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The Horror of the Anthropocene

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In this essay I explore the profound and specific fastening of horror to the Anthropocene by considering both scientific and philosophical responses to our contemporary moment. I then take Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* as a case study of the Anthropocene horror story, analysed in relation to the four stages of horror as defined by John Clute. This close reading of the *The Road* reveals a problem with the horror of the Anthropocene: just like the road down which the man and boy travel, it takes us nowhere. I end with a critical engagement with Donna Haraway's coinage of an alternative descriptor – the Chthulucene – arguing that it remains haunted by horror. I conclude that the challenge remains to think the affect of the horror of the Anthropocene whilst conceiving of stories that will move us beyond it.

In 2014, Samuel Beckett's short story 'Echo's Bones' was published for the first time. Until that date it had existed only in typescript, the original of which is held at the Rauner Library at Dartmouth College in America, with a carbon copy to be found in the A. J. Leventhal Collection at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas, Austin. Mark Nixon, the editor of the first published version, explains in his introduction that the story was written by Beckett at the request of Charles Prentice, senior partner at the publishing house Chatto & Windus, who accepted Beckett's collection *More Pricks Than Kicks* (1934) for publication but suggested in editorial correspondence with Beckett that an eleventh story would 'help the book' (Beckett, 2014: 112).[1] Beckett duly wrote an additional story in which he resurrects the main

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[1] The 1933 letters from Charles Prentice at Chatto & Windus to Samuel Beckett on the subject of 'Echo's Bones' are usefully published as an appendix to the text of the story in Nixon's 2014 edition (Beckett, 2014: 111–16).

character, Belacqua, who had in fact died in the ninth story of the originally submitted volume. By resurrect, I should clarify here that I do not mean simply that he wrote another story in which Belacqua featured, set some time prior to his death despite the story being written chronologically after that death had been written. No, in 'Echo's Bones' Belacqua is quite literally resurrected. Belacqua, we are told at the story's opening:

> Now found himself up and about in the dust of this world, back at his old games in the dim spot, on so many different occasions that he sometimes wondered if his lifeless condition were not all a dream and if on the whole he had not been a great deal deader before than after his formal departure, so to speak, from among the quick. (Beckett, 2014: 3)

Belacqua is a ghost in this story; his corporeal insubstantiality is confirmed a few pages later when he realises that his body casts no shadow.

Prentice eagerly read the new story, only to be so horrified by it that he rejected it and went ahead with the publication of *More Pricks Than Kicks* in the ten story form with which we are familiar. I use the word 'horrified' here quite specifically since it is clearly the emotional affect the story had on Prentice, as revealed in his rejection letter to Beckett on 13th November 1933 which he begins with the declaration that the story 'is a nightmare. Just too terribly persuasive. It gives me the jim-jams' (Beckett, 2014: 114). 'People will shudder and be puzzled and confused,' he declares, 'and they won't be keen on analysing the shudder' (Beckett, 2014: 114). Prentice is remarkably apologetic to Beckett: his rejection of the story is explained as an emotional issue on his part as reader, rather than as a judgement of literary quality, style or technique as a publisher. He concludes the letter:

> This is a dreadful débâcle – on my part, not on yours, God save the mark. But I have to own up to it. A failure, a blind-spot, call it what I may. Yet the only plea for mercy I can make is that the icy touch of those revenant fingers was too much for me. I am sitting on the ground, and ashes are on my head. (Beckett, 2014: 114)

Prentice's readerly response here is sufficient to classify 'Echo's Bones' as a horror story, if one adheres to the predominant mode of classifying horror stories in terms of their 'affect'. This mode can be traced back, at least, to H. P. Lovecrafts's 1927 survey of the genre, 'Supernatural Horror in Literature', in which he describes horror as 'a literature of cosmic fear' in which 'atmosphere is the all-important thing, for the final criterion of authenticity is not the dovetailing of a plot but the creation of a given sensation' (2012: no pag.). For Lovecraft, 'the one test of the really weird is simply this – whether or not there be excited in the reader a profound sense of dread' (2012: no pag.).[2]

John Clute provides a succinct definition of 'Affect Horror' in *The Darkening Garden: A Short Lexicon of Horror*, a text first published in 2006 but reissued in 2014 in *Stay*, as the final section of a volume primarily serving as a collection of Clute's reviews (although it does collect five short stories as well). Clute explains that 'it has become common to state not only that certain emotional responses are normally generated in the reader of horror texts, but also to claim that these responses are, in themselves, what actually define horror' (2014: 275). Clute's issue with this definition – his dislike of it is implicit rather than explicit in the entry – is that since, he claims, 'no other genre has ever been defined in terms of the affect it generates in the reader' (2014: 275), defining horror in such a way means that critics have been able to define horror not as a genre at all, but as a sensation which could be produced by any kind of story, generic or not. Indeed, precisely such an argument is to be found in Lovecraft, who asserts that 'we must judge a weird tale not by the author's intent, or by the mere mechanics of plot, but by the emotional level which it attains at its least mundane point' (2012: no pag.). For Lovecraft, 'if the proper sensations are excited' (2012: no pag.) – those of fear and dread – then the moments in a story which elicit them can be classed as horror, even if the story as a whole cannot. But Clute, a veteran structuralist, is affronted by this dissipation of what he considers a strictly generic category – horror – into 'a kind of afflatus, a wind from anywhere' (2014: 275).

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[2] Another significant theorist of horror in the affect mode is Julia Kristeva for whom, in *Powers of Horror*, abjection names 'a twisted braid of affects and thoughts' (1982: 1).

In contrast to 'Affect Horror', Clute's lexicon is committed to consolidating horror as a genre, constituted, as all genres are, by 'certain patterns of story' that can be suitably analysed or, in Clute's terminology, 'anatomized' (2014: 275). Clute's work offers the most compelling structural schema for horror: a four-part model for the definitive horror story which comprises 'Sighting', 'Thickening', 'Revel' and 'Aftermath'.[3] These constitute 'a grammar of *moves* that culminate in an understanding that the true world augurs and embodies an ultimate terror that does not lie to us' (Clute, 2014: 310). For Clute, 'Affect Horror' 'may be very profitably applied to non-supernatural texts', whereas genre horror is the preeminent mode of what he calls the 'bound fantastic' (2014: 275, 287). In Clute's account, all fantastic literature emerged from 1750 onwards when mankind became aware of the planet itself and, crucially, of its mortality. Fantastic literature can be divided into two categories, the free and the bound, according to a text's relation to the planet: texts of the bound fantastic – horror – 'move towards an *exposure* of the nature of the world to which we are bound' (Clute, 2014: 305); texts of the free fantastic – fantasy, a category which for Clute includes science fiction – move to escape from the world, whether through fancy or reason. These categories, Clute believes, provide a structural definitional context for genre horror, since 'attendance to the world precedes affect' (2014: 311).

As Prentice's response demonstrates, 'Echo's Bones' is definitely affect horror, but Clute seems to consider the entirety of Beckett's oeuvre to reside within the horror *genre*, despite the fact that Beckett's texts would not ordinarily be considered supernatural: Clute's lexicon is prefaced by an epigraph from Beckett's late story 'Company'; and, in the final entry on 'Vastation', Clute asserts that 'vastation eats Beckett into a silence which it is his heroism to break' (2014: 341). This complicates Clute's association of affect horror with non-supernatural texts, and what we might call 'story horror' (rather than genre horror) with fantastic ones. In this essay I test to what extent Clute's structural model might be effectively used to analyse a

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[3] Another structuralist approach can be found in Tzvetan Todorov's *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (1973). But Clute's model is specific to horror, whereas Todorov's is not. This essay is intended, in part, to draw greater attention to Clute's model and its efficacy in reading horror stories. For a fuller exploration of Todorov's theory in relation to horror, see Hills (2005), Chapter Two.

non-supernatural horror text – Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) – and explore what new readings of this frequently interpreted novel might be generated as a result of approaching it in such a way. I believe that *The Road* is indicative of a specific twenty-first century phenomenon: that the early twenty-first century is beginning to see, and will quite possibly continue to see, a literary mainstream incorporation of the story moves of the horror genre akin to the literary mainstream incorporation of the story moves of science fiction witnessed in the late twentieth century. Writers are turning to horror – just as Veronica Hollinger argued they were doing in relation to science fiction back in 2002 – 'as a narrative discourse through which to map the metamorphoses of present reality' (Hollinger, 2002: 4).[4] Prentice deemed Beckett's story unfit for publication in 1933 because it was a jim-jam inducing nightmare that would leave its readers puzzled and confused; Beckett's story is appropriate for publication now, because life in the early twenty-first century – and the future we see before us – is considered by many people to be a jim-jam inducing nightmare that leaves us puzzled and confused. But contemporary horror is moving from a literature of cosmic fear to a literature of planetary fear, and horror can be seen to be structuring the entire story, not just the high spots, of non-supernatural literature.

In this essay I will explore the profound and specific fastening of horror to the Anthropocene by considering first both scientific and philosophical responses to our contemporary moment. I then take *The Road* as a case study of the non-supernatural Anthropocene horror story, analysed in relation to the four stages of horror as defined by Clute.[5] This structural close analysis exposes a problem with horror of

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[4] In addition to McCarthy's *The Road*, discussed at length in this essay, other texts indicative of this phenomenon are: Mark Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000); Steven Hall's *The Raw Shark Texts* (2007); Hugh Howey's Wool Trilogy (2011–13); Jeff VanderMeer's Southern Reach Trilogy (2014); and David Mitchell's *The Bone Clocks* (2014) and *Slade House* (2015). In 2011, *Granta* published a special issue on horror. See also Kelly (2012) for a journalistic evaluation of current popular perception of the genre.

[5] Note that attention to thinking the relationship between the Anthropocene, ecology, ecocriticism and horror has emerged in recent years in both cinema and literary studies. In cinema studies, see, for example, Foy (2010); Justice (2015); Murray and Heumann (2016); with, most recently, Morgart (2017) encouraging ecocriticism to engage more with horror. In literary studies, see, for example, the essays collected in the Ecohorror special issue of *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* (Slovic, 2014). In August 2017, Christy Tidwell and Carter Soles distributed a call for papers for a cross-media and

the Anthropocene – just like the road down which the man and boy travel, it takes us nowhere. I end with a critical engagement with Donna Haraway's coinage of an alternative descriptor – the Chthulucene – arguing that it, nevertheless, remains haunted by horror. I conclude that the challenge remains to think the affect of the horror of the Anthropocene whilst conceiving of stories that will move us beyond it.

1 The Anthropocene

Clute defines 'Fantastic Horror' as 'a pattern of story moves deeply and at times grotesquely responsive – like all genres of the Fantastic – to the nature of the world since 1750' (2014: 311). He posits that horror began as 'a subversive response to the falseness of that Enlightenment ambition to totalize knowledge and the world into an imperial harmony' (Clute, 2014: 311). But he also argues that 'horror is born at a point when it has begun to be possible to glimpse the planet itself as a drama' (Clute, 2014: 311). The perception of the planet itself as a drama summarises succinctly the idea of the 'Anthropocene', the term proposed by Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer in 2000 to name a new geological epoch in which, as Crutzen explains two years later, 'the effects of humans on the global environment have escalated' (Crutzen, 2002: 23) to such an extent that we can be said to have had a scientifically-verifiable geological effect on our planet. In 2009, the International Commission on Stratigraphy (ICS), the arbitrator of the International Geological Time Scale (IGTS), set up an Anthropocene Working Group as part of the Subcommission on Quaternary Stratigraphy (the body that deals with formal units of the current Ice Ages), tasked with collating evidence for the formal consideration of the term to be presented at the 35th International Geological Congress in South Africa between 27th August and 4th September 2016. On Monday 29th August 2016 the AWG did indeed present its preliminary findings and recommendations, as well as mapping out a route towards a proposal on formalization, and indicating work that still needs be done to effect that. It was reported that majority opinion within the group confirms the concept of the Anthropocene as geologically real and of a sufficient scale to be considered as an

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cross-period edited collection on Ecohorror. The CFP is available at: https://christymtidwell.wordpress.com/2017/08/28/cfp-edited-collection-on-ecohorror/.

epoch within the Geological Time Scale. Its adoption would mark the termination of the Holocene, but when did the Anthropocene begin?[6]

Crutzen and Stoermer originally proposed 'the latter part of the 18th century' as a 'specific start date to the onset of the "anthropocene"' (2000: 17), and at the beginning of their investigations, the AWG acknowledged that 'the beginning of the "Anthropocene" is most generally considered to be at c. 1800 CE, around the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in Europe (Crutzen's original suggestion)' (Media Note: Anthropocene Working Group, 2016). Whilst human activity has left traces on the stratigraphic record for thousands of years, in 2002 Crutzen argued that in the latter part of the eighteenth century 'analyses of air trapped in polar ice showed the beginning of growing global concentrations of carbon dioxide and methane' (2002: 23). The originally proposed scientific start date for the Anthropocene thus connects it to the Industrial Revolution and to current climate change concerns. Fascinatingly, it also roughly corresponds to Clute's start date for the origin of the genres of the fantastic – 1750 – in which case, fantastic literature would be, by definition, the Literature of the Anthropocene. The AWG's subsequent investigations have, however, challenged this originally proposed start date, locating the most likely beginning of the Anthropocene as around 1945 since 'substantial and approximately globally synchronous changes to the Earth System most clearly intensified in the Great Acceleration of the mid-20th century' (Media Note: Anthropocene Working Group, 2016). Since 'the mid-20th century also coincides with the clearest and most distinctive array of signals imprinted upon recently deposited strata', the AWG propose that 'the mid-20th century represents the optimal beginning of a potential Anthropocene Epoch' (Media Note: Anthropocene Working Group, 2016). So: it now appears that the epoch of the Anthropocene will be dated from around 1945, a date which corresponds not to the Industrial Revolution but to the development and testing of nuclear weapons; variations on the term 'Anthropocene' have been in use

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[6] This most recent information regarding the AWG is drawn from a media note issued by the University of Leicester on August 29th 2016. The AWG includes two Leicester geologists, Jan Zalasiewicz and Colin Waters; Zalasiewicz is the AWG convener. A paper making a case for a formal Anthropocene Epoch and analysing ongoing critiques has just been published in *Newsletters on Stratigraphy* (Zalasiewicz et al, 2017).

from as early as the mid-nineteenth century (Crutzen, 2002: 23); and fantastic literature has existed since (at least) the mid-eighteenth century. Why propose then that there is something unique about the relationship between the Anthropocene and twenty-first-century literature? The significance of the connection is that the term 'Anthropocene' was not widely popularised until Crutzen and Stoermer's use of it in 2000. So whilst the origins of the term may well date back centuries, and science may determine its start date to be the mid-twentieth century, our *self-consciousness* that we are living in the Anthropocene Epoch can be dated very precisely to the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Whilst a numerical start state for the Anthropocene expressed as a calendar date might make more sense to the non-specialist, the AWG is now committed to identifying a candidate Global boundary Stratotype Section and Point (GSSP), more colloquially known as a 'golden spike', 'a physical reference point in strata at one carefully selected place' (Media Note: Anthropocene Working Group, 2016), which is the accepted scientific method of defining geological time units. For example, the beginning of the Holocene is defined by a boundary between two ice layers in a core sample taken from Greenland which is now stored in Denmark. The AWG hopes to identify suitable candidates for the Anthropocene in the next two-three years on the basis of which they would prepare a formal proposal to the Subcomission on Quaternary Stratigraphy to define a formal Anthropocene unit, which would then have to be voted upon and ratified by various committees before the Anthropocene would become a formal part of the Geological Time Scale. Whilst science is therefore still some years away from declaring that we are living in the Anthropocene, both the sciences and the humanities – who have been more quick to adopt the concept, speaking as it does so succinctly to existing concerns about ecology, sustainability and more – agree that the most likely event in the Anthropocene Epoch, if we continue to live as we do now, is the extinction of the human race. In 'The Anthropocene: From Global Change to Planetary Stewardship', a scientific paper remarkable for its clear political purpose, Will Steffen and his co-authors provide strong evidence and argument that 'the momentum of the Anthropocene threatens to tip the complex

Earth System out of the cyclic glacial-interglacial pattern during which Homo sapiens has evolved and developed' (2011: 757). In other words, the Anthropocene threatens to render the planet unfit for human habitation. Without an immediate and concerted move towards active planetary stewardship, they conclude, 'the Anthropocene threatens to become for humanity a one-way trip to an uncertain future in a new, but very different, state of the Earth System' (Steffen et al, 2011: 757).

What is interesting about Steffen et al.'s language here is that the Anthropocene is conceived of as transitive, in the now rare, even obsolete, meaning of that term: it forms a transition between two conditions. The Anthropocene will take us all from one state of the Earth System to another, one that possibly no longer supports any, let alone human, life on Earth. Although he does not use the term 'Anthropocene' explicitly, the philosopher Eugene Thacker is describing precisely this epoch's potential consequences – many of which we are already living with – in the opening of his meditation on the end of philosophy, *In The Dust of This Planet: Horror of Philosophy* (2011).[7] On his opening page, Thacker states that:

> The world is increasingly unthinkable – a world of planetary disasters, emerging pandemics, tectonic shifts, strange weather, oil-drenched seascapes, and the furtive, always-looming threat of extinction. In spite of our daily concerns, wants, and desires, it is increasingly difficult to comprehend the world in which we live and of which we are a part. (2011: 1)

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[7] Thacker's title recalls the lines from Proverbs, which also haunt 'Echo's Bones', in which Wisdom reminds us that we would do well to heed her since 'Before the mountains had been shaped,/ before the hills, I was brought forth,/ before he had made the earth with its fields,/ or the first of the dust of the world' (Prov. 8:25-26). *In the Dust of this Planet* is the first of a trilogy of books by Thacker – the others are *Starry Speculative Corpse* (2015) and *Tentacles Longer Than Night* (2015) – which explore the relationship between horror and philosophy. This is a revived intersection of enquiry in the contemporary moment, with issues of *Collapse* IV (Mackay, 2012) and *Horror Studies* 8(1) (Bruhm, 2017) devoted to it. For the historically seminal work on philosophy and horror see Carroll (1990); on Thacker, see Zager (2017).

Echoing critical discourse about the Anthropocene, Thacker asserts that 'to confront this idea is to confront an absolute limit to our ability to adequately understand the world at all' (2011: 1). Like Clute, Thacker identifies this confrontation with the unknown and ungraspable as 'an idea that has been a central motif of the horror genre for some time' (2011: 1). Horror, it seems, arrives when we are at the limit of our capacity to tell stories, be they literary or philosophical ones.

Confronted by 'the unthinkable [anthropocenic] world' (2011: 1), Thacker, a philosopher, recognises that his discipline is in crisis. As a result, he is concerned with '*the horror of philosophy*', understood as the moments at which philosophy meets the limits of the capacities of its own mode of engaging with the world. He wishes to isolate:

> Those moments in which philosophy reveals its own limitations and constraints, moments in which thinking enigmatically confronts the horizon of its own possibility – the thought of the unthinkable that philosophy cannot pronounce but via a non-philosophical language. (Thacker, 2011: 2)

For Thacker, horror replaces philosophy as the dominant mode in which we can now think in and about the epoch of the Anthropocene: 'the genre of supernatural horror,' he asserts, 'is a privileged site in which this paradoxical thought of the unthinkable takes place' (Thacker, 2011: 2). The problem for Thacker is that philosophy is irreducibly anthropocentric, 'always determined within the framework of the human point of view' (2011: 7). In contrast, and somewhat counter-intuitively given its name, if humankind is to survive the epoch of the Anthropocene, he asserts that we must displace the human point of view in favour of a planetary one. In essence, the epoch of the Anthropocene forces us to confront what Thacker calls, 'the *world-without-us*' (2011: 5; emphasis in original): 'one of the greatest challenges that philosophy faces today,' he says, 'lies in comprehending the world in which we live as both a human *and* a non-human world – and of comprehending this politically' (2011: 2; emphasis in original).

If the epoch of the Anthropocene can be understood as the era in which, in Thacker's words, 'the world as such cataclysmically manifests itself in the form of a disaster' (2011: 3), what is crucially at stake is not just what meaning we attribute to that world, but the mode we use in order to interpret it and reach that meaning. As Haraway asserts in *Staying with the Trouble*, 'it matters which thoughts think thoughts' (2016: 57). Thacker posits that the Greeks responded to the world mythologically, the Christians theologically (via the idea of apocalypse) and modernity existentially. As do all those who are attempting to critically engage with the Anthropocene, Thacker realises that 'one of the greatest lessons of the ongoing discussion on global climate change is that these approaches are no longer adequate' (2011: 4). Instead, Thacker asserts that it is in horror literature 'that we most frequently find attempts to think about, and to confront the difficult thought of, the world-without-us' (2011: 6). Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* is the seminal work of Anthropocene horror, a terrifying evocation of the world-without-us, 'a nebulous zone that is at once impersonal and horrific' (Thacker, 2011: 6). I want to turn to this text now in order to analyse in what sense it can be classified as a horror story, but also to open up a challenge if not to the appropriateness, at least to the efficacy, of horror as a response to our current epoch.

2 Horror

Shortly before she abandons her son and husband and embraces the welcome oblivion of death, the mother in *The Road* challenges her husband's positive spin on current events:

> We're survivors he told her across the flame of the lamp.
> Survivors? she said.
> Yes.
> What in God's name are you talking about? We're not survivors. We're the walking dead in a horror film. (McCarthy, 2006: 47)

There is no doubt that *The Road* is a horrific and horrifying novel in its affect, with its 'tableau of the slain and the devoured' and its 'blackened looters' tunneling among

the ruins of civilization to retrieve precious tins of food, 'like shoppers in the commissaries of hell' (McCarthy, 2006: 77, 152). *The Road* also borrows story-telling techniques from the horror film to build some of its most powerful moments. Consider, for instance, the familiar building of suspense that McCarthy employs as the man and the son explore the house in whose basement they are to encounter the resident cannibals' human larder. In fact, this scene is regularly referenced in online evaluations of whether the novel can be classed as horror, or not. In 'But is it Horror? A Critical Re-Examination of Genre in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*', Nicholas Kaufmann summarises online responses to the text, guided by Douglas Winter's assertion, delivered at the Bram Stoker Awards in 1998, that 'horror can only truly be defined by the *emotions* a work of literature evokes' (Kaufmann, 2008: no pag.). Kaufmann's conclusion is that, according to this definition, *The Road* is indeed horror. But this only defines the text as *affect horror*, in Clute's terminology, and affect horror is not anthropocenic, since it is not transitive – it does not move the reader from one condition to another. Instead, it arrests us in the horrific thick of things: 'much Affect Horror could be described as being stuck in the Thickening phase' (Clute, 2014: 313). In contrast, *story horror*, like the Anthropocene, *is* transitive. In the following close analysis I examine *The Road* according to Clute's four-part model in order to determine if it qualifies as *story horror* and, if so, where it transits us to.

i. Sighting

The first stage in a horror story is the '"granting" to a protagonist of a first Sighting of things to come'; this is not, Clute is clear, 'an invitation but an impalement' (2014: 310). In the story of *The Road*, the sighting begins at a very precise moment, 1:17am:

> The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions. He got up and went to the window. What is it? she said. He didn't answer. He went into the bathroom and threw the lightswitch but the power was already gone. A dull rose glow in the windowglass. He dropped to one knee and raised the leaver to stop the tub and then turned on both taps as far as they would go. She was standing in the doorway in her nightwear, clutching the jamb, cradling her belly in one hand. What is it? she said. What is happening?

I don't know.

Why are you taking a bath?

I'm not. (McCarthy, 2006: 45)

I refer to the 'story' of *The Road* quite deliberately here, for what Clute's model does not account for is the difference between story and discourse. Whilst the *story* of *The Road* contains the elements of Clute's model in the correct order, its discourse or telling presents them to us in a less than linear way, the consequences of which I will examine in what follows.

In the *story* of *The Road*, the sighting stage continues until the moment of the mother's suicide. The mother has fast-forwarded through all the stages of the horror story and already resides in the aftermath. Her act of suicide is equivalent to Kurtz's final words on his death bed in *Heart of Darkness* (1899), which Clute describes as 'an ultimate gape of rage, a final saying of the world at the close' (2014: 312). Along with Kurtz, she has gazed upon the heart of darkness, 'the naked, impersonal malice of the world' (Clute, 2014: 312): 'I'm speaking the truth. Sooner or later they will catch us and they will kill us. They will rape me. They'll rape him. They are going to rape and kill us and eat us and you won't face it. You'd rather wait for it to happen' (McCarthy, 2006: 48). Like Kurtz, she has, in Clute's words, 'transited all that fiddle of story, and can only utter the final grammar of reality entire, a rage isomorphic with how the world is truly said, the still point where any great Horror story ends: nothing but true, intransitive' (2014: 312): 'my only hope,' she says, 'is for eternal nothingness and I hope it with all my heart' (McCarthy, 2006: 49). Having already 'transited all that fiddle of story', the mother cannot be part of the horror story to come – she has already reached its end. But she is right about her husband; he 'won't face it' because protagonists in horror stories always begin in a state of denial.[8]

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[8] Perhaps the most famous opening in denial – in the story, not the discourse – is the narrator of Lovecraft's 'The Call of Cthulhu' (1928) who in fact considers lack of knowledge and full awareness to be 'the most merciful thing in the world [. . .], the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents' (2011: 61). The same sentiment is echoed at the beginning of Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959): 'no live organism can continue for long to exist sanely under conditions of absolute reality' (2009: 1).

'Sighting,' Clute says, 'signals the moment when the protagonist (or the narrative voice in the story) begins to recognize a Thickening (which is the second stage) in the texture of the world' (2014: 331). Before moving on to thickening, though, I want to pause momentarily and pay attention to the uncharacteristic imprecision in Clute's analysis here – closer attention must be paid to the crucial distinction between narrative voice and protagonist. *The Road* is a third-person narrative primarily focalised through the man. I will examine below the significance of the end of the novel when the man dies and the focalisation (perhaps) shifts to his son, as well as the indeterminate focalisation of the final paragraph. For now it is sufficient to note that, for most of the text, we gain insight into no one else's mind but the man's, apart from information conveyed to us about others' thoughts and feelings through direct speech. Direct speech, though, is not properly indicated as such in the text. In fact, as is characteristic of McCarthy's work, many rules of grammar and narrative melt away in this text – we find no direct speech, omitted apostrophes, no chapters, and the frequent omission of words in sentences. In the context of a horror story, however, this stylistic tendency produces very specific effects. At the moment of sighting, for instance, consider the line: 'A dull rose glow in the windowglass'. This is not a grammatically correct sentence – it omits a pronoun (the so-called 'existential there') and the past tense of the verb 'to be'. The correct sentence would be 'there was a dull rose glow in the windowglass'. But this is not the sentence we get. The existential pronoun is used in front of a verb, usually a form of the verb *to be*, to assert that someone or something exists. The construction as a whole is called an existential sentence. By inversion, the omission of the existential pronoun serves to create a sense of unreality around that which is being described, a sense of it being out of time and place, or possibly of not having really happened at all. With such careful sentence construction, McCarthy evokes the man's sense of the ungraspable unreality of the events through which he is living.

But such language also has an effect on the reader. From the very beginning, we encounter a language and style which unsettles us, with which we are not at home. With the absence of the existential pronoun, at first we struggle to make sense of this sentence – we read 'rose' as a noun, but then that does not make sense since 'glow'

should be 'glowed' to be declined correctly, and how would a *dull* rose *glow* anyway? Things are not as they seem in the language, just as things are not as they seem in the story. 'Sighting', says Clute, 'is a *trompe l'oeil* which the world generates. It is the familiar, which is the false, and the unfamiliar, which is the true, in one aspect' (2014: 332). An action becomes 'the same and not the same' (Clute, 2014: 332): the man running the bath is not running a bath. And things are certainly not as they seem in the windowglass, McCarthy's equivalent of the mirror in which Clute claims 'sighting is often first experienced' (2014: 332). *The Road*'s style serves as *our*, the reader's, first sighting, 'the first sign that we are going to be unmapped or unhoused from the normal world – "normal world" being a term simply designating a world that we are accustomed to, a world which we may indeed discover to have been unreal' (Clute, 2014: 331). 'Unhousel'd', an adjective meaning 'not having had the Eucharist administered' (OED), is most famously used by the Ghost in *Hamlet* to emphasise the horror of his death – not just that he was murdered, but that he was dispatched without the last rites that would purge his soul and secure his entry into heaven:

> Cut off even in the blossoms of my sin,
> Unhousel'd, disappointed, unanel'd,
> No reckoning made, but sent to my account
> With all my imperfections on my head:
> O, horrible! O, horrible! most horrible! (I.v. 82-6)

Clute adapts the Ghost's adjective into a powerful verb to describe a displacement from the 'normal' to the 'horrific'. The unusual and unsettling language and style of *The Road* performs this displacement, unhouseling us from the world of literary fiction to which we might have become accustomed just as the man's first sighting of the world-to-come unhousels him from his 'normal' world.

ii. and iii. Thickening and Revel

In the order of the story, from the moment of sighting the protagonist moves into the thickening: 'thickening begins after the uncanny afflatus of Sighting begins to fade, and the future adumbrated in the terrorizing *flash* of Sighting begins to come

true' (Clute, 2014: 337; emphasis in original). Whilst 'the moment of Sighting may be conveyed in a sentence. . . the process of Thickening normally occupies most of any text being considered' and is a process during which 'the phenomenal world is increasingly revealed as a rind that, once peeled, exposes the vacancies within the false consciousness of "normal" life' (Clute, 2014: 337). In thickening, the focus is on what Clute calls the 'world-rind', 'a rind of lies', 'the assemblage of evasions, the scar tissue over the unendurable past, which comprises the Hooked self' (2014: 338). Such is the focus of one narrative strand in *The Road* – the rind of lies about surviving, carrying the fire, the good guys, and so on, which the man tells his son in order to create and sustain the false hope that reaching the coast will bring some sort of relief.

But the horror of the man and boy's environment is so profound, so undeniable, that the thickening stage is constantly interrupted, ruptured, fissured by the reality of that world. The man and the boy cannot avoid the horror which surrounds them – cannibalism, enslavement, rape, murder – and their repeatedly close encounters with danger enforce a constant threat that they will be pulled down into that world. The man's journey is a profound and conscious exercise in denial of that horror and a preservation of the world-rind that conceals it, not for his own sake but for the boy's, who, paradoxically, has no experience of what 'normality' was. In fact, the boy resists being told about that other 'normal' life. When the man visits his childhood home, the boy wants to leave. Towards the end of the discourse, the man has a moment of realisation:

> Maybe he understood for the first time that to the boy he was himself an alien. A being from a planet that no longer existed. The tales of which were suspect. He could not construct 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. (McCarthy, 2006: 129)

The thickening discourse of *The Road* is thus constantly and repeatedly fissured by Clute's third stage – revel – which the man is constantly working to resist. According to Clute, revel should come 'after that thickening rind of appearances is peeled away at last, when the truth of things glares through the peeled Masque or Danse Maca-

bre; and it resolves into the exhausted latency of Aftermath. Revel delivers the truth' (2014: 324). But things are not quite so sequential in the discourse of *The Road* – revel constantly intrudes but is repeatedly denied by the man. The closest he gets to confronting it, interestingly, is not by facing the present but by being haunted by the past. The memories of that past are most dangerous, most threatening, to the preservation of the world-rind in the present:

> From daydreams on the road there was no waking. He plodded on. He could remember everything of her save her scent. Seated in a theatre with her beside him leaning forward listening to the music. Gold scrollwork and sconces and the tall columnar folds of the drapes at either side of the stage. She held his hand in her lap and he could feel the tops of her stockings through the thin stuff of her summer dress. Freeze this frame. Now call down your dark and your cold and be damned. (McCarthy, 2006: 16)

The happy memories of the past perform the same function as 'Revels' in Clute's analysis which, as here, 'unfreeze the action into full horror' (Clute, 2014: 326).

iv. Aftermath

The final stage of the horror story is 'Aftermath', at the very heart of which 'lies an awareness that the story is done' (Clute, 2014: 279). The moment of 'Aftermath' 'prefigures a world incapable of change, a world no longer storyable' (Clute, 2014: 279). This moment of 'Aftermath' occurs in *The Road* when the boy leaves his father's dead body behind:

> He slept close to his father that night and held him but when he woke in the morning his father was cold and stiff. He sat there a long time weeping and then he got up and walked out through the woods to the road. (McCarthy, 2006: 236)

The horror story of *The Road* ends here, leaving us, as all horror should, with a 'gut dislocation' (Clute, 2014: 279). But the discourse does not end here – the paragraph continues, 'When he came back he knelt beside his father and held his cold hand and said his name over and over again' (McCarthy, 2006: 236). The boy's return marks

a shift in the novel's mode from horror to fantasy. In horror, there can be no final moment of redemption, no restitution of the lost past; these are the hallmarks of fantasy, the fourth and final stage of which, in Clute's analysis, is 'Return' (Clute and Grant, 1997). *The Road*, then, does not end in the horror mode; instead McCarthy adds five final pages which proffer the nostalgic consolations of fantasy. Here, somehow, a non-cannibalistic man, wife, boy, girl and dog have survived and come to the rescue of the boy. The nuclear family (if you'll excuse the pun) of times long gone. These final pages undo the novel's horror story and its affect by offering a continuance after the arresting aftermath of the man's death.

It is possible, of course, that fantasy is exactly what these final five pages are – that we have not in fact moved away from the man's focalisation but remain within it, experiencing with him his dying fantasy that his boy will be saved, that someone will come to his son's rescue as he himself did *not* come to the rescue of the little boy they left behind. Such a reading is not impossible and this textual undecidability gives way to two mutually possible interpretations of the end of the novel. Either, the novel shifts genres at this moment because the author is seduced by the consolations of fantasy, and/or the novel is self-consciously demonstrating the man's refusal unto the very last to confront the full horror of his situation, to accept 'that there is nothing to be done, that there is no cure to hand, no more story to tell, no *deus ex machina*, no statement that It Was All a Dream' (Clute, 2014: 279). Either McCarthy cannot confront this possibility, and designs an ending – after the aftermath – that holds on to precisely this hope, the nuclear family serving as the *deus ex machina*. And/or McCarthy is aware that humankind is unable, in the final instance, to confront and accept the 'final gift of Horror' – 'to flash-freeze the future' (Clute, 2014: 280) and tends instead to cling to a nostalgic and fantastical restitution of an imagined past.

3 The Chthulucene

Clute provides his lexicon of horror 'in order to suggest the ideal course of the full Horror story', but he is quite clear that it is a model set up precisely 'to illuminate and to value the chance-taking – the opportunism – the pushing against the limits

of Order that seems inherent in any creative act, and manifest in any live creation of Story' (Clute, 2014: 312, 313–14). Whilst the above analysis confirms that the story of *The Road* is indeed a horror story according to Clute's definition, it also reveals that in the end it pushes against the possibility of the full horror story. Whichever interpretation of the end of *The Road*'s story one is persuaded by, the novel's discourse does not end with 'Aftermath'. Whilst the *story* ends with the consolation of a fantastical return, whether real or imagined (within the frame of the text), the *discourse* ends with a final lyrical passage evoking the ecological vitality of a bygone age.

Opening with 'Once there were brook trout in the streams' (McCarthy, 2006: 241), this passage shifts mode again, this time not from horror to fantasy, but from fantasy to fairytale. 'Once' means not just 'some time in the past' (OED) but also recalls the 'Once upon a time' that heralds that atemporal suspended setting of the fairytale. The narrative focalisation also shifts, not from the father to the son, but from the son to the extra-diegetic omniscient narrator of the fairytale. Whilst at first it seems that the second person pronoun is being used in the passage – 'You could see them standing in the amber current' and 'they smelled of moss in your hand' (McCarthy, 2006: 241) – 'you' and 'your' are actually functioning here as the generic or impersonal 'you', colloquially substituting for the more formal 'one' and 'one's'. The generic 'you' mediates the environment through mankind. The trout stands as a metonym for an ecological time 'older than man' (McCarthy, 2006: 241) but man is still the observer of this world, he holds it in his hands, it is experienced through his sensorium, his sight and smell.[9] By the end of the paragraph, we have shifted genre yet again, from fairytale to parable – man, in his hubris, has failed to respect the mystery of the natural world and has desecrated its impersonal becoming in ways which 'could not be put back. Not be made right again' (McCarthy, 2006: 241).

Encapsulated here are two of Haraway's 'objections to the Anthropocene as a tool, story, or epoch to think with': its continued prioritisation of man over nature; and the paucity of the stories associated with it – 'they are not about ongoingness'

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[9] I am purposefully using male pronouns here, since McCarthy uses 'man', not 'mankind', nor 'human'. For a feminist engagement with *The Road*, see Morgenstern (2014).

(2016: 49). Horror of the Anthropocene, quite literally, gets us nowhere – it produces only vastation or nostalgic consolation. Once we have 'transited all that fiddle of story', 'the still point where any great Horror story ends' is the 'intransitive' (Clute, 2014: 312). Horror should leave its readers in a state of vastation, 'literally: a laying waste to land or a psyche; a physical or psychological devastation; desolation' (Clute, 2014: 340). Vastation occurs when you find out that 'the world *means* its malice'; after it, 'the utterands of Story, and Story itself, falls into dead silence: for there is no way to proceed' (Clute, 2014: 341). Yet it is in the nature of humankind to go on, and to continue to tell stories. To recall my opening, Clute observes, if you remember, that 'vastation eats Beckett into a silence which it is his heroism to break' (2014: 341). But for Beckett and his characters this is not heroism, it is inevitability, as the unnamed protagonist of *The Unnamable* (1953) perhaps most powerfully exhibits at the end of that novel: 'You must go on. I can't go on. I'll go on' (Beckett, 2012: 134). The full horror story is perhaps so 'inhuman' because it is a defiance of this unavoidable continuance; it generates, in Clute's words, 'a Vastated sense of the imminence of the end of the world' (Clute, 2014: 342).

But the world has not ended yet; we are not yet living in the dust of this planet; our story is not over. As Haraway rightly observes, we remain 'mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings' (2016: 1) – the challenge is to inhabit the thick of things without nostalgia or despair. Haraway's recent intervention into thinking the Anthropocene is an attempt to do just this. In 'Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin' (2015), an essay included in *Staying with the Trouble* (2016) in lightly revised form, Haraway also conceives of the Anthropocene as transitive:

> I along with others think the Anthropocene is more a boundary event than
> an epoch, like the K-Pg boundary between the Cretaceous and the Paleogene.
> The Anthropocene marks severe discontinuities; what comes after will not be
> like what came before. I think our job is to make the Anthropocene as short/

thin as possible and to cultivate with each other in every way imaginable epochs to come that can replenish refuge. (2015: 160)

But in the chapter 'Tentacular Thinking: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene' (2016) (which was also originally published in 2015 but was significantly revised for the book), Haraway's proposition is more radical – the idea of the Anthropocene ought to be replaced by the Chthulucene: 'an ongoing temporality that resists figuration and dating and demands myriad names' (2016: 51). Whilst for Haraway, 'both the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene lend themselves too readily to cynicism, defeatism, and self-certain and self-fulfilling predictions', the Chthulucene displaces the human and replaces the horror of the Anthropocene with 'ongoing multispecies stories and practices of becoming-with in times that remain at stake, in precarious times, in which the world is not finished and the sky has not fallen – yet' (2016: 56, 55).

Haraway states that '*Chthulucene* is a simple word' (2016: 2), a compound of the Greek roots *khthôn* and *kainos* (the Greek root for *cene*). *Khthôn* means 'earth' and, stretching the literal translation of *kainos* which is 'new', Haraway translates it as 'now' in order to evoke the presentness of the Chthulucene, 'the temporality of the thick, fibrous, and lumpy "now," which is ancient and not' (2015: 163). But in an act of deliberate metaplasm she also changes the spelling in an attempt to distance her coinage from the monster Cthulhu, created of course by Lovecraft.[10] Even as Haraway attempts to escape from horror, then, her coinage is haunted by it. The relocation of an 'h' is not sufficient to exorcise that which it cannot fail to represent for others – horror – even if, as Haraway rather hollowly insists, 'Cthulhu (note spelling), luxuriating in the science fiction of H. P. Lovecraft, plays no role for me' (2016: 174). Interestingly, that 'h' was also crucial for Lovecraft, who noted in a letter to Duane

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[10] See 'The Call of Cthulhu' (1928) (Lovecraft, 2011: 61–98). Haraway states in a footnote: 'Less simple was deciding how to spell Chthulucene so that it led to diverse and bumptious chthonic dividuals and powers and not to Chthulhu, Cthulhu, or any other singleton monster or deity. A fastidious Greek speller might insist on the "h" between the last "l" and "u"; but both for English pronunciation and for avoiding the grasp of Lovecraft's Cthulhu, I dropped that "h." This is a metaplasm.' (2016: 169).

Rimel on 23rd July 1934, that when pronouncing 'Cthulhu', 'the *h* represents the guttural thickness' (1976: 10–11). Haraway's work is a concerted and necessary effort to reconceive relationships between all critters and our planet beyond the constraints on thought and action represented by the Anthropocene.[11] But Lovecraft's monster stalks even Haraway's Chthulucene, an irreducible reminder that, nevertheless, to dwell in the thick of things in the present is to contend with horror. The challenge to literature remains: to recognise that the *affect* of Thickening is horror, but to conceive of *story moves other than horror* that will transit all us critters into a future present in which the dust does not lie thickly over this planet.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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[11] I adopt here Haraway's use of the American idiom 'critters' in order to usefully 'refer promiscuously to microbes, plants, animals, humans and nonhumans, and sometimes even to machines' since, as she notes, it avoids 'the taint of "creatures" and "creation"' (2016: 169).

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