

Domestic Spaces in Unhomely Places: *Oikos* and Ethics in McCarthy's *The Road*

James Corby (University of Malta)

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Spatially, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* is starkly simple. Although the basic schema permits many variations, I would argue that there are qualitatively only three spaces in the entire novel. These are the road itself, the sea, and chanced-upon, variously manifested domestic space. These closely interdependent spaces structure the narrative and allow for the staging of an exploration of memory and childhood, as well as providing the context for a compelling but never fully articulated ethical demand to emerge.

The road is a threateningly exposed and entirely desperate place that offers no refuge or sustenance. Roving gangs of half-starved cannibals travel the road, as does their food, the last remaining, pitiful detritus of humanity, aimlessly and hopelessly wandering. Chronotopically, the road exists in the pitiless zero hour of a present bereft of past and future [there is no past, 55; the hour. There is no later. This is later, 56].

What encourages the Man and Boy on their journey through the hostile space of the road is another of the novel's three spaces, the sea. The potency of this space, the reason why it counts in McCarthy's novel, is that it is an indeterminate space. This idea is expressed with poetic concision when the father tells his son that he does not

know whether the sea is still blue [ref]. It is, then, a vast blank canvas upon which they can project the precarious, weakly-entertained hopes that give them just enough motivation to continue.

Temporally, then, the sea is futural, an idealised time of fantasy and projection that allows both protagonists to indulge in the fleeting thought that there might be an alternative to the searing *jetztzeit* of the road.

But although the coast provides the space out of which a motivation to travel along the road emerges, it does not do anything to facilitate that journey. And this is where the third and final space of the novel comes into play. The space in question, perhaps the most important chronotope of the three, is that of the *oikos* or home. The idea of home has long been recognised as important in McCarthy's work, most notably by Terri Witek in her essay, 'Reeds and Hides: Cormac McCarthy's Domestic Spaces', and Jay Ellis' 2006 book, *No Place for Home: Spatial Constraint and Character Flight in the Novels of Cormac McCarthy*. Witek notes a curious pattern. 'Nearly all the protagonists in Cormac McCarthy novels flee from or lose their homes [...] and yet McCarthy's characters seem compelled toward imitations of domesticity'.

This pattern is apparent in *The Road* too, where, in its multiple iterations, it constitutes an ongoing cyclical process. Although some of the domestic spaces in the novel are architecturally houses, and were once homes, this is by no means an essential condition, and is certainly not always the case. Often the places that allow for a domestic space to emerge, albeit always fleetingly, are house-like only in the barest, most reduced sense.

This understanding of interior space is explored in Gaston Bachelard's 1958 work, *The Poetics of Space*. Bachelard, in a peculiarly heady mixing together of the philosophical and the poetic, recognises the basic shell- or nest-like seclusion offered by the house, but what is implied is that this is only the bare condition that allows the domestication of space to occur. That domestic space is, ultimately, non-commensurable with its bare architectural condition – that it is, in other words, more culture than concrete – is supported by Bachelard's suggestion that 'all really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home'. Materially, all that is required is 'the slightest shelter', and from this 'the imagination build[s] walls of impalpable shadows [or] comfort[s] itself with the illusion of protection' [5]. '[T]he sheltered being', then, 'experiences the house in its reality and in its virtuality, by means of thought and dreams'. Thus, for Bachelard, the non-commensurability between interior and architecture does not negate or proscribe the peculiar symbiosis that exists between the two. Shelter provides the minimal condition for the imaginative production of the oikos, the domestic space that harbours memories and dreams. It is on this point that Bachelard's topophilic panegyric takes full flight:

[I]f I were asked to name the chief benefit of the house, I should say: the house shelters day-dreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace. [6]

His task, he believes, is to 'show that the house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind'. 'Without it', he suggests, 'man would be a dispersed being', and here we might recall Wallace Stevens' speculative hypothesis: 'Suppose these houses are composed of ourselves'.

Similarly, Henri Lefebvre comments that for Bachelard ‘[t]he relationship between Home and Ego [...] borders on identity’ [121].

This identity develops out of the fertile ground of memory. In this strange chiasma of ego and oikos, the house must be understood as preserving the memories it generates [memories are housed – 8]; memories that are, of course, rooted in childhood.

Bachelard asserts that the house is ‘the human being’s first world’ [7], ‘our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word’ (4). Contra Heidegger, it is the cradle one occupies before being cast into the world [7]. Temporally, then, home is always behind us, in our past, and yet, as such, it remains ahead of us, having come before us. The domestic spaces in *The Road* assume this backward looking temporal profile, complementing the temporal characteristics of the novel’s two other chronotopes.

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

We encounter the first space suggestive of such domesticity on page 4. It is not a house, but a ‘roadside gas station’. Nor do the Man and Boy stay there overnight. And yet, it provides for them, offering a small amount of motor oil that they will be able to

use in their ‘little slutlamp’, thus sustaining and protecting them, albeit in the most meagre and indigent manner. In this brief reprieve from the road, the gas station becomes also a place of memory and of childhood associations. The man feels compelled to pick up an old phone and dial ‘the number of his father’s house in that long ago’; a completely illogical action that puzzles the boy. A few pages later the boy and his father enter ‘an old batboard smokehouse’, and find a ham, ‘[d]eep red and salty meat inside. Rich and good’. It quickly becomes clear that although the chronotope of the sea provides the motivation to travel on the road, it is the domestic spaces that provide the sustaining physical and intellectual nourishment required for such a journey.

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

These experiences of domesticity are always fleeting. No sooner have the father and son discovered and taken advantage of a sheltering, home-like space, than they are forced to abandon it to rejoin, once again, the road. And this takes us back to Witek’s original insight that in McCarthy’s novels the protagonists flee from or lose their

homes as well as apparently being drawn to approximations of domesticity.

McCarthy's domestic spaces are rooted in tradition and memory, but otherwise they are transient. Location inexorably heralds dislocation; place gives way to displacement. The experience of being compelled from domestic space to its *other* (here symbolised by the road) is the novel's compulsively reiterated pattern. It is the shift from one chronotope or cultural space to another that in turn makes necessary the transformation or translation of the two chronotopes or cultural spaces into a way of thinking about the world capable of accommodating both in a manner that will allow them to remain distinct, their differences recognised and preserved.

Let us consider this repeatedly replayed move from the oikos to the road as a sort of *cultural translation*. The oikos provides the space in which the man can be a father and the boy can be a son. It is, essentially, a private space. It sustains and shelters and offers enough of a sense of security for thoughts to rise above an immediate concern with survival and instead reflect backwards. It is a space of stories, memories and dreams, where the world is remade – not as it is, not even as it was, but as it ought to be. It is where the man and boy re-inscribe their moral identity as the good guys, the people who carry the fire. At the heart of the oikos, then, is a symbolic hearth sheltering a fire that they are protecting and carrying or translating; translating from one generation to another, translating from one culture to another. A translation, it is implied, upon which everything depends.

The road, as already mentioned, is everything that the oikos isn't. Whereas the oikos is secluded and private, the road is unremittingly exposed and unsparingly public. It is no place for memories or stories or childhood. To have any hope of surviving, one

must have an unflinching understanding of how it is – how it ought to be is irrelevant, it is a place beyond both good and evil.

The man travels the road without illusions and is fully conversant with its ways. He is able to conjure the discourse of the oikos for the benefit of his son, but he hardly believes in it anymore. He has accepted the harsh survivalist logic of the road and exercises it freely. For instance, upon confronting a man who has stolen all of their possessions, he forces the man to denude himself in the middle of the road and hand over his clothes; not killing him, then, but leaving him to face certain death. This ultimate denial of privacy, which exposes the thing itself, *unaccommodated* man, is a stark demonstration of the power and reach of the road, and it reveals the extent of the man's complicity with it.

He is thus deeply resistant to the boy's inclination towards acts of selflessness. Quite naturally, having been inculcated in the law/culture of the oikos (eco nomy), the boy's expectation is that the empirical 'is' must be made to submit to the ethical 'ought', the law of the road to the law of the oikos (eco nomy). His first instinct, in other words, is to export unmodified the culture of the oikos to the road. The father realises that this is incompatible with survival on the road and this leads to clashes with his son, who, of course, is deeply troubled by his father's attitude, finding it very difficult to reconcile with their self-professed identity as the fire-carrying good guys. Out of this conflict of the domestic, pre-subjectival culture of the oikos and the rapaciously politicised life of the road, comes initial disappointment, followed by negotiation, readjustment, and, gradually, tentative, conditional, unsatisfied acceptance.

This process is of central importance in McCarthy's novel. It constitutes a motif that is replayed again and again, impressing upon us the possibility that the repeated forced abandonment of domestic spaces, traumatic though that is, might in fact be more appropriately understood in the context of a more general cultural tension or *translation* between the chronotope of the oikos and the chronotope of the road.

In an attempt to try to understand what might be happening here, I would now like to turn to an essay by Jean-Francois Lyotard and an essay by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. In his 1988 essay 'Oikos', Lyotard asks us to question the received wisdom that would have us believe that the oikos, the home, is a place of safety. On the contrary, he argues, the oikos 'is above all the place of tragedy'. With this precedent in mind, he sets about refashioning the Greek notion of *oikeion* as an alternative to common notions of *Umwelt* and ecology. *Oikeion* is traditionally translated as, variously, 'one's own' or 'appropriate' or 'familiar', and, as Lyotard points out, '[i]n Greek, there is a very clear opposition between *oikeion* and *politikon*' [101]. The *oikeion* is 'everything that can be called "domesticity" in the old Latin sense, that which is the *domus*'. 'In the final analysis', Lyotard writes, '*oikeion* is everything that is not *öffentlich* [public]'.

Lyotard wishes to suggest that, similar to the idea that at the heart of the oikos is tragedy, at the heart of the *oikeion* there is anxiety and repression. Lyotard's thesis is that the human being is born too soon and that our original oikos, our body, is ill-prepared in relation to its *Umwelt* [103]. At the same time, however, in another sense 'we are born too late because a lot of meanings or stories have already been narrated about our birth'. 'In this sense', writes Lyotard, 'we are already the object of a lot of

meanings'. On both counts, Lyotard seems to suggest, the outside (outside the body, note; he is not speaking of subjectivity here) is disclosed as a source of anxiety, which our 'psychic apparatus' defensively represses. Thus, Lyotard identifies what he calls 'a large element of childish anxiety that is a result of the fact that something is given, has been given, and will have been given to us before we are able to receive it, before we are in the condition of agreeing to it, before becoming aware of it' [105]. What results from this – Lyotard says 'Call it what you will, the 'unconscious' or whatever – is an opacity that resists openness and communication. 'One can only describe this something', Lyotard writes, 'as contradiction, tension, repression, deferral, displacement and in general distortion. All these concepts', Lyotard adds, 'are terms of transport'. Translations, in other words, that place at the heart of the oikeion 'the thing that has not become public, that has not become communicational, that has not become systemic, and that can never become any of these things' [105].

For Lyotard, this inherent complexity makes 'us' who we are, makes 'us' what we are. He states boldly: 'I am describing a situation of distress, of suffering that is at the same time the mere condition of thinking and writing' [106]. It is, he says elsewhere in the essay, 'the source of every invention, creation, and writing' [107]. Lyotard's general worry is over what the consequences might be if in the course of our technological development we were to erase 'the question of birth, the question of childhood, the question of a certain anxiety'. Giving flight to a posthuman fantasy, Lyotard writes:

If we are sent to space after the explosion of the sun (I don't even know if it will be us), if something is sent to space without this extraordinary complexity that is precisely the paradox of childhood, I am afraid that this complexity is

not complex enough. In this case, we could call this by the terrible name of mere survival, which is not very interesting. I am not interested in surviving, not interested at all. I am interested in remaining a child.

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

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

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

She goes on:

...the human subject is something that will have happened as this shuttling translation, from inside to outside, from violence to conscience: the production of the ethical subject.

Spivak acknowledges that ‘the human infant, on the cusp of the natural and the cultural, is in translation’, but implies that this condition of being in translation is coterminous with ethical subjectivity. Thus, although both Lyotard and Spivak locate what we can call originary translation in childhood, it is in fact a site or space of birth that endures and is carried with us for as long as we exist as ethical subjects. It is the condition of being open to the possibility of radical uncertainty and reappraisal, where, in Jakob von Uexkull’s terms we are displaced to the extent that our *umwelt* becomes an object for us [see also Blanchot in the *Infinite Conversation*]. Being lost in translation, in other words, is the condition of ethical subjectivity. And it is what Lyotard means when he urges us to remain children. If we are no longer children in precisely this respect; if we are, that is to say, no longer open to the experience of originary translation, then we lose our ethical subjectivity and become mere survivors. In his essay ‘The Survivor’, published in the same year as ‘Oikos’, Lyotard writes:

I understand childhood [...] as obedience to a debt (which we can call a debt of life, of time, of event, a debt of being there in spite of everything), a debt for which only the persistent feeling of respect can save the adult from being no more than a survivor, a creature living on reprieve from annihilation. [149]

Thus, originary translation is the translation of an initial debt, and to lose sight of that is to lose sight of what we are. The *law* of the *oikos* out of which we emerge – that is, our *economy* – means that we are always in debt; we emerge, overdrawn, out of a negative balance. I O U therefore I am, we might say.

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

This worry about the loss of the oikos as a distinct space is not, of course, without precedent, and it is in light of this that I would argue that the real concern of *The Road* is, paradigmatically, modernity, not the posthuman.

In *The History of Sexuality Vol. I*, Foucault addresses what he calls the 'threshold of modernity':

For millennia, man remained what he was for Aristotle: a living animal with the additional capacity for a political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question.

We have seen Lyotard contrast two distinct realms, the private space of the oikos and the public space of politics. What Foucault is here drawing our attention to is the fact

that these two realms designate two different understandings of life – *zoē* and *bios*. As Giorgio Agamben points out in his influential book *Homo Sacer*, the proper sphere of Zoe, or bare reproductive life, is the *oikos*. Bios, on the other hand, was understood to be public life in the political sphere. For Foucault, then, ‘the decisive event of modernity’ is ‘the entry of zoe into the sphere of the polis – the politicisation of bare life as such’ [agamben, p. 4].

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

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