Absurdity and Revolt in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*

MICHAEL KEREN

I. Introduction

In this article I identify four major themes of absurdity and revolt at the centre of Cormac McCarthy’s 2006 novel *The Road*—transience, existentialism, reality’s precedence with respect to storytelling, and trans-generational commitment—themes first developed both theoretically and literarily by Albert Camus and others in the crucible of the Second World War and its aftermath, more than half a century ago. These themes remain with us in this powerful twenty-first century novel and continue to be useful standards for the evaluation of our lives both in the private and public spheres, especially with respect to our subjugation to technology and its electronic interpenetration of our interpersonal lives. In what follows, I analyze *The Road* within the framework of Camus’ notions of absurdity and revolt, spell out the four themes, and discuss their usefulness as contemporary standards of evaluation.

II. The Road and Camusian Thought

In *The Road* we follow the journey of a father and child pushing a supermarket cart on the road after the technological, economic, and political systems surrounding us have been destroyed. The reader is left wondering why the two continue, what allows them to endure, and why suicide is not the preferred option. The unnamed father and child walk through the grey-
black remains of cities, villages, and forests burned to ashes, with dead bodies all around. “They passed through the site of a roadside hamlet burned to nothing. Some metal storage tanks, a few standing flues of blackened brick. There were gray slagpools of melted glass in the ditches and the raw lightwires lay in rusting skeins for miles along the edge of the roadway” (191-2).

The causes of the destruction are never given. The Road thus differs from didactic tales like Aldous Huxley’s Brave New World (1932) and Margaret Atwood’s Oryx and Crake (2003) that issue warnings of authoritarian control, domineering scientists, and the like. What we are faced with is what Camus, in his 1942 essay The Myth of Sisyphus, called "a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights" (6). The setting is one in which all aspirations and illusions associated with the world as we know it have dissipated and the political, religious, and commercial rhetoric glorifying them have been silenced. Scrabbling through the charred ruins of a damp, rotten house with a corpse floating in the black water of the basement, the father sees for a brief moment “the absolute truth of the world. The cold relentless circling of the intestate earth. Darkness implacable. The blind dogs of the sun in their running. The crushing black vacuum of the universe” (McCarthy 130).

Why is the earth seen as dying intestate and why does the destruction not entail at least an ethical lesson? The answer lies in the difficulty to attribute meaning to the universe, which is the core of Camus’ notion of the absurd. We are trying to attribute meaning to a world whose meaning escapes us. As Camus notes, "I don't know whether this world has a meaning that transcends it. But I know that I do not know that meaning and that it is impossible for me just now to know it" (Camus, Sisyphus 51). But Camus also challenges us to face the absurd, and not to commit either “philosophical suicide” (28) by speculatively positing meaning without proof, or actual suicide as a result of the recognition that life is meaningless. Sisyphus who rolls a stone
up the mountain only to see it roll down thus becomes a symbol of revolt. The Greek mythological hero is observed at a moment of agony, when he descends from the mountain to the plain. “A face that toils so close to stones is already stone itself! I see that man going back down with a heavy yet measured step toward the torment of which he will never know the end” (121). This is an “hour of consciousness” (121), one in which Sisyphus, conscious and defiant of his fate, is free.

I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always finds one's burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy. (123)

*The Myth of Sisyphus* inspired many in the Second World War era with its call to overcome despair at a moment of great agony, allowing a ruined world to face its conditions with open eyes and rebel against illusory religious, political, and ideological doctrines. Camus warned a whole generation of the illusory nature of doctrines attributing fundamental values to an ineffable universe and called for a revolt against such doctrines, a revolt which gives life its value. “Spread out over the whole length of a life, it restores its majesty to that life” (55).

In 1947 Camus published *The Plague*, a strong literary representation of revolt. Variously interpreted as an allegory drawn from the Nazi occupation of France and as a statement of the human condition, the novel describes the Sisyphusian efforts of a few individuals to help a population stricken by plague. Dr. Bernard Rieux, the medical doctor, and Jean Tarrou, the visitor who organizes sanitary squads, as well as a few others are aware of the overwhelming power of the plague but refuse to give in to it. They know that all religious and political institutions have failed them and that their individual actions promise only inescapable defeat,
but by refusing to give in to either illusory promise or the plague itself they rebel. As the doctor says, "since the order of the world is shaped by death, mightn't it be better for God if we refuse to believe in Him, and struggle with all our might against death, without raising our eyes towards the heavens where He sits in silence?" (124). Camus insists that the rebellion stems not from virtues like courage and devotion, definitely not from Christian love as Father Paneloux, the priest, preaches in the novel, but from "comprehension" (126), i.e., understanding the absurd human condition.

In the post-war era, one could easily identify with the plague-stricken town of Oran, "hitherto so tranquil and now, out of the blue, shaken to its core" (13). The destruction caused by the Second World War and the disappointment with the religious and political systems that failed to prevent it led to reactions similar to those of the residents of Oran. "At such moments the collapse of their courage, willpower, and endurance was so abrupt that they felt they could never drag themselves out of the pit of despond into which they had fallen" (68). And yet Camus shows a way to persevere by the conscious application of common decency in human affairs. As Rieux says, "That's an idea which may make some people smile, but the only means of fighting a plague is—common decency" (158).

Although The Plague is a gloomy tale of death and suffering, Camus never gives up on recovery; the wartime loss of courage, willpower, and endurance is temporary. Even at the peak of the plague, when the town is at the mercy of the epidemic, the doctor considers the possibility that the pestilence may die out of its own accord, and when it does, the people of Oran still have a strong enough memory of their former life to look ahead toward restoration. The whole town, Camus writes, "was on the move, quitting the dark, lugubrious confines where it had struck its roots of stone, and setting forth at last, like a shipload of survivors, toward a land of promise"
(262). At the end of the novel, the narrator, Dr. Rieux himself, while not approving of official declarations of victory over the plague admits that "the dominion of the plague has ended" (259). In other words, while the Sisyphusian curse is never over, as the gods show no mercy and offer no salvation, the people of Oran regain their consciousness and find the courage to keep going.

In his 1951 book *The Rebel*, Camus developed the earlier solitary character of Sisyphus into “the rebel,” who feels solidarity with others. The rebel puts his whole being into the revolt and is willing to die as a consequence of the act of rebellion, which demonstrates that there is a common good he considers more important than his own destiny. The affirmation implicit in every act of rebellion, writes Camus, is extended to something which transcends the individual insofar as it withdraws him from his supposed solitude and provides him with a reason to act. Rebellion can only find its justification in solidarity with others. "In order to exist, man must rebel, but rebellion must respect the limit it discovers in itself—a limit where minds meet and, in meeting, begin to exist" (22). Although the nature of the meeting is elusive it singles out Camus as an important moralist (see Duran).

An important dimension of Camus’ morality is his insistence upon a revolt that recognizes limits. Surveying historical revolutions which were motivated by nihilism and led to absolutism, he believes that there exists a moderate way of acting and thinking that does not expect to attain absolute political forms. Politics is no religion, and history should thus not be seen as an object of worship but as an opportunity that must be rendered fruitful by a vigilant rebellion. The most vigilant rebel, however, cannot achieve perfection; children will still die unjustly even in the best possible society because no individual can eliminate the suffering of the world. In recognizing such limits, the rebel differs from modern revolutionaries—be they fascists or communists—who pretended to change the course of history. The Rousseauian wish to
reverse the advance of technology, for example, seems useless to Camus because, as he puts it, “The age of the spinning-wheel is over and the dream of a civilization of artisans is vain” (*The Rebel* 295). The moderate rebellion he proposes is consistent with the notion of the absurd as it does not propose a revolutionary scheme which turns the world over but sees the revolt in the willingness to move forward in spite of the absurdist conditions.

As I shall argue, the father and child in McCarthy’s novel, who have no illusions about the void universe but persist in their journey on the road, may be seen as figures in a literary representation of Camus’ notions of absurdity and revolt.

**III. Absurdity and Revolt in *The Road***

Camus’ notions of absurdity and revolt remain relevant in the twenty-first century (see Margerrison), especially with respect to very recent developments in the growing role of electronic and digital mass media. The events of the latter half of the twentieth century, and first years of the twenty-first century—the wars, the political crises, the social movements—have been accompanied by the development and massive dissemination of information technologies, especially cable television and the Internet, which have become the main filters through which events are received and interpreted. And at the beginning of the third millennium, new technologies threaten to alter human consciousness. When Tarrou is asked in *The Plague* what he means by "a return to normal life" he speaks with a smile of "new films in the picture houses" (268). Sixty years later, films, soap operas, reality shows, video games, social media, and other forms of communication not only mark normal life, but seem to dominate it. Certainly the Sisyphus, who in the 1940s was happy at the foot of the mountain because of his non-illusory comprehension of the human condition, faces new challenges in the present age of political,
commercial and media spin, and information overload. Non-illusory comprehension beyond the ubiquitous rhetoric of happiness may be slipping beyond our grasp.

In his 1985 book *Amusing Ourselves to Death* Neil Postman noted the collapse of the discourse of reason in the television age, showing how television made entertainment the natural format for the representation of all experience. Our television set keeps us in constant communion with the world, he writes, but it does so with a face whose smiling countenance is unalterable. Entertainment has become the supra-ideology of all discourse on television, and even news shows depicting tragedy and barbarism are part of a format for entertainment, not for education, reflection, or catharsis (see Postman). And it is clear that the entertainment format has also enframed Internet culture (see Shefrin).

In *The Age of Missing Information* Bill McKibben showed how television encourages a non-reflective culture by making individuals lose their orientation to both space and time. Electronic media have become an environment of their own, he writes, a global village in which local and regional consciousness is supplanted and “placelessness” prevails due to the fact that electronic content makes sense across virtually all regions and cultures; it is dubbed and copied around the planet (McKibben 52). Television leads us to ignore the progression of time by expecting us to shift entirely each half hour from fear or sadness to laughter and back. There is no rhythm, McKibben writes, nothing like the image of summer following spring to help you orient yourself over the course of a lifetime, which in turn makes it very strange to grow old and die. “Television never grows old, never ceases that small talk that may be innocuous when you’re thirty but should be monstrous by the end of your life” (149).

Cultural critics have noted the impact of television on the human consciousness by its use of artificial means like dazzling studio lights, smiling news anchors, recorded laughter, and the
like to create a false sense of happiness which blurs the distinction between information and entertainment and desensitizes us to the tragedy, barbarism, and death we are exposed to in large portions. These observations, however, become even timelier in the age of the Internet. Communication experts have often expressed enthusiasm about computer-mediated communication technologies seen as supporting human traits such as “the desire to communicate, the desire for freedom from arbitrary authority, a resistance to uniformity and a preference for diversity, a love of the unexpected and the serendipitous” (Roland 372). Yet the Internet often seems to weaken, not strengthen, the human sense of reality. Individuals engaged in blogging, chatting, tweeting or interacting with Facebook friends do indeed satisfy a human desire for self-expression and free communication but these activities are mostly confined to cyberspace where comprehension is challenged by noise, social discourse by chatter, politics by public relations, friendship by electronic interaction, and consciousness of the absurd by an unending quest for happiness. A blogger’s announcement that “spring is in the air and that means leafy green Web sites are popping up all over the web” hardly reflects the change of seasons. A site like “if i die,” (www.ifidie.net) allowing Facebook users to record a message to be posted to their Facebook page posthumously, does not enhance a consciousness of life and death. When Sisyphus is imagined climbing the mountain with an iPad and headphones, he cannot be understood as comprehending the futility and sterility of the universe.

The Internet is more detrimental than television to a non-illusory comprehension of reality because television viewers are generally aware of the escapist nature of the medium, even when watching “reality shows,” whereas Internet users may easily be led to confuse virtual reality with actual reality. For example, the enthusiasm among communications scholars over new media has made some of their writings resemble the ideologies of the interwar era in their
promise of a redemptive political future. Millions of individuals sitting at their computers were
taken to represent a democratic public sphere, while new media may encourage a politics of
solitude that is more consistent with totalitarianism than with democracy (see Barber). The
Internet is an effective tool for the mobilization of support for important causes but it often
creates the illusion that computer-mediated communication among virtual publics may substitute
for political activism in the real world, an illusion allowing wars and atrocities, inequality and
injustice, political corruption, environmental destruction, and many other social ills to go on
undisturbed (see Keren).

In *The Road*, McCarthy turns off the screens, exposes the violence and destruction in the
real and ineffable universe, and sets the parameters of the Sisyphusian revolt for the early
twenty-first century. The novel was not necessarily designed to turn us away from the mass
media’s amusements, or to show us how to live conscious lives devoid of illusions, but in very
real ways it does do those things. The father and child’s walk on the road with no illusions about
the absurdity of the world may be seen as an updated version of Camus’ revolt. To show this, I
shall now identify four major themes of that revolt at the core of McCarthy’s novel: the
realization that life is transient, the precedence given to existence over essence, the refusal to
substitute storytelling about reality for reality itself, and a genuine commitment to succeeding
generations.

IV. Transience

*The Road* begins with the following words: “When he woke in the woods in the dark and
the cold of the night he’d reached out to touch the child sleeping beside him. Nights dark beyond
darkness and the days more gray each one than what had gone before” (3). These words are
reminiscent of the second sentence in Genesis: “And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep.” The universe in The Road is presented in its bare un-illuminated state with the lights over grocery stores and gas stations shut off. Significantly, the dark setting involves change, growth, and transformation, as when the father counts each frail breath of the shivering child and the two of them look at bare strands of second-growth timber. This stands in contrast to media images whose mostly fast and hasty movement fails to represent change, growth, and transformation. Electronic and digital media provide us with more information than we ever had and expose us to a larger variety of events than we ever experienced but the magnitude of the information and the speed with which the events are passing through us lead to a media craze with little room for subtle and sensitive observations of the kind attributed in this novel to the father and child. Consider the following exchange between them:

Are we going to die?
Sometime. Not now.
And we’re still going south.
Yes.
So we’ll be warm.
Yes…
I’m going to blow out the lamp, is that okay?
Yes. That’s okay. (10)

This simple exchange involves recognition of the distinctions between light and darkness, warm and cold, north and south, life and death. These basic distinctions have always been of concern to humans but are getting blurred in the contemporary world in which electronic and digital technologies allow us to enjoy everlasting lights on our computer screens without worrying about dawn or sunset (which we may sometimes not even notice when we are online), to keep a constant room or office temperature, to follow a GPS with no clear sense of where we are going,
and to construct ourselves a virtual “Second Life.” The Road on the other hand serves as a reminder that no virtual construct or other illusion will allow us to overcome the constraints of reality. In the father's dreams, some visions appear to him in white but when he wakes up he realizes the falling snow is not white but gray. He knows that his and his son's survival depend on hard work in the real world and he therefore wakens himself from the siren worlds coming to him in his dreams: “He said the right dreams for a man in peril were dreams of peril and all else was the call of languor and death” (18).

The Road not only dismisses illusions but highlights the importance of facing the transience of life in a sober and straightforward way. Only when we face reality and recognize that life is transient can we sense movement and growth. Without turning death into a moving force of life (see Carel), McCarthy shows life to be enriched by the recognition that death is part of it. Once humans do not pretend to be immortal by building pyramids or creating posthumous Facebook pages, they may share in “the minutes of the earth and the hours and the days of it and the years” (McCarthy 3). The novel's two protagonists live in time and do not believe in eternity for, as the child puts it, "ever is no time at all” (28). Nor do they believe in promises of a happier world made by politicians, advertisers, and talk show hosts. As the father warns the boy: “When your dreams are of some world that never was or of some world that never will be and you are happy again then you will have given up. Do you understand? And you can’t give up. I won't let you” (189).

V. Existentialism

The father’s warning not to give up on life by abandoning reality for dream and survival for promise contains a significant existentialist echo. Existentialism has many definitions and
interpretations (see Barrett; Kaufmann; Visker) but The Road can be read as a fundamentally existentialist tale in its Sartrean emphasis on the precedence of existence over essence. I refer to the claim that individual action matters and whatever determinants we attribute to it, we are shaped by what we do rather than by God, nature, or society. We interact with our environment, which is often threatening and hostile, but our fate is the product of our own making. As Sartre writes, “man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world—and defines himself afterwards … Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism” (Sartre). Following Nietzsche, Sartre recognized the contingencies within which we live but unlike Nietzsche, he put his faith not in heroic affirmation but in what John Duncan calls “a necessarily imperfect and often messy Sisyphusian activism uninterested in romantic posturing” (Duncan 165).

McCarthy’s characters never abandon a non-illusory view of their surroundings. They act and hardly talk. They move forward even though there is no vision to follow and no lighthouse to point the way in the darkness. In the first part of the book the father and child are walking south toward the sea but when they reach it, they are disappointed to find that the sea is not blue but gray. Yet, the two keep going because it is not the blue sea or any other destination that gives meaning to their journey. What we become is the outgrowth of what we do. This idea is demonstrated when the two find their own footsteps on the ground and conclude that by following them they will be going in the right direction—they will be doing what they are doing. Similarly, when they arrive at the ruins of the house in which the father grew up the latter realizes that his childhood dreams had no chance of fulfillment because life consists of our activities, not our dreamy plans. “This is where I used to sleep. My cot was against this wall. In the nights in their thousands to dream the dreams of a child’s imaginings, worlds rich or fearful
such as might offer themselves but never the one to be” (27). In *The Road* existence always precedes essence; even the names given to things are seen as void. People have always called the things they see by names, which has endowed these things with higher qualities and meanings, as when certain species of birds are called “songbirds.” In this novel, however, all names fade in the father’s memory: “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. More fragile than he would have thought” (88-89). By making names fade, the author demonstrates the fragility and futility of the attempt to attribute additional meanings to things. Also, when the father and child assure an old man they meet on the road that they are not robbers and he asks them what they are, the author (for whom we are what we do rather than what we call ourselves or pretend to be) writes: “They’d no way to answer the question” (162). It is then the old man himself who, responding to the father’s questions, articulates the idea developed by both Camus and Sartre that reality is indifferent to the plans designed by humans and to the meanings they attribute to it:

How do you live?
I just keep going. I knew this was coming.
You knew it was coming?
Yeah. This or something like it. I always believed in it.
Did you try to get ready for it?
No. What would you do?
I don’t know.
People were always getting ready for tomorrow. I didn’t believe in that. Tomorrow wasn’t getting ready for them. It didn’t even know they were there.
I guess not.
Even if you knew what to do you wouldn't know what to do. You wouldn't know if you wanted to do it or not. (168-69)
Here, then, lies the second theme of absurdity and revolt. There is no world besides what we make of it. The meanings we mistakenly assume to arise from our surroundings are fragile. We are the product of our deeds rather than of our visions. And we keep going.

VI. Storytelling and Reality

*The Road* leaves no room for any story to be told beside the life story that unfolds at any given moment. In every conversation with the child, the father focuses entirely on the mundane tasks of survival. For example:

Are we going to die now?
No.
What are we going to do?
We’re going to drink some water. Then we’re going to keep going down the road.
Okay. (87-88)

The focus on the mundane tasks of survival does not stem from dismissal of the larger spiritual issues brought up by the child, but rather from necessity. There simply is no story to tell unless one is willing to invent lies; there is no tale other than the one occurring at present. The father therefore dismisses all tales, visions, and dreams, including his own dreams about his late wife which represent to him a futile attempt to escape reality.

In his dream she was sick and he cared for her. The dream bore the look of sacrifice but he thought differently. He did not take care of her and she died alone somewhere in the dark and there is no other dream nor other waking world and there is no other tale to tell. (32)

How then can he cope with the child’s need for stories? What stories can he tell him when he inquires about the past, as children do? As much as the father wants to satisfy that need, he finds no story to tell.

He thought hard how to answer. There is no past. What would you like? But he stopped making things up because those things were not true either and the telling
made him feel bad. The child had his own fantasies. How things would be in the south. Other children. He tried to keep a rein on this but his heart was not in it. Whose would be? (54)

The author does not grant us the privilege to invent stories, such as the mythologies explaining the creation of the earth or the learned essays of philosophers. This privilege is apparently no longer available to us after the horrors of the twentieth century; if we were to tell the true story of that century, it would fail to capture the voice of the dead, the smell of the butchered, and the sight of the oppressed. At times it seems as if the author is expressing his own difficulty to tell the story of a world that has lost its sense of life, as when the father realizes that any story about the past would be suspect. “He could not reconstruct for the child’s pleasure the world he’d lost without constructing the loss as well and he thought perhaps the child had known this better than he” (154).

Toward the end of the novel, the child no longer asks for stories as he realizes that storytelling cannot change his fate. The value of life lies in living it, not in painting it pink. When the father asks whether to tell him a story, he says no.

Why not?
Those stories are not true.
They don’t have to be true. They’re stories.
Yes. But in the stories we’re always helping people and we don’t help people.
Why don’t you tell me a story?
I don’t want to.
Okay.
I don’t have any stories to tell.
You could tell me a story about yourself.
You already know the stories about me. You were there. (268)

A common story which persists over time and across cultures is that of a supreme being whose presence provides people with a sense of direction and allows them to unburden themselves of responsibility for the evils they inflict on others. Yet, in spite of many religious elements in The
Road (see Pechey), the author does not grant us this comfort: “On this road there are no godspoke men. They are gone and I am left and they have taken with them the world. Query: How does the never to be differ from what never was?” (32). This approach is consistent with the refusal of existentialist thinkers to substitute the will of God for the human imperative to act (and the responsibility this imperative entails) (see Gordon). The two main characters do not make this point themselves. It is brought up by the old man they meet, who tells them: “There is no God and we are his prophets” (McCathy 170), adding that “Where men can't live gods fare no better” (172). McCarthy keeps the role of God ambivalent. A supreme power is definitely not absent from the novel; the father feels he has been appointed by God to protect his son. What the author does not accept are common religious interpretations and morals. For example, the descriptions of the world's destruction resemble doomsday prophecies but are not related to theological notions of sin. “Within a year there were fires on the ridges and deranged chanting. The screams of the murdered. By day the dead impaled on spikes along the road. What had they done? He thought that in the history of the world it might even be that there was more punishment than crime but he took small comfort from it” (32-33).

The lack of common religious morals does not abolish the distinction between good and evil; the father and son aspire not to do evil. They will always be good, the father promises, and evil is not going to afflict them because they are “carrying the fire” (83). The Promethean myth of the fire stolen for mankind and carried by the torchbearer from generation to generation is applied here to a man and boy who have not given up (as the boy’s mother did) on life. There are no special attributes that prepared them for the task other than their endurance on the road, which stands in contrast to the mother’s reliance on visions of the future. “Sooner or later they will catch us and they will kill us,” she said before committing suicide (56). The fire however is given
to those who carry on, even if for no apparent reason. In the morning after the mother disappears, never to be seen again, the father and child get up and set out upon the road. They both realize she may have been right but their existence is not the outgrowth of calculations about right and wrong or deliberations about the value of life held “with the eagerness of philosophers chained to a madhouse wall” (58). They simply endure and their endurance becomes a major literary representation of revolt in the face of the absurd.

VII. Trans-generational Commitment

In The Rebel, Camus emphasizes the strong relationship between rebellion and solidarity. “Man’s solidarity is founded upon rebellion, and rebellion, in its turn, can only find its justification in this solidarity” (22). For Camus, human solidarity is the inner meaning of rebellion; rebellion is meaningless unless embodied in solidarity (see Sagi). This strong relationship is a major theme of The Road. The father and child walking on the road may raise comparisons to the father and son in Christianity or in the biblical story of the sacrifice of Isaac, but at no point in the book does the option exist of sacrificing the boy’s life for a higher ideal. The father’s welfare cannot be separated from the health and wellbeing of his son and it is inconceivable to define his individuality without considering the two’s interdependence.

The Road not only highlights the interdependence but shows it to be a condition of survival. In the harsh world described in the novel, there is still a slim chance of survival as a result of the father's love and care. As mentioned before, the book begins with the father in the dark and cold woods reaching out and touching his child. “His hand rose and fell softly with each precious breath” (3). There is little to add to this beautiful description, as if the full commitment involved in the relationship can only be conceived in the world after its destruction. In the
contemporary world in which we consume the next generation's resources, destroy the planet on which they will have to live, and often define love and care by the number of "likes" on our Facebook pages, it is unusual to follow a relationship consisting of a father’s hand moving to the rhythm of his child’s breath, with very few words exchanged between them. The novel includes many instances of a father’s tender care. “He woke in the dark of the woods in the leaves shivering violently. He sat up and felt about for the boy. He held his hand to the thin ribs. Warmth and movement. Heartbeat” (116). The father looks at the boy in his sleep, comforts him when he is cold and hungry, and protects him in all circumstances. The land they walk in is “Barren, silent, godless” (4) but the boy is a godly gift. “He knew only that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke” (5). He takes the need to take care of his son as a godly imperative: “My job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God. I will kill anyone who touches you. Do you understand?” (77). When the boy becomes ill, the father gives him the most devoted and tender care. “He held him all night, dozing off and waking in terror, feeling for the boy’s heart … He wiped his white mouth while he slept. I will do what I promised, he whispered. No matter what. I will not send you into the darkness alone” (247-48).

But the father is not immortal and becomes ill himself. “In some other world,” the author reminds us, “the child would already have begun to vacate him from his life. But he had no life other” (273). When the boy realizes his father is dying, he begs him to take him along. This cannot be done because the fire has to be carried on but the father promises he will always continue to be there for his child. “If I’m not here you can still talk to me,” he says. “You can talk to me and I’ll talk to you. You’ll see” (279). Although he is mortal, the boy will always be able to hear his voice. “You have to make it like talk that you imagine. And you’ll hear me. You
have to practice. Just don’t give up” (279). And the boy does not give up. When the father dies, he kneels beside the body wrapped in a blanket and cries. “He cried for a long time. I’ll talk to you every day, he whispered. And I won’t forget. No matter what. Then he rose and turned and walked back out to the road” (286).

At the end of the novel, a man and woman come out of the woods and take the boy under their care as the journey continues. This unexpected turn is consistent with the theme of trans-generational commitment which endures a father’s death. The child continues to be protected because the commitment by a mortal person is no less assuring than the belief in an immortal entity. As we learn about the boy: “He tried to talk to God but the best thing was to talk to his father and he did talk to him and he didn’t forget” (286).

*The Road* places commitment at the center of revolt. *The Plague'*s protagonist, Dr. Rieux, is also fully committed to his patients whom he nurses day and night but Rieux separates himself emotionally from his patients in order to fulfill his tasks. As Camus writes,

> Indeed, for Rieux his exhaustion was a blessing in disguise. Had he been less tired, his senses more alert, that all-pervading odour of death might have made him sentimental. But when a man has had only four hours' sleep, he isn't sentimental. He sees things as they are; that is to say, he sees them in the garish light of justice; hideous, witless justice. (183)

For the father in McCarthy's novel, however, the child's fate is not a task to be fulfilled because it is just and righteous but because the child is an inseparable part of his own being. He simply knows that his existence, and that of the child, are inseparable, “That the boy was all that stood between him and death” (McCarthy 29). He realizes that their survival is not assured, that the mother may have been right in preferring suicide over the uncertain walk on the road, but he pursues the journey, knowing that by living a life of full bond with the boy, life is fulfilled to the utmost: “He sat the boy down and pulled off his shoes and pulled off the dirty rags with which
his feet were wrapped. Everything’s okay, he whispered. Everything's okay” (208). This theme of trans-generational commitment is one of the most important themes to be considered in the context of the twenty-first century. Existentialist and other thinkers have not neglected the elements of love and commitment (see Krishek; Lawton) and individuals often show commitment to others, but can we really say that "everything's okay" when our existence on this planet involves an exhaustion of resources and environmental destruction or when we have no idea what the electronic and digital media we disseminate in uncontrolled quantities may bear for future generations? Will they lead to an expansion of consciousness or rather to a closing of the mind? Like Camus, McCarthy does not provide us with normative guidelines but his novel does not allow us to neglect trans-generational commitment as a major component of our existence.

VIII. Conclusion

McCarthy's *The Road* updates Camus’ notions of the absurd and revolt in the context of the early twenty-first century. The post apocalyptic tale of a father and child walking on the road serves as a timely reminder that life is worth living not only when we immerse ourselves in transcendental hopes, redemptive ideologies, and virtual reality but when we recognize the futility of these constructs and yet endure. This reminder is important in an age in which new media of mass communication threaten to alter the human consciousness. With cyberspace turning into a major arena in which we receive political information, conduct economic activities, get educated, play games, make friends, etc., we may become less sensitive to the distinction between reality and its virtual representations. In this article, I identified four major themes of absurdity and revolt in McCarthy's novel: the realization that life is transient, the
precedence given to existence over essence, the refusal to exchange storytelling about reality for reality, and a genuine and concrete commitment to the next generations.

These four themes may serve as useful standards for the evaluation of our present life both in the private and public spheres. Human life is, of course, too complex to be placed within a simple typology separating conscious and unconscious existence. There are lots of variations to consider besides the authenticity of the rebel who recognizes the absurdity of life and the enslavement associated here with new media that blur our conception of time and space, challenge our freedom and privacy, and mistake superficial interactions for human commitment. There are obviously many options open to us to conduct our private and public affairs in the age of new media and it would be wrong to search for a free and authentic existence only in a world that has experienced a major catastrophe.

*The Road*, however, makes us aware of the need to evaluate every step we take on the road of life in terms of the degree of consciousness we maintain. The massive introduction of communication technologies into society and culture today is accompanied by a redemptive language which does not differ much from the language of past ideologies. And like the public intellectuals who served as “fellow travelers” of these ideologies, communication researchers are often serving the producers and marketers of new communication technologies in their willingness to prematurely attribute to those technologies social values such as freedom, democracy, and civil engagement. It would be safer to assume that today’s digital revolution will follow every other technological revolution in the past by having both positive and negative social implications. Therefore, as we go through today’s revolution, we must ask ourselves at every point in time whether we exist as free, creative, committed individuals or whether we are deluded by a false rhetoric of happiness, whether our awareness of the world's problems as a
result of the flood of information in the electronic and digital media involves a concrete attempt to solve them, and whether our political associations are based on genuine civil solidarity or on superficial ties that involve no real commitment to anything—least of all to the next generations. By making us think about these Camusian themes in the contemporary world, *The Road* demonstrates rather forcefully the contribution of the literary imagination to existentialist thought.

**Works Cited**


