Chabon, McCarthy & Ashbery**:**

A Portrait of The Road, redefined.

"The last instance of a thing takes the class with it. Turns out the light and is gone. Look around you. Ever is a long time. But the boy knew what he knew. That ever is no time at all" (28).

Michael Chabon said of Cormac McCarthy's The Road that "In order to destroy the world, it becomes necessary to save it" (Chabon 4). In his novel, McCarthy attempts to create a post-apocalyptic non-world of sorts, in which practically nothing remnant of the past exists. This literary deconstruction is predicated largely upon the removal of time as we as readers know it—the concept of "ever" manifests itself miraculously as both a very long time, and no time at all. And yet, McCarthy cannot annihilate completely this world because the nature of the characters' interaction and existence, of their inextricable communication, prevents the real destruction of the very core—its lingual expression. An interesting companion, Jon Ashbery's poem "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" grapples with a portrait that boasts perplexing lighting and a temporal flatness, thus losing something of its intended projection. In McCarthy's The Road, it is the relationship between ambiguous, often interchangeable literary voice and the perception of time that effect truly a situation in which the intended annihilation of the novel's world becomes in fact dependent on its very existence; as Jon Ashbery notes in his poem "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," it is the telling of something that presents the deconstruction of its original intent. While the world in The Road certainly is transformed, it is nowhere near destroyed but rather, in the words of Ashbery, evolves as when "A whispered phrase passed around the room / Ends up as something completely different" (Ashbery 445-46).

In The Road, we are presented with a situation in which time is both existent and almost completely undefined, epitomized by the characters' conflicting views on the concept of "ever." At one point the boy asks if he'll never drink a Coca-Cola ever again, and the father responds by telling him "ever" is a long time; roughly five days later (if we rely on the characters' often questionable calculations of passing days) we are told that the boy is aware "that ever is no time at all" (28). This dichotomy presented by the interpretation of "ever" establishes the protagonists' difficulty in cementing one concrete concept of how to temporally define their experience. Reflecting this, the novel is

effectively fragmented in its refusal to establish a linear timeline: the text jumps from one day to the next week, falling in and out of dreams and memories and real occurring events as if the story is just one fantastically disjointed puzzle.

While in some sense the manner in which events in the novel are continually tumbling into each other prevents any conventional linear temporality, the whirlpool of happenings crafts a singularly seamless experience for us as readers that we see not so much through the literal passing of time, but through the experienced consciousness of father and son. The world in the novel greatly lacks differentiation between days and nights since ash blocks out view of the sun leaving the characters to watch simply "ashen daylight congeal" (5). When the arbitrary constructions of time like minutes and hours and days—defined normally by the sun, by changes in light—are lost, there is nothing left in the way of a natural timeline—time itself is subject to question[1]. In this sense, "ever" becomes both a long time and absolutely none at all; time is simply now. Recognition of a past and a present are based solely on experiences and some sort of alternating nostalgia and projection without a set framework; as such, in order to get some sort of foothold in the novel's often temporally ambiguous world, we have to examine the very *manner* in which father and son pursue the issue of "ever," and thus, the nature of their experience itself as a whole.

The nature of the discussion of "ever" between father and son becomes itself almost totally ambiguous when we examine its context of the passages in which it takes place—literary voice is unprecedentedly flexible and subject to question, particularly the second passage in which we see reference to the word "ever." The passage in question begins as a third-person recollection of the early

[1] An interesting complement to this idea of environment and time, Jon Ashbery notes in "Self-Portrait:" "And the window doesn't matter much, or that / Sliver of window or mirror on the right, even / As a gauge of the weather, which in French is / *Le temps,* the word for time..." (83-86).

years post-apocalypse:

> In those first years the roads were peopled with refugees shrouded up in their clothing. Wearing masks and goggles, sitting in their rags by the side of the road like ruined aviators. Their barrows heaped with shoddy. Towing wagons or carts. Their eyes bright in their skulls. Creedless shells of men tottering down the causeways like migrants in a feverland. The frailty of everything revealed at last. Old and troubling issues resolved into nothingness and night. The last instance of a thing takes the class with it. Turns out the light and is gone (28).

We don't initially question the narrative voice—it seems logical that it the father would remember the early years of the new world in such a graphic and depressive manner. However, the passage takes an interesting twist, the remainder of the passage subjecting everything prior to reevaluation:

> Look around you. Ever is a long time. But the boy knew what he knew. That ever is no time at all (28).

The unexpected arrival of verbal direction, the switch to the second-person voice, and then back again to the third-person note of the boy's thoughts suddenly begs the question of just who is speaking when, and what kind of distinctions within the passage need to be made.

There is a faint chance the whole passage is a sort of inner monologue on the boy's part, but the jaded, aged tone demands a narrative voice of greater experience uncharacteristic of the boy's naivety thus far. Given that the boy is not the voice of the passage, and that there are but two protagonists, the passage is, arguably, the father addressing his son in a sort of time-delayed response to the original conversation pages prior in which the boy is drinking coke[i]. This explains the "Look around you," and the vivid nostalgia for an experience past. Considering also McCarthy's attachment to unannounced switches in narrative voice and lack of quotation marks, it wouldn't be particularly odd to include within one text block the boy's mental response to his father's explanation of "ever."

But what is really striking is the connection between those two passages about "ever." Assuming the latter is indeed the voice of the father, it is reasonable that what is happening here is that the two

passages, while pages apart in the novel, are one conversation broken up. Throughout the novel, the father often responds to his son's stoic "okay's" by attempting to further verbal interaction through reasoning what he has just said; in this case the father delivers a graphic recap of early post-apocalyptic days in order to explain the sense in which last passage he had said "ever" is truly long. The boy of course, in the conclusion of these two passages, sticks to the notion that "ever" is actually no time at all. In physically splitting up a single continuous topic of conversation over a series of pages interspersed by other events in the novel, McCarthy manifests that very difference in interpretation of just what "ever" really is in this post-apocalyptic world: the man has suggested "ever" is a very long time, and while by the time we get to the boy's response to this we are several pages forward, we are recalling, returning to, paradoxically, a strain of conversation in which we had already been immersed. To phrase it alternatively, in the paginated move forward, we find ourselves back at events prior, tearing apart temporal sense as we would normally experience it otherwise.

In his poem "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" Jon Ashbery muses over a portrait of a man in which light fails to do its proper job, and time inexplicably perpetuates itself without going anywhere at all: "That is, all time / Reduces to no special time" (403-04). Though certainly the subject matter in the poem varies necessarily a great degree from that of The Road (the poem is an extrapolated reflection on a portrait of the past, The Road a futile journey of two characters in a future wasteland), both present worlds that because of their extreme inaccessibility want of a new way of thinking about what they connote. Ashbery struggles to take apart the intended clockwork of the portrait's subject, of its artistic devices, without the capability knowing some idea of what the artist sought to create. He must focus on applying the portrait's aspects in a manner understandable within his environment. And there does remain an inability to completely contextualize: "The hand holds no chalk / And each part of the whole falls off / An cannot know it knew, except / here and there, in cold pockets / Of remembrance, whispers

out of time" (548-52). But even with his finishing the poem in this rather desolate, Road-esque ending, Ashbery still succeeds in bringing to the table exactly what makes The Road so particular: the same way that The Road skips around to define its presence, "Self-Portrait" looks to extrapolate, and searches for definition in a new interpretation of what the world captured within that portrait is. Aside from the sinister preoccupation with death, it is the transcendence of time or place in favor moving on to new ways of looking at things, characteristic of both works that matters: it allows for, in spite of recognition of futility, the breakdown of one type of world into a completely new construction.

It is with the leap from one world in favor of a new one that we can admire Ashbery's re-interpretation of a potentially obsolete 16th century portrait, in the same way that Michael Chabon admires The Road: "...To annihilate the world in prose one must simultaneously write it into being. Thus even an act of stylistic denial as extreme as McCarthy's here...remains, in spite of itself, an affirmation" (Chabon 3). McCarthy seeks to take away all things reminiscent of a world but as father and son actively discuss "ever," even while McCarthy attempts to hinder their work by breaking up literally those conversations within the novel, the characters create a new understanding of the frame of their existence. So instead of ultimate destruction there emerges through the dregs of post-apocalyptic desolation a sort of sweet creation of something new, and something held accountable for only by the manner in which it is created, by which it is defined. It is this uniquely singular logic that allows the paradox of working destruction that defines both Cormac McCarthy's The Road and Jon Ashbery's "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror."

*"*This *thing, the mute, undivided present, / Has the justification of logic, which / In this instance isn't a bad thing / Or wouldn't be, if the way of telling / Didn't somehow intrude, twisting the end result… (Ashbery 438-42).*

[i] Endnote A notable point of conflict is that the nature of the language in this passage is rather graphic and extensive, featuring descriptions of eyes "bright in their skulls" and "creedless shells of men tottering down the causeways" which are unlike any previous conversation between father and son. Indeed the literary voice in this passage seems to reflect in some ways the tone of the last paragraph in the novel, an ambiguous and seemingly mature, omnipotent voice in a novel wherein the only speakers are typically father and son. However, it would prove nearly impossible to relate this passage to the novel's last without delving into an extensive analysis founded on unmasking the nature of that last narrative voice in the book, an extension that demands a liberty of space of which I'm not privy.