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Empty roads: Walking after catastrophe

In *A Philosophy of Walking* (2009, 2014), Frédéric Gros advocates the joys of a rudimentary, creaturely activity that is emphatically ‘not a sport’.¹ To walk, he argues, might constitute a ‘rebellious’ form of freedom in which the ‘micro-liberations’ of accelerated modern life (the choices that characterize a consumer economy) are revealed to be ‘dependencies’.² Is walking always characteristic of such agency? We might ask where those unable to walk fit into this Romantic defence of the aimless, unmotivated peripatetic. The future imagined by post-catastrophe narratives – a time when anxieties about shopping are less pressing than, for example, avoiding death from hypothermia – is frequently defined by a kind of enforced, continual motion. This movement, in contradiction to the accelerating tempo of early twenty-first-century culture, is often slow (unless, say, hasty escape from hungry cannibals is necessitated) and motivated by something other than the circulation of capital. However, it is rarely the kind of purely liberating endeavour celebrated by the political philosopher. Apocalyptic landscapes are, in short, normally witnessed by characters at walking pace, but without a joyful spring in the step. This chapter focuses on two journeys by foot across alternative future versions of ruined, post-collapse America: Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006) and Jim Crace’s *The Pesthouse* (2007). These visions of catastrophe imagine epochs in which twenty-first-century technologies of transport have been abandoned and human mobility is radically circumscribed. They are also novels in which contemporary subjectivities are fundamentally revised: in *The Road* even names

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have disappeared as language deteriorates and concepts evaporate. The central protagonist of McCarthy's novel, an unnamed father, undertaking a very long walk to the possible greater warmth and safety of the coast in desperate and exceptionally dangerous circumstances accompanied by his young child, reflects that 'there's not a lot of good news on the road'.³ The chapter thinks about the relationship between post-catastrophe walkers, the 'promised lands' that they may seek and the wider relationship between apocalyptic presentiments and the mysteriously countercultural deed of taking a hike.

Contemporary post-apocalyptic film and television narratives are busy with walking tropes: for example, in the Hughes Brothers' film *The Book of Eli* (2010), a kind of post-apocalyptic version of John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678–84), a man bearing a prophetic name undertakes an archetypal journey westwards across an America that, decades earlier, has been ruined by nuclear war; this single-minded expedition echoes traditions of the frontier and the screenplay playfully draws on the iconography of the Western genre. The narrative is similarly fraught with violence, but its motivation rather differs from both conventional notions of Manifest Destiny and motifs of revenge. Eli (Denzel Washington) is undertaking his hazardous walk to deliver what might be the last remaining Bible to an archive of all human achievements and endeavours housed on Alcatraz Island. A less funereal form of walking is central to Edgar Wright and Simon Pegg's *The World's End* (2013), in which an ill-advised nostalgic pub crawl by a reluctantly reunited group of school friends seems to precipitate Armageddon; one protagonist, terminally resistant to the pressures of adult responsibility, continues the walk between pubs after the world's end.

For North Americans, the ordinary act of going for a walk has long been regarded as a spirited form of dissent. In his cultural history of 'this first and principal way of American native and colonial locomotion', Joseph Amato emphasizes the significance of walking in a variety of protest movements. Walking, he argues, 'has symbolic connotations in a society that rides. It stands for [...] the people's historic way. Taking to one's feet adds solemnity, humility, and an air of sacrifice to one's cause.'⁴ He cites, for example, peaceful marches against the Vietnam War and, more recently, the American invasion of Iraq and the economic policies of the G8

nations. This tradition can be traced as far back as the nineteenth-century nonconformist American Romanticism of Henry David Thoreau. In 'Walking' (1862), a digressive defence of travelling by foot that has become a touchstone for eco-criticism, Thoreau castigates those who have capitulated to the insidious logic of a sedentary era. The sometime teacher, advocate of civil disobedience and occasional 'sojourner in civilized life' claims that he could only 'preserve' his 'health and spirits' if able to 'spend four hours a day at least [...] sauntering through the woods and over the hills and fields, absolutely free from all worldly engagements'.⁵ This perambulatory diligence was so contrary to the inactive posture of the day that it became positively countercultural. Thoreau's mentor, Ralph Waldo Emerson, famously complained that 'civilized man has built a coach, but he has lost the use of his feet'.⁶ The success of capital and new technology did not produce a renewed vitality in humanity but an epidemic of sitting down.

Thoreau offers a bathetic image of a bustling economy that has, ironically, produced bodily stasis: he imagines 'the mechanics and shopkeepers' cooped up in their places of work for hours on end 'sitting with crossed legs, so many of them – as if the legs were made to sit upon, and not to stand upon' (*W*, p. 262). The horrors of this enforced desk or workshop-bound life prompts Thoreau to confess that such lynchpins of the American trade 'deserve some credit for not having committed suicide long ago' (*W*, p. 262). By contrast, he reveres those rare, nonconforming figures who display 'a genius for SAUNTERING'. According to Thoreau's idiosyncratic etymology, this unhurried practice is 'beautifully derived from idle people who roved about the country' and claimed to be 'going a la Sainte Terre, to the Holy Land'. An alternative meaning, however, he notes, is 'sans terre', signifying one who is 'without land or home [...] but equally at home anywhere' (*W*, p. 260). This leisurely mode of mobility, whatever its linguistic origins, is, in Thoreau's eyes, a dissident act, in which 'every walk is a sort of crusade, preached by some Peter the Hermit in us, to go forth and reconquer this Holy Land' (*W*, p. 260). Walking, in these terms, is not simply rebellious; it is a form of resistance against the inactive nature of the emerging commercial imperative. Thoreau celebrates the freedom of leaving everything behind. He disdains the purely recreational walk ('Our expeditions are but tours') and declares that even the shortest of walks be undertaken 'perchance in the spirit of undying adventure,

never to return' (W, pp. 260–1). His take on walking fuses a gospel-like revelatory idiom with political ideals of liberty:

If you are ready to leave father and mother, and brother and sister, and wife and child and friends, and never see them again – if you have paid your debts, and made your will, and settled all your affairs, and are a free man – then you are ready for a walk. (W, p. 261)

In homiletic mode, Thoreau's words specifically echo Christ's injunction for his followers to leave everything behind in order to follow him (Luke 14. 25–7). The emphasis on the 'free man' not only is gendered language typical of the era, but also bears the trace of American Romantic investment in a certain kind of masculinity: independent, practical, solitary and cerebral. This version of free walking remains enormously influential, but, as with Thoreau's liberal approach to the inspiring ideas of the past, contemporary interpreters have found ways of moving beyond it. Rebecca Solnit, activist, essayist and impressively unpredictable thinker, has pursued a robust revision of nonconformist attitudes to mobility that acknowledge a debt to Thoreau. In *Wanderlust* (2001), a strikingly personal history of walking and 'also a polemic against industrialization, privatization of open lands, the oppression and confinement of women, suburbia, the disembodiment of everyday life and a few other such things', Solnit reflects on her ambulatory adventures as part of the anti-nuclear movement.⁷ Peripatetic protests, in this case, are a speculative attempt at forestalling the end of the world. One of Solnit's recent hiking routes takes her across 'a headland just north of the Golden Gate Bridge studded with abandoned military fortifications'. The trail, via the 'exuberant, riotous green' of the hills also affords the strange sight of an 'odd collection of objects and cement buildings' that 'were part of a Nike missile guidance system' and encourages her reader to 'think of the ruin as a souvenir of the cancelled end of the world'.⁸ She associates these remnants of the Cold War with memories of demonstrations in a nuclear test site in Nevada during the 1980s. In a transgressive deed or form of 'civil disobedience' on 'an unprecedented scale' she and her fellow protestors walked on 'the off-limits side' at the test site, 'an act of trespass resulting in arrest': 'We bore a kind of bodily witness to

our convictions, to the fierce beauty of the desert, and to the apocalypses being prepared nearby.”⁹

Solnit’s progressive, democratic walking practice is a defiant alternative to the dominant mode of gas-guzzling, future-denying culture of the present. Concepts of American identity in the era of global capital are frequently defined by ideas of mobility and speed. In short, the most popular narratives of freedom in the United States are associated with the open road and burning gas in a fast car. Walking narratives have a certain subversive logic in American culture, even if they are often ideologically complex and nostalgic for certain ‘authentic’ notions of masculine identity. However, contemporary representations of the walker are not always hymns to the salvific possibilities of hiking, sauntering or strolling. Douglas Coupland’s early fiction, including *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (1991) and *Shampoo Planet* (1992), explore the classic tradition of North American ‘road’ stories with car journeys criss-crossing Canada and the United States. Nevertheless, a number of his protagonists also trek out into the American wilderness on foot, their search for revelation frequently frustrated. Coupland’s comic novel *Miss Wyoming* (2000) includes a spectacular misadventure in walking that is part parody, part homage to the American myth of the freedoms of the open road. The neatly named John Johnson, successful Hollywood producer on the verge of a breakdown, experiences a near-death vision with apocalyptic implications. His epiphany may be generated by medication and television rather than any supernatural agent, but, hallucinatory or not, the apparition triggers a transformation and this man of wealth decides to abandon his privileged life in order to become a ‘citizen of nowhere’. John walks away from the cluttered, (sub)urban life in order to embrace an ideal of American freedom embodied in what he names ‘the romance of the road’: ‘Adventures every ten minutes ... No crappy rules or smothering obligations’.¹⁰ John’s aspirations are an echo of the spiritual quest of Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957); the freewheeling world view of the Beat generation is rejected by John’s oldest friend who plainly dismisses the project: ‘The road is *over* ... It never even *was*’ (*MW*, p. 52). John’s initial foray ends in spectacular failure, embarrassment and a bad case of diarrhoea in the desert. As the novel ends, despite his initial humiliation, John and his new lover once again walk away from

both metropolis and suburb to rejoin the tradition of ‘endless pilgrims’ ‘along the plastic radiant way’ of America (*MW*, p. 311).¹¹

Joshua Ferris’s *The Unnamed* (2010), by contrast, is a disturbing story of a successful New York lawyer, Tim Farnsworth, whose contented, secure life is ruined by sporadic recurrences of compulsive walking that find no satisfactory physical or mental diagnosis and resist all forms of treatment. He is a man who becomes ‘trapped [...] in the next step, the next step and the next step’.¹² Walking, in a story that has shades of Edgar Allan Poe’s urban Gothic (especially the restless pursuit of his 1840 tale of urban anomie, ‘The Man of the Crowd’) and to the title and absurdist universe of Samuel Beckett’s *The Unnameable* (1953), is far from the liberating, defiant activity celebrated by Thoreau and Solnit. Tim’s pathological walking exacerbates his loneliness and estrangement from family and alienates him from any sense of community. His unwilling exploits become a grotesque parody of the nineteenth-century flâneur: the aimless journeys by foot are not associated with leisure. Instead, these bouts of uncontrollable restlessness separate the protagonist from a secure, suburban domestic life and propel him into the wilds of an America tainted by environmental ruin; these abandoned edgelands suggest that a wealthy nation is in the midst of a catastrophe. He encounters flooded towns and houses charred by wildfire and witnesses a flock of birds falling from the sky: ‘Disaster once confined to the west had migrated, a wayward animal confused by scrambled weather. Reservoirs were poisoned’ (*U*, p. 104). *The Unnamed* is haunted by a kind of pre-apocalyptic mood in a double sense: it is focalized via a character who not only seems to be on the brink of a revelation – one that never quite materializes – but is also overwhelmed by a sense of incipient doom. The novel opens during ‘the cruelest winter’ in which schools have been shut for weeks and long lines form at groceries (*TU*, p. 3). This unsettling, faintly dystopian mood fuses repressed anxieties regarding climate change with a disturbed social order. During one of her depressing, heroic forays to find her itinerant husband, Jane’s perception of the snow-furrowed landscape is interspersed with the language of ruination: ‘The black trees all around her stood with their sharp naked branches like burnt-out dendrites’ (*TU*, p. 11). This sentence, in particular, is resonant of the scorched, lifeless world evoked in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* in which

ash constantly swirls and the ‘trunks of trees’ that border a river valley are ‘charred and limbless’ (*TR*, p. 8).

One reviewer, who otherwise plays down the elements of *The Unnamed* that seem to prefigure catastrophe, nevertheless notes that it constitutes a ‘kind of existential journey’ that bears comparison with *The Road*.¹³ Indeed, McCarthy’s sombre novel, in which a nameless father and his young son attempt to survive an astoundingly inhospitable and desperate future, walking along ‘ashen scabland’ and ‘shuffling through the ash’, pushing a cart with a few meagre possessions, across the blacktop of a broken, usually empty road has become the exemplary twenty-first-century post-apocalyptic quest narrative (*TR*, pp. 4, 14). The father carries a pistol and crude, whittled bullets: what might appear to be a belated version of the right to bear arms as a means of protection is also, ominously, represented as a source of self-destruction; the boy is told, in the event that he is kidnapped by one of the cannibal gangs, that he should end his own life rather than face something worse.

Michael Titlestad notes that the nature of the journey undertaken in McCarthy’s novel is ‘far from the ideals of freedom, self-discovery, even manifest destiny’ that we have come to associate with the distinctively American chronotope of ‘the road’; instead it ‘has become a site of diminution, on which survival is the best one can hope for. Traveling has become detached from any higher purpose – it is motivated by the inexorable need to keep moving.’¹⁴ The nation in which McCarthy’s walking narrative unfolds is, like father and son, never named, presumably because in the future that it imagines national boundaries and governments belong to a hazily recalled past. Instead, the land that we assume to be a ruined former United States of America is referred to in a series of dismal epithets; the ‘country’ (a synonym in the novel for landscape rather than nation) encountered by the novel’s two central protagonists is variously described, for example, as ‘wasted’, ‘darkening’, ‘desolate’, ‘burntlooking’ and ‘bleak’ (*TR*, pp. 4, 8, 16, 51, 140). Where the American interior traversed by Ferris’s errant lawyer intermittently testifies to a coming end, in water or fire, *The Road* takes place in an era in which nature appears already to be spoiled beyond any hope of recovery; colour has drained from the land and each day is ‘more gray [...] than what had gone before’, resulting in a darkness that is ‘like the onset of some cold glaucoma dimming away the world’ (*TR*, p. 1). This ocular simile, used on the novel’s opening page, in

which fading sight is a metonym for global desolation, foreshadows a novel where acts of seeing are, by turns, disappointing and terrifying or, on occasion, both.

The civilization-ending catastrophe that also appears to have ravaged the ecosystem is left unexplained and represented as minimally as possible, witnessed rather plainly in flashback as ‘a long shear of light and then a series of low concussions’ and ‘a dull rose glow in the window-glass’ (*TR*, p. 54). The ash-laden, charred earth that has no hint of returning verdure or animal life might resemble the imagined landscapes of a nuclear winter; the reader is never told whether this uninviting, deathly world is the consequence of atomic warfare, the impact of a meteor or an anthropogenic environmental event. Some ecologically charged fiction such as, for example, Ian McEwan’s *Solar* (2010) and Kim Stanley Robinson’s ‘Science in the Capitol’ trilogy (2004–7), focus on human agency and folly as crucial elements of climate change. McCarthy’s novel, by contrast, is far more concerned with effects than with causes. The road is deployed, via the fragmented memories of the exhausted, ailing father as the defining space in which the human catastrophe plays out. ‘In those first years’ following the unspecified disaster ‘the roads were peopled with refugees shrouded up in their clothing’ (*TR*, p. 28). This stark sentence might imagine a wrecked future, but it also resonates with a distinctively early twenty-first-century history in which thousands of people are forced out of their homes as a result of war, starvation and environmental crises. During their journey, the father and son encounter a fallen city that is ‘mostly burned’, its streets lined with cars, once a signifier of speed and freedom of movement, ‘caked with ash’; trees and rivers are blackened and motionless (*TR*, p. 11). This charred topography is no place to dwell safely (the sparse population must contend with not only starvation and disease, but also the lurking threat of cannibal cults); survival depends on the ability to keep moving.

Walking is the main activity in *The Road*. It is the only way that the father and son might survive for any length of time. The word ‘walk’ and its cognates (‘walked’, ‘walking’) are used more than a hundred times in the novel’s 300 pages. Indeed, this iterative style takes on the timbre of liturgy and the hike, punctuated by the son’s candid questions, becomes a kind of embodied prayer, a discreet rebellion against the temptations of despair. The man is drawn to the possibilities of repetition as a survival strategy: as he walks, he

recollects things vanished from the world and exhorts himself to 'make a list. Recite a litany. Remember' (*TR*, p. 31). The present participle of the novel's favoured verb of mobility, however, does not always have entirely positive connotations. The man is haunted by memories of his dead wife and in one flashback to the early days following the catastrophe she rejects his assessment of their situation: 'We're not survivors. We're the walking dead in a horror film', she claims (*TR*, p. 55). The nameless woman, still pregnant at the point of global crisis, refuses to become part of this 'horror film' – a world that she already knows via the relentless visions of the end mediated in popular culture – and eventually takes her own life. Her choice of soubriquet to describe their horrendous predicament resonates with another twenty-first-century exploration of post-collapse America: *The Walking Dead* (2010-), a post-pandemic, 'zombie apocalypse' television drama adapted from Robert Kirkman and Tony Moore's continuing comic book series (2003-), emphasizes an ambulatory motif. It also prompts a question: are either the infected or survivors the eponymous 'walking dead'?

Mobility is foregrounded in McCarthy's emblematic title, one that echoes a long American literary tradition of travel writing. For Diletta De Cristofaro, drawing on Bakhtin, the 'eponymous road' is an 'anti-apocalyptic chronotope'.¹⁵ She argues that although the 'narrative forward motion might initially appear to suggest the road as a chronotope for the flowing of time, in consonance with the Bakhtinian understanding', a more careful reading 'subverts the teleological' interpretation of this distinctively American space. Such a subtle rethinking emerges, she notes, because 'the road, strictly speaking, does not take the characters anywhere' and because the novel emphasizes 'the cyclical repetition of almost identical events', complicating 'the teleological sense of an ending and convey the idea that no significant change is possible for the man and the child after the apocalypse'.¹⁶ Similarly, Peter Boxall suggests that the novel, and the spoiled world that it evokes, is defined by an absence of 'any forward momentum, any future orientation'. 'Where the idea of a road offers the prospect of direction', notes Boxall, 'the road here has thickened, coagulated, like the cold oleaginous sea that breaks leadenly on the novel's grey shore'.¹⁷ He also identifies a plethora of broken technologies of travel that clutter McCarthy's denatured landscape (in particular, an abandoned train and, finally, a wrecked ship). These relics of an age of speed

are, to be sure, melancholy reminders that our own age may be vulnerable to the ravages of time and nature and that the human ingenuity that wrought such industrial marvels is not a transcendent, abstract virtue; it too might atrophy or be overwhelmed by bigger forces of destruction. Yet even if the novel views a world stripped of the kind of velocity that shapes its current readers' everyday life, it is not without energy or motion. The father and son do not surrender to the horrors of the road and, though it would take a rather skewed reading to support a 'survivalist' interpretation of the novel, this masculine dyad are resourceful in the face of hardship. They scavenge for useful scraps of lost technology, decant tiny residues of oil from abandoned gas stations to fuel their slut lamp and occasionally alleviate their constant hunger with rare discoveries of tinned food.

'Barren, silent, godless' is the depressing trinity of adjectives used to describe the terrain encountered by the man as he plans a journey south with his young son because 'there'd be no surviving another winter here' (*TR*, p. 2). They embark on their gruelling excursion to the coast, which the father emphasizes is vital for their survival, to cling to the conditions necessary for existence that the cold of the north is likely to obliterate. They are driven on by the indistinct, shaky hope of a better life. Maps and memories of maps are a recurrent trope in the narrative: as the boy studies their fragile paper guide, his father remembers that 'he'd pored over maps as a child, keeping one finger on the town where he'd lived' (*TR*, p. 194). The pair consult a 'tattered oil company roadmap' now deteriorated to the extent that it is 'just sorted into leaves and numbered with crayon'; the son, born after an era of government, is confused by lines on their fraying guide that his father names 'state roads' – 'they used to belong to the states. What used to be called the states' (*TR*, p. 43). In one sense, the absence of fixed names intensifies both the nightmarish logic of the narrative and the sense that the journey is not simply another trip into the heart of America but a more mythic venture. Although locations are occluded in the text, denying the reader a feeling of secure orientation, the boy learns 'the names of town and rivers by heart' and, in an echo of his father's early cartographic fascination, he sits 'by the fire at night with the pieces of the map across his knees' (*TR*, p. 229). Ashley Kunsu suggests that 'withholding place names' is part of 'a provocative rhetorical move that forces the reader to imagine new possibilities'; in this

reading 'the burned out landscape, strangely, is a new if unlikely Eden awaiting once again those perfect names.'¹⁸

Although the topography of their journey is ambiguous, some critics map the walk in precise terms: for Amy Hungerford, for example, the pair set off from Appalachia and head for the Gulf of Mexico.¹⁹ Shelly L. Rambo is similarly specific in proposing that the blighted territory evoked 'is post-apocalyptic Tennessee'.²⁰ Indeed, a characteristic of McCarthy's earlier fiction is its geography: his first four novels, from *The Orchard Keeper* (1965) to *Suttree* (1979), are set in Appalachia; a number of subsequent novels move westward.²¹ Rambo, drawing on Dana Phillips's reading of McCarthy's brutal (anti) Western, *Blood Meridian* (1985), suggests that the possibility, or otherwise, of redemption – 'the concept of repairing or restoring what is damaged' – might be figured in the novelist's work in regionalist terms as a conflict between 'southern' and 'western' approaches.²² The movement southwards tacitly invokes the literary memory of figures such as Flannery O'Connor, whose work abounds with specifically Christian (if very violent) redemptive imagery. Rambo notes, however, that this 'trajectory' competes with an alternative regionalist interpretation: to read McCarthy 'as a western writer' means that 'nihilistic images prevail'. The southern orientation of the character in *The Road*, she argues, is a literal and figurative 'return "home" for McCarthy', one that sends 'him back into the familiar frameworks of religious vocabulary; probing the question of a redemptive ending is, in this sense, warranted'.²³

The novel is haunted by theological language. There is a radical difference between this journey in an ostensibly 'godless' environment with little more than a faltering hope of survival, on a road in which the man surmises that there are 'no godspoke men' and Thoreau's lofty belief that 'leisure, freedom, and independence [...] are the capital' in the 'profession' of a walker that 'comes only by the grace of God' and that 'requires a direct dispensation from Heaven' (*TR*, p. 32; *W*, p. 261). However, the father and son are represented, even as the narrative begins, as travelers with a holy burden: they are 'like pilgrims in a fable swallowed up and lost among the inward parts of some granitic beast' (*TR*, p. 1). The epithet 'pilgrims' is used four times in the novel and always in relation to a death-bound journey, including one instance late in the narrative in which detritus of the old world ('Electrical appliances, furniture. Tools') has been 'abandoned

long ago by pilgrims enroute to their several and collective deaths' (TR, p. 213). This curious piece of allegorizing, early in the novel, draws on a distinctively American history of dissident religious migration and on the biblical narratives that those same European 'pilgrims' read so attentively. The 'granitic beast' that is the post-catastrophe world is figured in an idiom similar to the 'belly of the fish' in which a prophet is said to have spent 'three days and three nights' (Jonah 1. 17). Jonah's gastro-aquatic hell was, at least, temporary, whereas the brutalized, American landscape, cautiously navigated by father and son, seems endless; cyclical time itself has dissolved, as the only indicator of seasonal change is an intensifying cold. The landscape has been polluted beyond recognition and no longer has signs of the numinous, but the father reads the son as an act of divine speech: 'He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke' (TR, p. 3). This improvised incarnational theology spills into a kind of polytheism: in one of the few conversations with another human being, the father asks the elderly Ely, a kind of existentialist seer who claims that he was 'always on the road', to think of his son as 'a god' (TR, pp. 179, 183). Although the mysterious interlocutor rejects this unorthodox speculation, his own utterances are stippled with theological paradoxes such as 'There is no God and we are his prophets' (TR, p. 181). The name Ely might be an allusion to the biblical Elijah but this incongruous mystic has little by way of good news or encouraging counsel. His role in the narrative is like an absurdist echo of symbolic figures, such as Evangelist, Hopeful and Mr Worldly Wise encountered by Christian during his walk from the City of Destruction in Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*. *The Road* does not articulate the theological certainty of Bunyan's allegory of the Christian life. However, the journey of father and son, like that of the eponymous pilgrim, is not simply a fight for life but a pursuit of goodness in a world that seems to mock this idea as a category error.

One of the axioms in a novel that is distinctively litanic in its multiple repetitions is idea that the father and son are 'the good guys' (for example, TR, pp. 81, 108, 136, 145, 148, 298). It is a soubriquet with which the child needs to be reassured and with which he challenges his father when the older man behaves in a way that seems less than ethically justified. The collision between the boy's innocent desire to uphold virtue and the grubby compromises

necessary for survival might encourage interpretations of the journey as something more than a flight from death. In an alternative approach to those who locate *The Road* as a biblical novel, Lydia Cooper reads the novel more specifically as a rewriting of one of the paradigms of quest narrative, the story of the Holy Grail.²⁴ She notes that an early draft of the novel was titled *The Grail* and suggests that McCarthy makes similar use of Arthurian mythology as T. S. Eliot's apocalyptic *The Waste Land* (1922). For Cooper, the novel's 'evocations of those motifs suggest the power of the grail narrative as a metaphor for an extended study on a world seemingly "wounded" and "wasted" beyond recognition, possibly beyond salvation'.²⁵

The dream of reaching the coast might be a reworked Arthurian quest or an echo of Christian pilgrimage, but the eventual arrival at the shoreline is, ostensibly at least, a disappointment. There is neither a transfiguring vision in which the world's former beauty is miraculously restored nor a neat *deus ex machina* in which the pair find safe haven and a functioning community. 'Cold. Desolate. Birdless', the ocean is dull, freezing and bereft of life (*TR*, p. 230). The encounter with the coast and its predictably wrecked cities is disheartening and it might have provided the frame for a particularly bleak ending. The end, however, is deferred: the shared journey continues until the father, wounded and in a deteriorating, sometimes semi-delirious state, eventually dies. The son, however, does not succumb to despair or to self-destruction with the pistol. Instead, in an uncanny twist, as the boy grieves, he is approached by a stranger who says that he too is a father, with a wife, son and daughter; he also tentatively invites the child to join their family. In a narrative that is characterized by grim disappointment, death and cannibalism, it is difficult not to read this situation as sceptically as the dead father might once have done. Yet, against the grain of survivalist suspicion, the boy makes a leap of faith: after an improvised and solitary funeral rite he rises and walks 'back out to the road' (*TR*, p. 306). The end of the boy's narrative is not quite an end: he joins this family – a group he trusts will honour their promise to be 'the good guys' and, like him, to be 'carrying the fire' (*TR*, p. 303). The last image that McCarthy grants of the boy is a familial scene and a shift from a father-son relationship to a maternal dynamic: the child is gathered in an embrace and greeted as a kind of lost son ('I am so glad to see you'), but it is also one of prayerful remembrance (*TR*, p. 306). Significantly, in a

novel defined by its sense that there is no era to come, an indistinct but expanding future is implied in the description of the woman and child ‘sometimes’ talking ‘about God’ and the boy’s continuing ‘to talk to his father’ (*TR*, p. 306). The road has not reached a deadly limit and the journey, it is implied, continues for the boy. The death of the father does not negate their shared act of walking as resistance.

Jim Crace’s ninth full-length work of fiction, *The Pesthouse*, shares a number of tropes, ideas and anxieties with *The Road* and, coincidentally, was published only a few months after McCarthy’s novel. ‘This used to be America, this river crossing in the ten-month stretch of land, this sea-to-sea. It used to be the safest place on earth’, states the omniscient narrator, with a hymn-like cadence, of the ruined, post-technological world.²⁶ America’s former, but lost, status as ‘the safest place on earth’ is resonant of post-9/11 fears about national security. *The Pesthouse*, like *The Road*, constructs a future version of the American landscape peopled by anxious, imperilled pairs of walkers; the novel begins with two men walking across a hostile, dangerous landscape in search of the coast, and in both texts walking is an act of resistance against despair. The novels feature vicious aggressors and idiosyncratically spiritual figures: in lieu of a single, self-styled godless prophet, in Crace’s world there is a whole community of eccentric believers. The so-called Finger Baptists are a monastic order who run an enclave symbolically named the Ark and view metal and human industry as the source of humanity’s fall from grace.

Although *The Pesthouse* is ostensibly less bleak than *The Road* – an odd thing to claim, perhaps, given that Crace’s novel begins with ‘six or seven hundred, at a guess’ souls dying from asphyxiation in their sleep – both feature characters who display resilience against the temptation of despair (*TP*, p. 1). Resistance is not, in fact, futile but might be found in the slow pace of a long walk. Late in the narrative, a character who has already survived an apparently fatal disease, evaded asphyxiation by natural gas (a fate that befell her family) and escaped a murderous gang of thieves, becomes an advocate for walking. ‘We’ve walked before’, she reminds another survivor and companion on a journey across a ruined, dangerous landscape (*TP*, p. 190). Like *The Road*, in which ‘walk’ and its cognates appear so frequently as to resemble a litany, *The Pesthouse* is similarly concerned with walking and walkers.

The novel looks backwards to imagine a future that resembles a premodern epoch: this retrospective gaze is informed by a number of sources, and Philip Tew, in an early response to the novel, notes that Crace drew on reports of the Lewis and Clark expedition to the west of 1804–6, authorized by President Thomas Jefferson. However, notes Tew, ‘the expansionary and idealized notions of America’ or any ‘notions of manifest destiny’ perpetuated in the rhetoric of the third president of the United States, are countered in the novel ‘by reversing modernity’s myth of irreversible progress’.²⁷ The post-technological, post-federal America of Crace’s novel is no agrarian utopia, but the rural and coastal environments are very different from the blighted, ash-covered landscape of *The Road*. If nature and culture are permanently wrecked in McCarthy’s nightmare future, there are more signifiers of hope in *The Pesthouse*.

The central male protagonist, Franklin Lopez, bears a moniker from an older America. Although cultural memory has all but evaporated, this nominal allusion to Benjamin Franklin, inventor, printer, entrepreneur, statesman, revolutionary and Founding Father is a reminder of the former country of rugged individualism and experimental reason. Similarly, his older brother, Jackson bears the surname of the seventh president of the United States. America, however, has become a place to abandon in favour of mysterious new promised lands to the East; Europe, once the point of departure for adventure in the West is now the unfamiliar place of promise. Urban life is little more than legend for Franklin, who talks, with delight, of ‘grand old towns – *cities* was the word that he’d heard’ and an era in ‘the people of America had been as numerous and healthy as fleas’ (*TP*, p. 97). In fact, the brothers’ lupine surname (Lopez is Spanish for wolf) associates them with the narrative of Romulus and Remus and the mythical foundation of Rome. The name is a quiet suggestion that a new civilization might be inaugurated by one of these brothers of the wolf.

The image of the present world as future folk rumour is less austere than the civic ruins of Crace’s derelict nation, but it is, nevertheless, an estranging vision of metropolitan vitality. In common with McCarthy’s fable, it is never clear why civilization, as we know it, came to an end. However, the former ‘safest’ (and most powerful) ‘place on earth’ is represented as a ‘carcass’ that opportunists will abandon once they have ‘picked’ it ‘clean’ (*TP*, p. 10). This language of aggressive consumption has a muted political resonance

and might suggest one of the reasons for the nation's fall from economic and technological superiority.

The novel mischievously inverts the tradition of locating America as the final destiny of those seeking refuge, justice and belonging, particularly in the myth of the West. One character reflects on the vague hope that the 'best future' is to be found 'beyond the ocean' and 'happiness was in the east. Wasn't that what everyone believed?' (*TP*, p. 167). Franklin, like his brother, begins the novel motivated by 'hopes of getting free from America' (*TP*, p. 13). Franklin displays his self-reliant credentials when he decides to 'put his doubts behind him and concentrate only on the journey' (*TP*, p. 80). His journey, from West to East, is a reversal of the classic pilgrim and frontier journey across the continent. It is also an echo of an earlier narrative of desert exile; Franklin, like Moses, becomes a reluctant rebel and leader of a small family group wandering across the land. Indeed the word 'exodus' is used to describe this cross-continent migration (*TP*, p. 103).

If decelerated, ambulatory movement shapes the narrative, it is also punctuated by significant moments of stillness and encounters with places of rest and recuperation. The titular dwelling place, a 'little boulder Pesthouse above the valley', is a rough, temporary abode for the sick and dying; the basic shelter is a place of exile for residents of Ferrytown who show symptoms of 'flux' – an 'unwelcome' and 'intermittent visitor' – associated with travellers and feared by the community (*TP*, pp. 19, 20). Crace imagines a world in which walkers are associated with both the hope of survival and feared as a source of disease. Early in the novel, Margaret, whose father has already died from the disease is sent to the crude hut, her hair shorn, to await a lonely, but inevitable, end. Franklin, limping, takes refuge from the rain and, despite the risks of infection, stays with Margaret through the long dark night of her fever. In one moment of striking tenderness, Franklin massages her feet as an act of healing; his tradition believes that 'diseases depart the body through the feet' (*TP*, p. 47). This moment, one of mutual embarrassment and bonding between strangers for whom physical contact, in ordinary circumstances, might be regarded with suspicion or as breaking sexual taboos, takes on an anomalous spiritual aura as a kind of reworking of the episode, narrated in all four canonical gospels, in which a woman anoints Jesus's feet with lavish perfume (Matthew 26. 6–13; Mark 14. 3–9; Luke 7. 36–50; John 12. 1–8). The makeshift bothy, a dwelling that is barely

distinguishable from its organic surroundings, echoes other concealed locations in Crace's fiction. Like Jesus's cave in *Quarantine*, for example, it is a zone of intimacy, one in which life encounters the near presence of mortality. Margaret, who did not expect to live, experiences a near miraculous recovery, but the novel, in a sinister rhyme, couples resurrection with the sudden death of the town from which she was banished. The shared grief of this exiled daughter of Ferrytown and Jackson, whose brother also perished in the settlement, fortifies their provisional bond and a new walking partnership is created.

The long-distance walk east is scarcely less dangerous in Crace's novel than the southbound hike in McCarthy's chastening narrative. The reversal of the classic migration from east to west is one in which survival is far from assured: the 'wayside going east' is 'already littered with the melancholy camps and the shallow graves [...] of those whose bodies couldn't take the journey' (*TP*, p. 7). However, a significant difference is that the road is constructed as a place of possibility as well as threat. Early in the novel Jackson, full of masculine bluster, speaks of 'the wisdom of the road' that dictates risks must be taken and that 'only the crazy make it to the coast' (*TP*, pp. 8–9). This soubriquet, repeated a number of times, reads to me rather like an excessively solemn tag for a spectacularly violent Hollywood version of the novel. However, Caroline Edwards describes these repetitions as the narrative's 'mantra'; we might read this rhythmic, semi-comic reiteration as an equivalent to the litanic qualities of *The Road*.²⁸ Later in the novel, surviving walkers continue on the road to the coast and encounter 'the Dreaming highway', the remains of a near mythical road that is supposed to lead to 'Achievement Valley and a prospect of The Last Farewell' (*TP*, p. 38). These names also sound like parodies of the nation's Puritan and Enlightenment eras. However, this reminder of a lost world is also a conduit away from an apparently dying nation. The shape of the road defies nature in the way that it 'hurtled forward, all symmetry and parallels' and is a trace of the era of automobile travel and human ingenuity (*TP*, p. 94). This relic of the open road is a kind of post-apocalyptic version of Percy Shelley's sonnet-hymn to the death of empires, 'Ozymandias' (1818): a 'traveller from an antique land' describes 'two vast and trunkless legs of stone' in a desert as all that remain of the tyrannical ruler (ll. 1–2). The 'dreaming highway' is a similarly ironic, and perhaps

melancholy, testimony to a fallen republic whose ideal of freedom ultimately depended on oil, cars and the dream of mobility.

Margaret's intuitive suspicion of this old road, nurtured by the folklore of Ferrytown, is vindicated. Bandits ambush the walkers and Franklin is enslaved; Margaret's escape to the bizarre refuge of the Ark, where she sojourns for months and nurtures an adopted child, is a significant digression in the pilgrimage to the coast. However, following another attack by violent outlaws, the unlikely couple are reunited: in this instance, Margaret becomes Franklin's saviour, and the journey resumes. However, in another parallel with *The Road*, the eventual arrival at the coast is something of a disappointment, the ocean a negative 'surprise' as it appears, to Margaret, to be 'leaden [...] and lacking in expression' (*TP*, p. 196). Franklin also experiences a moment of epiphany: the ocean is transfigured from a source of mysterious potential into 'an obstacle' rather than 'a route to liberty'. Their shared rejection of the world beyond brings about a renewed myth of America as a place of belonging, a place that Franklin, in an echo of his revolutionary namesake, believes in as a place of possibility: 'His dream was not the future but the past. Some land, a cabin and a family. A mother waiting on the stoop' (*TP*, p. 206). This image of agricultural and domestic harmony echoes, consciously or otherwise, the idealistic image of America as a 'sweet mother' in Jean Hector St John de Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782). Franklin's decision not to abandon the nation is coupled with another ambulatory motif in a dream that he shares with Margaret: 'I've dreamed of walking back onto our land, poor though it is, and taking care of Ma. Those are my biggest dreams' (*TP*, p. 228). Indeed, the end of the novel fuses a motif of stasis and stability with one of walking and return. The novel's final journey is a return west in a repetition of archetypal 'American' journey: Franklin, Margaret and their adopted child, Jackie, arrive at the Pesthouse, the place of the initial encounter in which the woman's 'eyes had almost closed for good' (*TP*, p. 250). The adults renovate the place whose original purpose was as a waiting room for death and render it a dwelling of possibility. The rediscovery of Margaret's 'lucky things in a cedar box' includes coins 'from a past when Abraham sat on his great stone seat and the eagle spread its wings' (*TP*, pp. 253-4). This fragment of America's history suggests an ideal

of democratic belonging. Indeed, the final image of the novel is of Crace's unconventional holy family improvising a new life in the land 'that used to be America':

The couple knew that they only had to find their strength. And then – imagine it – they could begin the journey west again. They could. They could imagine striking out to claim a piece of long abandoned land and making home in some old place, some territory begging to be used. Going westward, they go free (*TP*, p. 255).

We might read this domestic idyll, and the promise of westward movement, as a conservative gesture. However, the end of the novel credibly embodies what Edwards describes as the novel's 'pastoral post-apocalypticism – replete with its microtopian familial communities'.²⁹ The protagonists do not simply survive; they flourish in a land that is being nourished by the patterns of natural rebirth. It also an end that promises a future: one in which, despite their current domestic contentment, they will continue their journey on foot.

Franklin, Margaret and Jackie join a long tradition of defiant American walkers, sojourners in fact and fiction, from Thoreau and Solnit to Kerouac's Dharma Bums and McCarthy's beleaguered father and son. According to Frédéric Gros, walking facilitates a kind of transcendent alternative to the imposition of coercive social identities: 'The freedom in walking lies in not being anyone; for the walking body has no history, it is just an eddy in the stream of immemorial life'.³⁰ Walking is sometimes a matter of survival and a way of rediscovering our bodies and minds. However, more than that, it is also an act of rebellion against a variety of tyrannies including the insidious idea that speed is the true index of freedom.

6

Keep watching: Spectacle, rebellion and apocalyptic rites of passage

In Nick Hornby's comic-apocalyptic short story, *Otherwise Pandemonium* (2005), a fifteen-year-old boy buys a second-hand VCR player and accidentally discovers that it has the capacity, via the fast forward button, to show the future. In typically laconic fashion, Hornby's anonymous Holden Caulfield-like narrator witnesses a coming crisis and the end of the world as mediated by second-hand, already-obsolete technology. The world to which this time-traversing box of tricks magically gives him access (as well as, in a sneaky nod to *Back to the Future II* [1989], knowledge of the outcomes of forthcoming sports matches) is ultimately one of endless, terrifying news broadcasts, 'no *Buffy*, no sports, no nothing' like 'the days after 9/11, if you can remember that long ago', and then an apparently endless 'Time of the Static' when everything, including even network television, seems to be over.¹ He is, however, pleased to be able to tell the reader that the prophetic bit of audiovisual equipment helped him to get a girlfriend because 'knowing the world is going to end makes you a lot less nervous about the whole dating thing' (*OP*, p. 20). 'Otherwise Pandemonium' is a concise, self-conscious pastiche of rites of passage narratives, one that draws on adolescent anxieties, yearning and contempt for a dishonest and disappointing adult world. However, instead of simply becoming what he calls 'a Stephen King-type story [...] with a really fucking scary ending', it is partly a meditation on the speculative optimism of school days that he