both figured in subjective terms. The "old stories of courage and justice" the man tells the boy are replaced eventually by the guilt of "making things up because those things were not true either and the telling made him feel bad."²⁸ *The Road* objects to Jameson's suggestion that the ironic moment is one in which the "die has not yet been cast (and never will be)."²⁹ In fact, the convergence of time and history in their ceasing to be, as lived by the father, produces a split between the subject of experience and the subject of knowledge necessary for irony. This split produces time but closes space. The die has in fact been cast if we trust that the father has nothing to do after the event but contend with what necessitates his piety. It is everything he can do to make time appear when space has finally been closed. The ironic position appears as the sole position that warrants anything like freedom or action in the face of social collapse. The novel suggests that to have any chance of making history appear — once the die has been cast — it need be a result of producing a sense of history negatively by using the ironic tool of ahistorical historicism; that is, an individual turns time into history — ironically, not allegorically — in knowing the challenges collective experience and action face during an epoch of total exhaustion; not simply in knowing the challenges, however,

but in refusing to meet those challenges with more collectivity.

These claims articulate the novel's challenge to readings of history as narrative, providential, or, as Coetzee puts it in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, "the jagged time of rise and fall, of beginning and end, of catastrophe."³⁰ In a formulation with which I am entirely comfortable, we might say the father is best described as "anti-imperial," or "anti-evangelical," or "anti-allegorical" in that his existential experience of time is objectively subjective and prefigures or figures nothing other than his sense of piety in the desecrated world of collective history.³¹ Perhaps the strongest sense of irredeemability in McCarthy's novel comes in its refusal to restore human history through natural history. Nature would immediately appear impervious to humanity's designs when at the novel's end it is once to have "hummed of mystery."³² But the novel's final image negates this appearance by threatening the convergence of history and nature: We see both History and Nature as "a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again."³³ The novel refuses the making of history by making subjective time the only way to think objective history. Even the seasons and natural reproduction — those stalwarts of figuring temporality — have reached their permanent disfiguration. Rather than read the final passage as a simple restatement of Vico's *verum factum*, it further invokes Vico's eternal history but finally refuses to promise history the eternal narrative reserve in the natural world.

In concluding, however, it might not be entirely satisfying to end with the exhaustion of the dialectic between nature and history, despite such a reading having the virtue of disrupting the tendency to read allegorically.³⁴ *The Road* begins neither with crisis nor a social problem; but, more forcefully, it begins in literary history and the invention of the human figure. It begins and ends with the problems of temporality and history — how to live in time after history, how to read ironically after allegory. McCarthy's novel performs a thoroughgoing "world reduction" that animates the problems of living historically while it simultaneously lays bare the challenges of doing so with the most basic sense of subjectivity.³⁵ One way to read historical modes in the novel is to focus on character. To do so most thoroughly, the focus must be on the father and the boy rather than privileging either. Looking at the space between father and boy provides the strongest occasion to locate the novel's critical position toward the promises of history and social life.

Perhaps more than Vico, Nietzsche should direct the final reading of time in the novel. Because of his experience of the world prior to the event, the father finds himself between the proclamation "there is no past" and the material remains of the post-event world.³⁶ For Nietzsche, the critical way of reading history requires a human life to "shatter and dissolve something to enable him to live: this he achieves by dragging it to the bar of judgment, interrogating it meticulously and finally condemning it."³⁷ It is "life alone, that dark, driving, insatiably self-desiring power" that finally allows the necessary forgetting.³⁸ *The Road* offers nothing other than the man's desire for life, even as his wife and mother of the boy condemns his actions:

“We’re not survivors. We’re the walking dead in a horror film. [...] We used to talk about death. We don’t anymore. Why is that? [...] It’s because it’s here. There’s nothing left to talk about.”³⁹ We should notice, however, as the man uses the moment to measure the world’s time. The event provides the temporal scale necessary to justify the father’s persistence in the world — if not the world’s persistence. Insofar as this is true about the character, irony becomes the temporal mode appropriate to the novel. For de Man, “irony appears as an instantaneous process that takes place rapidly, suddenly, in one single moment...irony is instantaneous like an ‘explosion’ and the fall is sudden.”⁴⁰ The novel shows the “axial event” almost exclusively through its effects, intimating only a sense of it happening within the temporal space of a moment: “The clocks stopped at 1:17...He went into the bathroom and threw the lightswitch but the power was already gone.”⁴¹ The man’s “empirical” and “ironic” selves — the one who falls and the one who can laugh at himself falling — meet at the event’s temporal point only insofar as the event itself creates the conditions for this simultaneity and the time that promises their eternal separation. The event represents a moment in which the man’s subjectivity meets the world’s objectivity; the difference being, however, that the man recognizes himself as both self and world, subject and object, cause and effect. The collapse configures such recognitions as misrecognitions.

The past comes through in dreams as the father finds himself “walking in a flowering wood where birds flew before them and he and the child and the sky was aching blue” only to condemn the past “siren worlds” as those which keep him from present circumstances. We can read the man’s desire “if he lived long enough the world at last would all be lost” as possible conditions for the critical reading of history.⁴² The father’s ironic position is conditioned not by his refusal to make a decision but as a result of his decision to live now. His decision embraces “life alone, that dark, driving, insatiably self-desiring power.” At the crossroads of history and modernity — the man chooses the latter as “he cruelly treads all pieties under foot” save for that piety, the boy’s protection, caused by the destruction of all other social problems, including the family in either an ideological or biological sense.⁴³

The problems illustrated by *The Road* and de Man’s “Literary History and Literary Modernity” parallel one another. Before coming to the close readings in the second, the first half of de Man’s essay reads like a philosophical counterpart to McCarthy’s novel. De Man, reading Nietzsche, argues that the incompatibility between history and modernity gives rise to “moments of genuine humanity...[when]...all anteriority vanishes, annihilated by the power of an absolute forgetting.”⁴⁴ The father’s judgments on the past are neither an instantiation of merely biological life nor a desire to be a “creature of nature,” as Ricoeur explains, who “cannot be guilty.”⁴⁵ Instead, the father’s decisions and actions concern “the radical impulse that stands behind all genuine modernity.”⁴⁶ His judgment of history effects modernism’s impulse to remain “an incandescent point in time” over and against the “reproducible cliché.”⁴⁷ The man’s actions, moreover, ironize the impulse de Man identifies. The “incandescent

light” and the “reproducible cliché” cannot help but be simultaneously present in how the man allegorizes while ironizing this impulse and its temporal figurations in light and cliché. We see finally in the man the remaining “fashion” of modernism without, however, the pejorative connotations found in de Man’s essay. In this reading, the man in *The Road* becomes “modern man” in that he is “all that remains of an invention that has lost the desire that produced it.” His actions make concrete the ironic allegory of history represented by modernism’s desire for total forgetting. This “reproducible cliché” represents, for the father, the past, as well as future, world. Past worlds that emerge in his dreams, tarnished by the “violence” memory does to their “origins,” signify the “long countdown” toward “giving up” on this “waking world.”⁴⁸ And those possible worlds in the future, represented in one way by the boy’s flute, suffer similar condemnation when the boy decides for himself to throw it away. This gesture confirms the father’s fear that in the “formless music for an age to come” the boy plays it is not the promise of the boy’s survival and another world but “the last music on earth called up from out of the ashes of its ruin.” The father’s final image of the boy is fitting: “The man thought he seemed some sad and solitary changeling child announcing the arrival of a traveling spectacle in shire and village who does not know that behind him the players have all been carried off by wolves.”⁴⁹

While the boy might press the father to see time and space outside of their world, the father’s relationship to history and the ironic position it affords him knows the world of human making finally folded in on itself. For the father there is no “rest of the time” outside of time spent “on the road.”⁵⁰ Or when the boy imagines a spaceship taking them to Mars — the best argument the book gives against spatial closure and for a possible return of a productive spatial dialectic rather than extinction of spatial openness — the father sharply responds “there’s nothing there.”⁵¹ In order to see the novel’s enactment of de Man’s incompatibility between history and modernity we need both characters. The boy as monument to the potential return of a world and a life is unsustainable in the face of the father’s irony. “In some other world the child would already have begun to vacate him from his life. But he had no life other.”⁵²

The boy cannot be the beginning; or, if he might, he can only do so knowing his “new beginning turns out to be the repetition of a claim that has always already been made.”⁵³ In another permutation of his problem being akin to the modernist problem with history, the father conscripts the fire despite the impossibility of the “single instant of invention.” The persistence of history reminds us of “the depths and complications of an articulated time, an interdependence between past and future that prevents any present from ever coming into being.”⁵⁴ Such persistence seems the privileged problem of post-apocalyptic narratives in their deep concerns with a present time’s relation to history. In *The Road*, the man’s character concretizes the aporias between time and history. The most stringent claims against allegory come in his refusals to reanimate the world’s ruins despite their continued presence. Such presence concentrates in the man’s experience of “the charred ruins of a library where

blackened books lay in pools of water.” In his influential “Allegory as Interpretation,” Morton Bloomfield claims that “allegory is...that which conquers time, that which perpetually renews the written word. The age that does not need, or thinks it does not need, the past does not need this kind of allegory.”⁵⁵ Arguably such a world is precisely the one in which the novel puts the man, and the decision given not to “renew the written word” is literalized in space and figure of the library.

The fire, however, seems the animation of a desire for renewal similar to Bloomfield’s characterization of allegory. Yet a difference in temporal scale remains between these two images of renewal. Put simply, the difference is in the making: both who makes and the story of the making. If “allegory always arises from a crisis in representation (a historical and specific crisis, it should be understood, and not some timeless and eternal one)” then the man’s fire becomes the irony of allegory.⁵⁶ Indeed, his is a crisis in representation at the moment in which the “historical and specific” conditions become terminal. By the novel’s conclusion the man has died and the boy is left, however briefly, on his own. Confronted by a stranger, the boy asks if the man carries the fire. The stranger’s confusion marks the idiom’s obscure meaning for anyone other than the man and boy. Upon joining the group the boy is offered another figure of eternity when the woman tells him “the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all of time.”⁵⁷ The similarities between McCarthy’s use of fire in both *Blood Meridian* and *The Road* and this final image of eternity point up finally the difference in the man’s project from this woman’s. The man becomes here “men themselves,” “divided from their origins” and “exiled”; his fire is “the last ever to be” because, as the boy knows better still, the irony is “ever is a long time” and “ever is no time at all.”⁵⁸ At once, the differences between ironic and allegorical readings appear and disappear against a final identification: neither withstands the romance of first and second nature. Both wish to read “History as a happy end”; both yearn for those victories that yield “a remarkable consolation: namely, to know that this first nature also was, at some time or other, a second nature and that every victorious second nature becomes a first.”⁵⁹ Neither is able to think of the difference it would make to have a world “no longer in time.”⁶⁰

Notes

1. Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 1, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990) 6. Jameson takes up the consequences of this claim in *Valences* by pointing to Ricoeur's (and Jameson's own) larger concerns about the "representation of temporality" and the necessary turn to fiction in which "multiple kinds of temporality...can be made to appear." See Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 2009) 500.
2. Fredric Jameson, *Valences* 546.
3. *Valences* 501.
4. *Valences* 576.
5. *Valences* 551
6. *ibid.*
7. *Valences* 479.
8. *Valences* 518.
9. Paul Bové, "The American State Allegorizes the Ruins: Henry Adams and Counterstrategy," *A More Conservative Place: Intellectual Culture in the Bush Era* (Hanover: Dartmouth UP, 2013) 44-48, 46. See also Paul Bové's "Misprisions of Utopia: Messianism, Apocalypse, and Allegory," *Field Day Review* Vol. 6 (2010): 70-93.
10. Ronald Judy offers another critique of allegorical readings of history. For fear of taking his comments out of their necessarily particular context of political change in Tunisia, I will simply reiterate Judy's suggestion that allegory turns attention "toward the familiar"; and in this particular case allegory acts as a "counterrevolutionary" force. See R.A. Judy, "Introduction: For Dignity; Tunisia and the Poetry of Emergent Democratic Humanism," *boundary 2* 39.1 (2012) 1-16.
11. The possible dialogue between the works of Walter Benjamin and Paul de Man on allegory is remarkably interesting and certainly too productive to consider adequately in this paper. I hope to make some suggestions about how to continue the thought already dedicated to these connections. For example, see Andrea Mirabile's "Allegory, Pathos, and Irony: The Resistance to Benjamin in Paul de Man," *German Studies Review* 35.2 (2012) 319-33.
12. Nancy Fraser, "On Justice: Lessons from Plato, Rawls, and Ishiguro," *New Left Review* 74 (Mar-Apr 2012) 41-51. For more on an unfortunate trend in left criticism that uses literary representations of the commodity allegorically to construct narratives of labor and the veiled workings of capitalism that extends toward an ethical imperative, see also Bruce Robbins's "Too Much Information" in *Novel* 43 (2010) 78-82. Robbins has used the phrase "commodity recognition scene" to describe such representations and their allegorical potential.
13. Bill Brown, "The Dark Wood of Postmodernity (Space, Faith, Allegory)," *PMLA* 120.3 (2005) 734-50.
14. Fredric Jameson, "Figural Relativism, or the Poetics of Historiography," *Diacritics* 6.1 (Spring 1976) 2-9.
15. For a longer meditation on problems of time and politics as they relate to apocalypse and narrative forms, with a specific focus on Benjamin's dialectical image, see Peter Osborne's *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde* (London: Verso, 2011) 144-59.
16. Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight* (Minnesota: U Minnesota P, 1983) 226.
17. Brown, "Dark Wood" 739.
18. Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns

- Hopkins UP, 1973) 434.
19. Paul de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology* (Minnesota: U Minnesota P, 1996) 179.
 20. de Man, *Ideology* 179.
 21. See Schlegel's *Critical Fragments* and *Athenaeum Fragments* on this sense of irony.
 22. Ben Marcus, "Living in the End Times: Why American Writers Are Obsessed with the Apocalypse," *New Statesman* (18 April 2012) <<http://www.newstatesman.com/culture/culture/2012/04/living-end-times>>.
 23. Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (New York: Vintage, 2006) 28, 6, 14. In his incisive essay, about which I cannot say much here, "Value|Theory|Crisis," Joshua Clover appropriates Braudel's phrase "signs of autumn" to read history as crisis and identify the contemporary crisis point in capital. It would seem natural cycle metaphors have captured, paradoxically, the imagination of those who would read history with a narrative inflection and a series of crisis points. See Joshua Clover, "Value|Theory|Crisis," *PMLA* 127.1 (January 2012) 107-14.
 24. McCarthy, *Road* 75.
 25. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (New York: Penguin, 1973) 84.
 26. Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian, Or the Evening Redness in the West* (London: Picador, 2011) 258; emphasis added.
 27. *Valences* 501.
 28. *Road* 41, 54.
 29. Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005) 179.
 30. J.M. Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (New York: Penguin, 1982) 133. I offer one caveat here. I would argue the time of empire concerns crisis not catastrophe. In fact, the distinction between these two terms illustrates well the difference between reading history as narrative or cycle. The former carries sense of endless circulation, while the latter concerns repetition. In his lectures on *Capital* David Harvey casually suggests "capitalism is perpetually on the road." A possible anti-capitalist reading of *The Road* could begin with this insight from Harvey. *The Road* seems to contend with such secular notions of narrative history as providential. Luck appears in at least two scenes. The first, with Ely, has him admit "I don't know what that would mean. What luck would look like. Who would know such a thing?" (174). The other, more ambiguous, scene comes just before the father dies in which he assures the boy "you're going to be lucky" (279). If one were to defend the novel's investment in a providential narrative, this scene would be crucial.
 31. All of these terms play with the importance of St. Paul for contemporary Marxian thinkers and the possibility of figuring revolution and universality.
 32. *Road* 287.
 33. *ibid.*
 34. In his essay "Cormac McCarthy and the Aesthetics of Exhaustion," Andrew Hoberek argues that in light of the natural world's exhaustion the novel privileges those things that "transcend the question of necessity." Making a claim that the father's appropriation of the past to make the new is based on "acts of the imagination" rather than on an "Adamic fidelity between words and the world" grants the order of "second nature" the place in which to find a "meaningful sense of potential" (491-92). These claims give short shrift to the importance of the dialectic between nature and history in the novel. More specifically,

the novel gives the appearance of erasing this dialectic. In so doing, nature's role as "counterpoint to history and understanding" (Hansen, "Formalism" 677) seems exhausted by the novel's final image of trout and nature more grandly. Perhaps more optimistically, on the one hand, this exhaustion leads to the recognition of the radical potential for human making in the world. On the other hand, however, the instantiation of such a world is a negative image of the contemporary world of commodities in which consumption can be figured in nothing but artificial terms. Indeed, we are left with the terrifying image of a world reduced to human imagination without the opposition of the natural world. As Cyrus Console puts it, tracing the "imaginings" of American companies such as Monsanto, "What is the soft drink if not 'the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic' that Walter Benjamin worries about?" See Andrew Hoberek's "Cormac McCarthy and the Aesthetics of Exhaustion" in *American Literary History* 23:3 (Fall 2011) 483-99. See also Jim Hansen's "Formalism and Its Malcontents: Benjamin and de Man on the Function of Allegory" in *New Literary History* 35:4 (Autumn 2004) 663-83. See also "The Matter with Kansas: Ben Lerner Talks to Cyrus Console," *Los Angeles Review of Books* (20 February 2012).

35. See Jameson's "World Reduction in Le Guin" in *Archaeologies* for an extended argument concerning this incisive observation and ironically productive technique.
36. *Road* 54.
37. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980) 21.
38. Nietzsche, *Advantage* 22.
39. *Road* 55-57.
40. de Man, *Blindness* 225.
41. *Road* 52.
42. *Road* 18.
43. *Advantage* 22.
44. *Blindness* 146-47.
45. Paul Ricoeur, "Christianity and the Meaning of History, Progress, Ambiguity, and Hope," *Journal of Religion* 32:4 (October 1952) 250.
46. *Blindness* 147.
47. *ibid.*
48. *Blindness* 129-31.
49. *Road* 78.
50. *Blindness* 151.
51. *Road* 158. I would like to suggest another reading of the collapse of social production — in this case economically rather than spatially. In the underground bunker the father takes account of the provisions and comes across a "double handful of gold krugerrands." After "knead[ing] them in his hand" he simply replaces them on the shelf (142). As Annie McClanahan writes in a recent essay on contemporary capitalism and horror movies, we might read this scene as a negation of eighteenth-century "talking coin narratives" (6). Unlike these stories that reinforce the social benefits of economic exchange, *The Road* offers a negative image of the social by denying the coin's role as both medium of exchange as well as guarantor of "an imagined community of circulation" that underpins economic social bonds (6). Even the gold itself loses its value in such a socially bereft and matter-of-fact world with little left of intrinsic value. Gold and money both are left collecting dust in a world without the social techniques of

circulation and exchange, only consumption. See McClanahan's "Dead Pledges: Debt, Horror, and the Credit Crisis" (<<http://post45.research.yale.edu/archives/2291>>).

52. *Road* 273.
53. *Blindness* 161.
54. *Blindness* 159.
55. Morton W. Bloomfield, "Allegory as Interpretation," *New Literary History* 3:2 (Winter 1972) 301-17.
56. Fredric Jameson, "From Metaphor To Allegory," *Anything* (Cambridge: MIT P, 2001) 24-36.
57. *Road* 286.
58. McCarthy, *Meridian* 258; *Road* 28.
59. *Valences* 612; *Advantage* 22.
60. *Valences* 612.