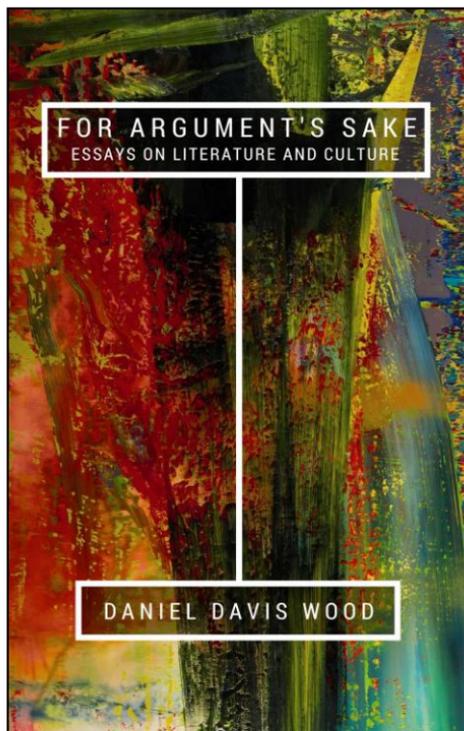


The following document is an extract from *For Argument's Sake: Essays on Literature and Culture* by Daniel Davis Wood, pages 257-262.

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NOTES ON NARRATIVE VOICE

These notes originally appeared online at *Infinite Patience* (12 and 17 July 2010).

IN JULY 2010, I GAVE A BRIEF LECTURE ON THE NARRATIVE VOICE in two highly-acclaimed works of post-apocalyptic dystopian fiction: Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Steven Amsterdam's *Things We Didn't See Coming*. Beginning with Henry James' assertion that a work of fiction can only acquire enough credibility to induce its readers to suspend disbelief if its fictional events are filtered through the eyes of an embodied first-person narrator, I argued that Amsterdam's first-person narrator generates that sort of credibility with far less sophistication than McCarthy's third-person omniscient narrator. In Amsterdam's novel, the narrator endures a series of episodic disasters in an apocalypse that unfolds by degrees; but, because he discusses his experiences in an entirely coherent and colloquial voice, his voice itself undermines the plausibility of his having actually experienced those events. In McCarthy's novel, by contrast, the narrator speaks in a voice that does not undermine its various contentions and revelations but instead augments them.

Although McCarthy's narrator is a demonstrably omniscient being — less a traditional narrator than a focalising consciousness — I argued that it has nevertheless suffered from its experience of the apocalypse at the heart of *The Road* and that this suffering gives credibility to the narrative it puts into words. As well as delving freely into the thoughts of McCarthy's characters, the narrator is also able to distance itself from them so completely that at one point it obtains a truly godlike view of the planet: "By day," it says, "the banished sun circles the earth like a grieving mother with a lamp" (28). At the same time, however, it regularly withholds or is otherwise unable to articulate the exact cause of the apocalypse, and this inability is precisely what invests the apocalypse with credibility. Here, in its entirety, is the narrator's explanation of the apocalypse:

The docks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions. ... [The man] went into the bathroom and threw the lightswitch but the power was already gone. (45)

Reading this threadbare explanation from an omniscient narrator, what we encounter is a post-apocalyptic narrative told by an almost godlike consciousness who nevertheless fails to speak the entirety of what it knows about the apocalypse. It seems as if the apocalypse itself was so powerful that it shocked even this consciousness into silence and stunted its every attempt to explicitly account for it; and, more importantly, the narrator is aware that its expressive abilities have had limitations imposed upon them by the very apocalypse of which it speaks. Language, like the narrative as a whole, has been reduced to rubble; or, as the narrator puts it,

[t]he world shrink[s] down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believes to be true. ... The sacred idiom [has been] shorn of its referents and [therefore] of its reality. (75)

As with all the words in *The Road*, I argued, these words are spoken by a narrator who inhabits a world in which words themselves are decaying, and who therefore has no choice but to reassemble — clause by clause and sentence by sentence — the very language with which it makes itself a narrator. Sometimes it is successful in its efforts; other times, less so. Either way, as a result, the style in which its narrative is told originates from the narrative premise. The narrative voice is idiosyncratic and its very idiosyncrasies imply an account of how it came to be that way. It bears the scars of the apocalypse whose aftermath is depicted in the narrative, and, in doing so, it carries within itself the conviction that the narrative is true. As every word, every linguistic awkwardness, and every syntactic peculiarity testifies to the truth of the otherwise unbelievable narrative premise of *The Road*, the narrative voice reinforces the credibility of the narrative as a whole. Despite McCarthy's use of a third-person omniscient narrator, then, Henry James would have likely approved of *The Road*. “[I]n proportion as the work is successful,” wrote James, outlining his primary criterion for literary accomplishment, “the idea” — the narrative premise — “permeates and penetrates it,

informs and animates it, so that every word and every punctuation-point contributes directly to the expression" (400).

DURING THE AUDIENCE QUESTION TIME AT THE END OF THE LECTURE, a questioner contended that my reading of *The Road* was fatally flawed. The narrator cannot be an omniscient consciousness, she said, because the narrator is obviously the boy at the heart of the narrative, now a grown man looking back on his survival ordeal and retelling it in a *faux* third-person voice. As proof of this, the questioner pointed to a passage in which the third-person narrative voice inexplicably shifts into the first-person:

The dog that he remembers followed us for two days. I tried to coax it to come but it would not. I made a noose of wire to catch it. There were three cartridges in the pistol. None to spare. She walked away down the road. The boy looked after her and then he looked at me and then he looked at the dog and he began to cry and to beg for the dog's life and I promised I would not hurt the dog. A trellis of a dog with the hide stretched over it. The next day it was gone. That is the dog he remembers. He doesn't remember any little boys. (74)

Since this shift in the narrative voice is a shift to the voice of the father, it would of course undermine my questioner's suggestion that the entire narrative is told in retrospect by the boy when he becomes a grown man. That aside, I think that to read this passage as a shift from the third-person voice to the first-person is to divorce it from its context in the broader narrative. The implication of such a shift would be that the first-person voice of the father has somehow obtruded upon the voice of the third-person omniscient narrator, as if the narrator has been shunted aside for the space of a paragraph before being allowed to continue speaking. But this implication rests on a disregard for the remainder of the narrative in which the narrator — clearly omniscient — totally leaves the boy and his father to extend its view of the ravished earth or else becomes so intimate

with them that it perceives their innermost thoughts. Consider, for example, this passage:

Later when the boy was asleep [the man] went to the house and dragged some of the furniture out onto the lawn. Then he dragged out a mattress and laid it over the hatch and from inside he pulled it up over the plywood and carefully lowered the door so that the mattress covered it completely. It wasnt much of a ruse but it was better than nothing. (125)

Or consider this passage:

They began to come upon from time to time small cairns of rock by the roadside. They were signs in gypsy language, lost pattered. The first he'd seen in some while, common in the north, leading out of the looted and exhausted cities, hopeless messages to loved ones lost and dead. By then all stores of food had given out and murder was everywhere upon the land. The world soon to be largely populated by men who would eat your children in front of your eyes and the cities themselves held by cores of blackened looters who tunneled among the ruins and crawled from the rubble white of tooth and eye carrying charred and anonymous tins of food in nylon nets like shoppers in the commissaries of hell. (152)

Or consider this passage:

He sat in the floor of the cockpit and sorted through the tools. Rusty but serviceable. Pliers, screwdrivers, wrenches. He latched the toolbox shut and stood and looked for the boy. (191)

In the first passage, who exactly judges that the mattress covering “wasnt much of a ruse but it was better than nothing” (125)? In the second passage, who exactly holds a fear of “men who would eat your children in front of your eyes” (152)? In the third passage, who exactly deems the tools in the cockpit to be “[r]usty but serviceable” (191)? For reasons that vary from passage to passage, the words

quoted here do not belong to the third-person narrator. They belong to the man, and yet in each instance the narrator discloses the man's thoughts via a "slip" into a voice other than the third-person: the implied first-person in the third and first passages, and the second-person in the second passage.

What appears in *The Road*, then, is a third-person omniscient narrator with a history of using its very omniscience — or whatever remains of it — to lay bare the thoughts of the boy and the man who make their way across a post-apocalyptic wasteland. In other words, the passage seemingly spoken in the first-person voice of the man is not a deviation from the voice of the omniscient narrator but rather a product of its narrator's very omniscience. The narrator grants readers temporary access to the man's thoughts throughout its narrative, albeit at greater length here than at any other point. We can only understand this, however, when we read the passage within the context of the narrative as a whole — not as something isolated from the whole of the novel, but as something sharply attuned to it.

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