THE END OF THE WOR(L)D AS WE KNOW IT?: LANGUAGE IN POSTAPOCALYPTIC NOVELS BY CORMAC MCCARTHY AND MARGARET ATWOOD

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ABSTRACT

THE END OF THE WOR(L)D AS WE KNOW IT: LANGUAGE IN POSTAPOCALYPTIC NOVELS BY CORMAC MCCARTHY AND MARGARET ATWOOD[1]

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In recent times, the idea of apocalypse has consumed the public consciousness. Naturally, this preoccupation with the end of the world has been a frequent subject for literary exploration. Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* are two recent novels that are set in the aftermath of global destruction. In *The Road*, an unnamed cataclysmic event has left the world in ruins, while in *Oryx and Crake*, the human race has been nearly annihilated by a man-made pandemic. As a result of these apocalyptic events, the postapocalyptic landscapes of the novels have been radically changed and rendered unspeakable for many of the characters that have survived. These characters are equipped only with the signifiers of the old world, and these signifiers no longer hold meaning in the new, postapocalyptic world. Therefore, as a result of the cataclysmic events, the postapocalyptic worlds of *The Road* and *Oryx and Crake* become sites for linguistic transformation. Both novels feature protagonists, in the father and Snowman, who represent the pre-apocalyptic world. These characters struggle to find their place in the new world, since they are burdened by the signifiers of the old world. Ultimately, their existences prove anachronistic, as they are unable to fully define

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[1] "Wor(l)d" has been used previously by Helen E. Mundler in her article entitled "Heritage, Pseudo-Heritage and Survival in a Spurious Wor(l)d: *Oryx and Crake* by Margaret Atwood."

themselves in the new world. Both novels also feature characters, in the boy and the Crakers, who represent the postapocalyptic world. These characters are charged with determining the linguistic transformation that will take place in the postapocalyptic world. Both the boy and the Crakers employ a simple, pared-down language that stands in stark contrast to the language of the pre-apocalyptic world. As a result of the apocalyptic events in the novels, language has been restored to its essential elements. Ultimately, both *The Road* and *Oryx and Crake* affirm language as a redemptive and inextricable part of human existence. They also suggest, however, that if language is to exist after an apocalyptic event, it must be radically re-imagined.

CHAPTER 1: NEW BEGINNINGS: LANGUAGE AND THE END OF THE WORLD

In recent years, the idea of apocalypse has consumed the public consciousness. People are becoming increasingly concerned about what will come "after the end," and predictably, this fascination has reverberated into the artistic realm, as the apocalypse has become popular subject matter for artistic exploration. More than ever, artists are indulging themselves in re-imagining new worlds and writing these worlds into being. Perhaps the largest contributing factor to this most recent surge in popularity of postapocalyptic representations is the growing sense that by bomb or bioterrorism or the staggering rapidity of technological innovation, the end of the world is approaching.

This is not to suggest, of course, that the fascination with the end of the world is only a recent phenomenon. History has shown that during times of heightened societal unease, works exploring alternative futures proliferate. For instance, in the mid-twentieth century when Cold War paranoia was at its peak, after-the-bomb narratives such as Nevil Shute's novel *On the Beach*, Walter M. Miller, Jr.'s novel *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, and the *Planet of the Apes* film franchise became increasingly prevalent. These narratives helped writers and audiences alike cope with the societal anxieties of the day. In contemporary society, fears over technology, global warming, and terrorist attacks have partially caused an influx of postapocalyptic narratives in literature, television, film, and other forms to hit the market. In literature, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* both reflect their authors' fears about the future. Dianne Luce explains that *The Road* "had its genesis in a very specific moment, when McCarthy had checked into an old hotel in El Paso with his young son, John (perhaps not long after September 11, 2001) . . . imagining what El Paso 'might look like in fifty or a hundred

years'" (9). Earl Ingersoll writes that Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* similarly began as a reaction to fears over what might become of the world. The idea for the novel began to take shape when Atwood visited Australia, "where she was deeply impressed by reminders of how indigenous peoples had lived in close connection with their environment" (163), after she visited the Arctic and "observed evidence of the shrinking polar ice cap" (163), and after her book tour for her previous novel, *The Blind Assassin*, was cut short as a result of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. *The Road* and *Oryx and Crake* follow this pattern of postapocalyptic works appearing in greater frequency during times when society is uncertain of the future.

Additionally, particularly in Western cultures that hold "rectilinear rather than cyclical" world views (Kermode 5), endings increasingly shape the way audiences consume stories and narratives. These cultures tend to see time as progressing on a continuum from left to right, culminating in a single, absolute ending event. According to James Berger, this mentality even determines the way these cultures process the narratives of history:

> . . . historical events are often portrayed apocalyptically—as absolute breaks with the past, as catastrophes bearing some enormous or ultimate meaning: the Holocaust, for example, or Hiroshima, or American slavery, the American Civil War, the French Revolution, the war in Vietnam and the social conflicts of the 1960's. (xii)

Frank Kermode, in his essential *The Sense of an Ending*, writes that because of the Bible's widespread influence, members of Western cultures are programmed to see the world in terms of endings: "The Bible is a familiar model of history. It begins at the

beginning ('In the beginning . . .') and ends with a vision of the end ('Even so, come, Lord Jesus'); the first book is Genesis, the last Apocalypse" (6). At the very least, the Bible's closed form has had immeasurable influence on the expectations Western readers bring to works of literature. These cultures traditionally value realism in their fictional texts, desiring the fictional story to mirror what they perceive to be reality. It makes sense, then, that they also desire a logical progression from beginning to middle to end. They desire resolution and closure in their narratives, as in real life. This partially explains why works of literature that actively try to subvert this beginning-to-end model, such as Eliot's *The Waste Land* or Joyce's *Ulysses,* can be so perplexing to average readers. The term "realistic fiction" becomes paradoxical, since real life cannot be contained within the beginning-to-end literary convention found in "realistic fiction." Kermode discusses this need to impose a man-made pattern onto time in our fiction, stating, "The clock's *tick-tock* I take to be the model of what we call plot, an organization that humanizes time by giving it form" (45). He argues that "humanizing" time is ultimately a pointless endeavor: "*Tick* is a humble genesis; *tock* a feeble apocalypse" (45). It is not possible for literature to literally adhere to a "realistic" progression of time, since the idea that time flows linearly is a fallacy.

Why, then, do we insist on such linear, chronological storytelling in our fiction? One reason is that adhering to the idea that a disorganized, chaotic, fragmented world can be compartmentalized into distinct, easily quantifiable categories is comforting; it allows us to feel in control in an uncontrollable, unpredictable world. One thing leads to another. Cause and effect. Endings satisfy the human desire for order in a world where true order is elusive, perhaps nonexistent.

Of course, in fiction "The End" is never really the end; audiences understand that the world inside the novel does not simply end after the final page has turned. Huck Finn does not simply cease to exist when he "light[s] out for the Territory"; the first-person "Call me Ishmael" that opens *Moby-Dick* suggests that Ishmael survived the capsizing of the Pequod and still lives to tell his story; when the cowboy rides off into the sunset in countless Western films, the viewer understands that he still exists after he disappears from the frame. Life (even the fictionalized kind) goes on.

Postapocalyptic narratives, by definition, work against this desired sense of resolution, because they take place, paradoxically, "after the end" (Berger xi). Michael Chabon, in his *New York Times* review of *The Road*, illustrates this paradox: "The only true account of the world after a disaster as nearly complete and as searing as the one McCarthy proposes . . . would be a book of blank pages, white as ash." The genre of postapocalyptic fiction, loosely defined though it may be, is, like any genre, beholden to certain conventions. Chief among these conventions is the notion of the "blank slate." In fact, many scholars point out that the popular definition of "apocalypse" as simply "the end of the world" is overly simplistic. Teresa Heffernan writes that, etymologically, "apocalypse" derives "from the ancient Greek *apokalupsis*, [and] is literally understood as a revelation or unveiling of the true order" (4). Therefore, "catastrophic narratives (and catastrophe is defined as the 'final event') that are bereft of redemption and revelation are not apocalyptic in the traditional sense" (6). Margaret Anne Doody also differentiates between popular and etymological usage of the term:

> When we use the word apocalypse—that very Western word—we mean
> the apokalypsis, a revelation, a disclosure, from the verb apokalypto, to

uncover. . . . But when we speak of The Apocalypse, we mean the story

and images found in the Revelation of Saint John the Divine—a book that

got into the New Testament only after a lot of argument. This book

contains not only the adoration of the Lamb and the vision of Heaven, but

futuristic glimpses of a time of pain and judgment. (24-25)

While there are subtle differences in these two scholars' definitions of "apocalypse," they

both agree that, in order for a postapocalyptic narrative to be considered as such, it must

include both the destruction of one world and the creation of another. Herein lies one of

the primary appeals of postapocalyptic fiction: narratives that are set in the aftermath of

catastrophe allow readers and writers alike to envision the world as a blank slate.

All postapocalyptic narratives, then, feature the world being wiped clean; it is

what replaces the old world that distinguishes postapocalyptic texts from one another.

Berger argues that only two possibilities really exist: "Paradise or shit" (16). At the risk

of painting the genre with too broad of a brush, this framework aids in an understanding

of how postapocalyptic texts have evolved over time. Authors of earlier postapocalyptic

narratives (with many notable exceptions, including *On the Beach* and *A Canticle for*

Leibowitz) tended to write about the apocalypse for its utopian underpinnings. These

writers viewed apocalypse "as an opportunity, not as a disaster" (Porter 42). Jeffrey L.

Porter proposes a justification for the popularity of these narratives that "would have

readers believe that something very good can come out of disaster" (46), arguing that

"[a]s unlikely as this might seem to us today, the need to find a glimmer of hope at the

end of the nuclear tunnel was understandably compelling in post-Hiroshima America"

(46). As the century wore on, these quaint tales of human perseverance, which have been

given the somewhat pejorative label of "survival fables" (Porter 41), no longer suited

increasingly postmodern audiences. Teresa Heffernan argues that "this faith that the end

[would] offer up revelation has been challenged in many twentieth-century narratives"

(5). She describes the shift in what contemporary postapocalyptic texts came to reveal (or

not reveal):

> The world is over. History is a spectacle in reruns. We cannibalize the past
>
> but have no vision of a future. Meaning has "been swallowed." We
>
> "survive" only as the walking dead. Apocalypse as the story of renewal
>
> and redemption is displaced by the post-apocalypse, where the catastrophe
>
> has happened but there is no resurrection, no revelation. Bereft of the idea
>
> of the end as direction, truth, and foundation, we have reached the end of
>
> the end. (11)

As faith in the essential "truths" that once satisfied the human need for continuity has

waned, the concept of apocalyptic landscapes as sites for change has become

problematized. Berger writes of postmodern representations of apocalypse: "There can be

no unveiling because there is nothing under the surface; there is only surface; the map has

replaced the terrain" (9).

The reason that apocalyptic texts have begun to move away from utopian

imaginings of the world after the end, one might argue, is that the language that existed

in, shaped, and was shaped by the pre-apocalyptic world is simply no longer able to make

meaning in the postapocalyptic world. A rupture has occurred between language and the

world, and the language of the pre-apocalypse is doomed to fall short in describing the

world of the postapocalypse. Berger writes that all postapocalyptic language necessarily

"demands a saying [of] the unsayable" (xx); if it is truly an apocalyptic event, then it has never been seen before and so cannot be described using the old signifiers. He refers to this failure of language as "the post-apocalyptic representational impasse" (13), explaining that "if apocalypse in its most radical form were to actually occur, we would have no way to recognize it, much less record it" (13). In these postapocalyptic texts, the authors usually suggest that if humanity is to escape extinction and continue to exist beyond the apocalypse, a new language must be developed. Two recent postapocalyptic novels, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, particularly emphasize linguistic shifts after the apocalypse, as language after the apocalypse in their novels has been broken down to its essentials.

Before any further discussion of postapocalyptic language in *The Road* and *Oryx and Crake*, a brief and admittedly basic discussion of the terminology of semiotics, the theoretical framework that will guide this analysis, is necessary. Although structuralism, as a literary theory, is no longer in vogue and, as Robert Dale Parker points out, "hardly any critics call themselves structuralists anymore" (40), some of the terminology coined by the structuralists remains relevant. This analysis draws from theory of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, who posits that language is more than simply "a list of words, each corresponding to the thing it names" (Saussure 60). Rather, it is a "system of signs," each sign uniting a sound-image, or "signifier," with a concept that the sound-image represents, or the "signified." It is important to note that the signified does not stand for the physical object, which Saussure called the "referent," but instead for the concept of the physical object (Parker 42-43). Parker further illuminates Saussure's linguistic model:

Saussure saw a firm link between the signifier and the signified, so that

any given sign is not merely the concept it represents (the signified) or its

representation (the signifier), but the two bonded together like two sides of

a coin or a piece of paper. (43)

In order for language to be a site for potential meaning, both the signifier and signified

must be "intimately united," and each must "recall" the other (Saussure 61). The

structuralists believed that signs do not possess any intrinsic value; rather, "[t]he link

between signified and signifier is arbitrary" (Parker 43). Therefore, signs depend on their

relationships to other signs, what Saussure calls "difference," in order to make meaning:

"in language there are only differences" (Saussure 70). As suggested earlier, the

complexities of semiotics and structuralism require far more attention than is given here.

However, these few basic terms will aid in an understanding of what happens to language

after the end of the world in *The Road* and *Oryx and Crake*.

With these fundamental principles of semiotics in mind, texts that feature

postapocalyptic scenarios become particularly interesting because, by definition, they

involve characters attempting to reconcile the old language and the new world. Berger

discusses the way characters are forced to use the old language to make meaning in a new

world:

Everything after the end, in order to gain, or borrow, meaning, must point

back, lead back to that time; and everything before that beginning (seen as

the "beginning of the end") reconfigures itself into prologue and

premonition. (xi)

Heffernan boils down the dilemma between old languages and new worlds into a question that has important ramifications for this exploration of *The Road* and *Oryx and Crake,* and for any study of postapocalyptic texts: "Does the ruptured relationship between language and the world, where the 'world' is no longer believed to be accessible through language, open up or shut down meaning? Is it productive or destructive?" (14). In discussions of postapocalyptic texts, often the physical destruction is so total and all-encompassing that the destruction of meaning-making systems like language, which occurs concomitantly with the physical destruction, is left unmentioned. *The Road* and *Oryx and Crake* explore more self-consciously than many other postapocalyptic texts the way language could be forced to change after the end of the world.

Cormac McCarthy has never been a writer easily confined to a single genre. His ten novels, beginning with *The Orchard Keeper*, published in 1965, through *The Road*, his most recent novel published in 2007, have consistently earned McCarthy the type of acclaim reserved for only the most revered of American authors. Certainly, it is reductive to affix a single genre label to McCarthy's work (or any artist's work, for that matter), especially given that his writing, according to Vereen M. Bell, "belligerently resist[s] abstraction and classification (Bell 2). Still, considering that this analysis deals strictly with language "after the end," *The Road* will be situated within the loosely defined genre of postapocalyptic fiction.

Upon its publication in 2007, *The Road* garnered far more mainstream attention than any of McCarthy's previous nine novels, winning the Pulitzer Prize and the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for Fiction. It was also a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. In a bizarre turn of events (and a sign that the apocalypse may be closer

than we realize), *The Road* was selected for Oprah's Book Club, and in March, 2007, the notoriously private author conducted his first televised interview on her show. Despite being highly esteemed in critical and scholarly circles, McCarthy had labored in relative obscurity for the first few decades of his literary career. His "Border Trilogy" (*All the Pretty Horses, The Crossing,* and *Cities of the Plain*), published in 1992, 1994, and 1998, respectively, brought the author's work into the mainstream. *The Road*, though, made Cormac McCarthy a household name.

For new readers of McCarthy, and there were multitudes given the author's sudden ascension to fame, *The Road* was shocking for its relentlessly hopeless depiction of a burnt-out postapocalyptic landscape. The novel is set in the midst of a world reduced to ashes, a "cauterized terrain" (*The Road* 14) in which almost the only survivors, apart from the father and the boy, appear to be roving gangs of cannibals and thieves. For longtime readers of McCarthy's fiction who had long since become accustomed to the author's signature brand of unrepentant violence, the bleakness of the narrative was to be expected. Rather, it was the spare, straightforward syntax that was most surprising. Arthur Bingham writes that McCarthy's style "will send most readers running for the dictionary" (19). However, *The Road* shows language returned to its most basic, elemental form, and this stylistic shift is largely a result of the postapocalyptic landscape the characters of the novel inhabit. Therefore, *The Road* demands a close examination considering how, and why, language has changed after the unnamed apocalyptic disaster of the novel.

Similarly to McCarthy's body of work, Margaret Atwood's writing has defied hard and fast categorization, which is fitting given her claim that applying genres to

literature is "like nailing jelly to a wall" ("*The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* 'In Context'" 513). Coral Ann Howells describes Atwood's status as one of the most versatile contemporary writers in English: "in every novel she takes up the conventions of a different narrative form—Gothic romance, fairy tale, spy thriller, science fiction or historical novel—working within those conventions and reshaping them" (5-6). In recent years, Atwood has turned to writing what she terms "speculative fiction," an extension of the science fiction genre. Atwood differentiates the two by saying that while science fiction proper "denotes books with things in them we can't yet do or begin to do, talking beings we can never meet, and places we can't go" ("*The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* 'In Context'" 513), speculative fiction "employs the means already more or less to hand, and takes place on Planet Earth" (513). Despite Atwood's reluctance to force any further categorization upon *Oryx and Crake,* it is necessary, given the centrality of the novel taking place "after the end," to situate it as a work of postapocalyptic fiction for this analysis. In the novel, Snowman, the supposed last man on earth after the mad scientist Crake has destroyed the human race through a deadly pandemic, is left with a head full of free-floating signifiers as he attempts to reconcile his old language with the postapocalyptic world.

While there is no shortage of scholarship on McCarthy and Atwood, and on *The Road* and *Oryx and Crake* in particular, there is a lack of scholarship offering an in-depth exploration of these authors' respective treatments of language after the apocalyptic events in their novels. Prior to this analysis, no scholarship has compared postapocalyptic language in these two texts. William E. Sheidley's "A Necessary Curse: Ambivalence Toward Technology in Two Recent Post-Apocalyptic Novels" does offer a comparison of

the two novels but leaves the authors' respective treatments of language mostly unaddressed. Many critics, however, have made important contributions towards these novels individually regarding the role language plays after apocalyptic events, and these articles are central to this analysis.

Ashley Kunsa, in "'Maps of the World in Its Becoming': Post-Apocalyptic Naming in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road,*" argues that the novel "is best understood as a linguistic journey towards redemption" (59). She analyzes the novel's style and character dialogue in an effort to show how, in a world seemingly devoid of meaning, meaning is made through language. In "Mapping *The Road* in Post-Postmodernism," Linda Woodson takes the opposite stance. Like Kunsa, she argues that *The Road* is best understood as a "journey" (89). However, while Kunsa argues that language "triumphs" (58), Woodson argues that with the end of the world, the language that defined the old world has become essentially meaningless. She takes the principles of postmodernism, which question the ability of language to accurately represent reality, and applies them to the setting of *The Road*, in which all referents have literally been destroyed, arguing that the old language is no longer adequate after the apocalypse. Shelly L. Rambo, in "Beyond Redemption?: Reading Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* After the End of the World," situates the novel within the context of American redemption narratives. She argues that the postapocalyptic setting of the novel cannot be interpreted as a traditional story of redemption and that any attempt to do so is futile since old mythologies have no connection to, and hold no meaning in, postapocalyptic worlds (101).

In "The Manipulative Power of Word-Formation Devices in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake,*" Paula López Rúa painstakingly traces the effects science and

technology, learning, consumerism, and media and entertainment have on lexical development within the novel. Moreover, she discusses language as a power-preserving tool and considers how these linguistic changes allow "number people" (150), the more privileged group in the novel, to wield authority over "word people" (150), the less privileged group. While Rua's study's primary focus is on language before the apocalyptic event of the novel, it nonetheless draws several informative conclusions regarding language's role in the novel. Jennifer Lawn also discusses the pre-apocalyptic language of the novel in "The Word as Remnant: Margaret Atwood and Janet Frame." In the article, she explores the "showdown" between words and numbers in *Oryx and Crake* (386), detailing the way that, as scientific, empirical reasoning gains privilege, the language of the novel becomes more precise and less figurative. Ultimately, she argues that figurative representation is essential for human survival (397).

Despite its still being considered a "subgenre" of science fiction, postapocalyptic fiction, according to Chabon, "is one of the few subgenres of science fiction . . . that may be safely attempted by a mainstream writer without incurring too much damage to his or her credentials for seriousness." Thanks in no small part to works by acclaimed authors such as McCarthy and Atwood, postapocalyptic fiction has gained a level of legitimacy in scholarly circles in recent years. Universities have begun to offer postapocalyptic fiction courses. Essential theoretical works have been published that discuss postapocalyptic fiction as a serious genre that merits serious critical consideration, such as Frank Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending*, James Berger's *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse,* and Teresa Heffernan's *Post-Apocalyptic Culture: Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Twentieth-Century Novel.* Each of these three works discusses

figurative representation and language after the end of the world, including the struggle for the old language to represent a new reality, and therefore factor heavily in this analysis.

This analysis draws from the aforementioned sources, among many others, to explore language's role after the end of the world. In doing so, it will attempt to answer some larger questions, such as "Do the novels depict figurative representation as an essential part of humanity?" and "Do these novels suggest it is possible for language, whether spoken, written, or otherwise, to survive the apocalypse?" Cormac McCarthy and Margaret Atwood are certainly complex writers, and therefore they resist simple, conclusive answers to these questions. However, each novel explores these questions in its own way, and each suggests that language is a redemptive and necessary part of human existence. They also suggest, however, that if language is to exist after an apocalyptic event, a radical re-imagining of its form and purpose must take place.

CHAPTER 2: THE SACRED IDIOM: POSTAPOCALYPTIC LANGUAGE IN *THE ROAD*

Roughly one third of the way into Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, the two unnamed protagonists, the father and his young boy, have just set up camp. As they silently warm their hands over a fire, the narration shifts and the reader is given access into the father's thoughts. He reflects on the linguistic rupture that has accompanied the unnamed apocalyptic disaster of the novel that has rendered the world a "cauterized terrain" (14) and his resulting inability to understand the world:

> He tried to think of something to say but he could not. He'd had this feeling before, beyond the numbness and the dull despair. The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true. More fragile than he would have thought. How much was gone already? The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality. (88-89)

For the father, the apocalyptic event has revealed the fallacy in the supposed "reality" of the old signifiers that once defined the world; his language no longer possesses the power to make meaning in the world, and perhaps never did.

The Road takes place ten years after the catastrophic event, described simply as a "long shear of light and then a series of low concussions" (14), has rendered the world unknowable, and thus unspeakable, for the father. He is stuck within the old system of language, left to grope for meaning in the eternal "nothingness" in which he finds himself and the boy (15). For the father, the signifieds, the concepts that once defined his world,

have been revealed as barren, and he is left with a collection of signifiers attached to nothing in the physical world. Yet even in the damaged state in which it exists, language is almost literally all the father is left with, and in order to survive, he must figure out how to make use of it in the new world.

Much scholarship on *The Road* concerns itself primarily with the novel's ambiguous, decidedly un-McCarthyesque ending. After his father's death, the boy is adopted by a family that appears to be "the good guys" (*The Road* 282), and this ending, while open for interpretation since the reader is left uncertain of the family's intentions, teases the possibility for the redemption of humanity. It is an ending that has polarized McCarthy purists who favor the more overtly nihilistic messages of the author's previous novels. Take, for example, *Blood Meridian*, which ends with the judge, one of American fiction's most disturbing characters and the embodiment of violence and war and evil, and the implication that the cycle of violence exalted by the judge is innate in humans and is destined to continue for all time. In the novel's final haunting scene, McCarthy writes, "He never sleeps, the judge. He is dancing, dancing. He says that he will never die" (335). In McCarthy's earlier texts, writes Shelly L. Rambo, "violence obliterates any redemptive framework" (100). The ending of *The Road*, on the other hand, offers a bit of hope, and this unusual ending has dominated much criticism of the novel.

Less has been written regarding whether language can survive, and if it can, how it will be altered after the apocalypse. The passage at the beginning this chapter suggests that, for the father, the breakdown between sign and signifier and the sudden disappearance of a reliable system for making meaning in the world is at least as traumatic as the cataclysm itself. His alienation in the new world because of the loss of

language cuts beyond the "numbness and despair" that he has grown accustomed to. Yet despite the irreparable damage that has been inflicted upon language by the apocalyptic event—for the "colors," "names of birds," and "things to eat" are truly gone for good, and thus the words that describe them—the language of the old world has not entirely disappeared. By examining how the father and son use language in the postapocalyptic world, it is possible to come to three significant conclusions regarding postapocalyptic language in *The Road*. First, the novel shows language being burned down to its essence as a result of the apocalyptic event of the novel, returned to a purer form that is a clear departure from the convoluted, overly complex language that existed before the apocalyptic event wiped the world clean. This suggests that language can in fact survive an apocalyptic event, even if it survives in radically altered form. Second, the father and son possess a unique bond, frequently relying on language as communication in order to ensure their own survival. This dependence upon language suggests that language is an essential, inextricable human trait that cannot be removed from humans, even after a cataclysmic event as total as the one in *The Road.* Third, language allows the father and son to construct new mythologies that will replace the old ones and be carried into the new, postapocalyptic world.

In *The Road*, Cormac McCarthy abandons the baroque, often enigmatic prose of many of his earlier novels in favor of a raw, elemental style that is free of all meaning-obscuring abstractions, thus mirroring the postapocalyptic landscape in which the novel is set. In *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse*, James Berger writes, "Apocalypse is a semantic alchemical process; it burns and distills signs and referents into new precipitates. The study of post-apocalypse is a study of what disappears and

what remains and of how the remainder has been transformed" (7). In *The Road*, what has disappeared is the vast majority of words that once ostensibly defined the world, and what remains is a language returned to its most basic, rudimentary form. It is a language that has been redeemed, in the sense that Shelly L. Rambo defines the term, "taken from a situation of disrepair and restored to an original, if not perfected, state" (102). Consider the following passage from early in the novel:

> They left the cart in a gully covered with the tarp and made their way up
> the slope through the dark poles of the standing trees to where he'd seen a
> running ledge of rock and they sat under the rock overhang and watched
> the gray sheets of rain blow across the valley. It was very cold. (8-9)

The father can point to the "cart," "gully," "tarp," "slope," and "trees" and see the clear linkage between sign and referent. This pared-down approach to naming is consistent throughout the novel as the father and son traverse the charred landscape on "a search for the prelapsarian eloquence lost in the postlapsarian babble" (Kunsa 60). Ashley Kunsa argues that the novel is "a search not simply for the original names given the world by Adam, but also, more fundamentally, for the God-given capacity to name the world correctly" (60). The father and son are searching for the coast, but also for a new way of understanding the world through a new language. As stated in Chapter 1, the term "apocalypse," in its etymological sense, refers literally to an "unveiling" (Heffernan 4). Many have focused on the "moral unveiling" that takes place after the apocalyptic event (Berger 8), of the way humanity at its basest is revealed, but language, too, has undergone a revelation; it, like the rest of the postapocalyptic landscape, has been stripped down to its most essential elements.

Throughout *The Road*, readers are constantly reminded of the inevitable failure of the old language, of the fact that it is doomed to remain one step removed from the real. After all, language "has not fallen from the sky" (Derrida 286). There is no such thing as a perfect name, since "the bond between the signifier and signified is arbitrary" (Saussure 62). Words do not possess any intrinsic value but rather are human constructs imposed upon a nameless world in order to preserve the illusion of order. The language that existed in the pre-apocalyptic world, then, has been revealed to be imperfect, and *The Road* eagerly displays this inevitable failure of the old language by constantly undermining it throughout the novel.

Written language, especially, is rendered irrelevant in the postapocalyptic world of *The Road*. Early in the novel, the father pulls a magazine from his hip pocket only to use it as a makeshift torch (47); the father and son pass through a town and see billboards featuring whited-out "advertisements for goods which no longer existed" (128); late in the novel, the reader finds out that the father has ceased giving his son writing lessons and discourages him from writing a letter in the sand: "What if the bad guys saw it?" he asks the boy (245). In one poignant scene, he recalls standing in a library some time after the apocalyptic event:

> Years later he'd stood in the charred ruins of a library where blackened books lay in pools of water. Shelves tipped over. Some rage at the lies arranged in their thousands row on row. He picked up one of the books and thumbed through the heavy bloated pages. He'd not have thought the value of the smallest thing predicated on a world to come. (187)

The image of the destroyed library is a transparent symbol of what has become of the old language. The library, once a repository for cultural truths, a keeper of the sacred verities that defined human existence, has been instantaneously reduced to ruins. For the father, the apocalyptic event has revealed that these "truths," as represented by the books in the library, are nothing more than "lies" (187).

Similarly, the narration suggests a struggle to adequately depict apocalypse, often admitting the impossibility of describing the indescribable: phrases like "nameless dark" (9) and "Something nameless in the night" (15) litter the text and can be read as resignations that the old language is no longer sufficient because the postapocalyptic world cannot be named in any meaningful way using the old signifiers. When the narration does attempt to capture the postapocalyptic landscape using the old language, it resorts to simile and metaphor to attempt to convey meanings of things for which the reader has no precedent: the sun circles overhead "like a banished mother with a lamp," and burned people sit beside the road "like failed sectarian suicides" (32).

The novel also is almost entirely devoid of proper nouns. The boy is simply "the boy," and the father, though referred to affectionately by the boy as "Papa," is also left unnamed. Early on, it is made clear that the old "official" names have been revealed as arbitrary and empty of any intrinsic meaning when the father half-heartedly tries to explain the idea of "states," then quickly gives up:

> Why are they the state roads?
>
> Because they used to belong to the states. What used to be called states.
>
> But there's not any more states?
>
> No.

What happened to them?

I dont know exactly. That's a good question. (43)

The Road is a journey narrative, but the father and son are not heading to any specified

location; they are merely "moving south" (4) towards "the coast" (29). While many

scholars, most thoroughly and convincingly Wesley G. Morgan in "The Route and Roots

of *The Road*," have situated the setting of the novel in the American South, this is beside

the larger point that the absence of proper place names indicates that the old systems for

making meaning have been revealed as bankrupt.

The use of phrases such as "nameless," the use of metaphor and simile, and the

absence of proper nouns are all ways of describing things for which no precise names

exist. The text is saturated with similar attempts to name the unnameable as the old

language continually falls short, which exemplifies Berger's idea of "the post-apocalyptic

representational impasse" (13). So if the old language is destined to fail, then something

better must replace it. Kunsa writes that the postapocalyptic landscape of *The Road*

becomes a "New Earth, a New Eden" (59). At first glance, her argument appears to defy

the poststructuralist idea that words do not have intrinsic value but are dependent upon

other words for meaning. Derrida writes that "there never has been and never will be a

unique word, a master name" (297), and if this is true, then the idea of "perfectly"

naming anything becomes an unattainable goal. Kunsa argues, though, that the father and

son are moving away from the old language and that their refusal to stay mired in the pre-

apocalyptic, now meaningless terminology "demonstrates their belief in a better way to

name and a better world of which to speak, even if they (and the novel) have not yet

found these things" (65). So, according to Kunsa, language has not failed; words have failed.

By this logic, the pre-apocalyptic, everyday language used by the father and son is only temporary, a placeholder until the "true" linguistic system that is to replace words becomes clear. The father's and son's usage of the old language is significant, because regardless of his status as what Kunsa refers to as an "Adamic figure" 65), the boy still depends upon the old language throughout the novel. The closest he and the father come to creating a "new" language is when they invent nonsensical names for card games, like "Abnormal Fescue or Catbarf" (53). Still, this is hardly the re-imagination of language the boy appears destined to usher into the postapocalyptic world. Even though the notion of "states" has been revealed as meaningless in the new world, the boy still memorizes names found on the old, tattered map he and the father carry around: "The boy sat by the fire at night with the pieces of the map across his knees. He had the names of towns and rivers by heart and he measured their progress daily" (214-15). Additionally, while "Papa" is not necessarily a proper noun, it functions in the same way for the boy. In one of the final scenes of the novel, the father dies, and the son turns to the old language in order to attempt to affirm his father's existence: "When he came back he knelt beside his father and held his cold hand and said his name over and over again" (281). For the boy, the act of repeating his father's name is a way of breathing him into being. While in many ways the old language has been revealed as useless, the simplicity with which the boy uses language shows the transition being made from the overly complex language of the old world to the language that is to define the new world.

In *The Road*, the father and son share a bond that is unbreakable; they are "each the other's world entire" (6). For readers, this bond is made clear through the father and son's frequent communication, and through this communication, the novel suggests that, even after the end of the world, humans need language in some form in order to exist and in fact, to remain human. A common language is what makes them the "good guys" and separates them from the "bad guys" in the novel, and so in order to ensure their own survival, the father and son must develop their own private code in order to understand each other and the world. One word that gains new significance after the apocalypse is the oft-repeated word "okay," which, as Linda Woodson argues, "functions as a primal response, useful in many ways as agreement, understanding with or without agreement, reassurance, and end of discussion" (94). Oftentimes the word takes on multiple meanings within a single conversation:

> And we're still going south.
>
> Yes.
>
> So we'll be warm.
>
> Yes.
>
> Okay.
>
> Okay what?
>
> Nothing. Just okay.
>
> Go to sleep.
>
> Okay.
>
> I'm going to blow out the lamp. Is that okay?
>
> Yes. That's okay. (10)

Since so much of the pre-apocalyptic language has been instantly wiped out by the apocalyptic event, simple, everyday phrases such as "okay" are instilled with new meaning, and the father and son depend upon this new type of language in order to understand one another. Given his existence in a world where the meaning-making institutions that existed in the pre-apocalyptic world have been laid waste, the boy is forced to rely on simple phrases like "okay"; these expressions, among others to be discussed later, become a part of the unique linguistic code that connects the father and son and in turn show how, in a world that resists linguistic interpretation, they depend on what little language remains in order to survive.

It has been established that many, in fact most, of the old signifiers that defined the pre-apocalyptic world have been broken from their supposed connection to reality. The father and son, then, must make use of what is left of the broken language that has survived the apocalypse. It is necessary here to return to the question posed by Teresa Heffernan with the father's and son's use of language as communication: "Does the ruptured relationship between language and the world . . . open up or shut down meaning? Is it productive or destructive?" (14). For the father, the answer is clear; his insistence on speaking, on using language of the old world, can be read as his fear that the rupture between words and the world shuts down the possibility for meaning. He, more than the son, is responsible for emphasizing the necessity for spoken words. Early in the novel, the father and son encounter a gang on the road. When one of the men grabs the boy and holds a knife to his throat, the father shoots the man, killing him instantly. Later, when the son is clearly traumatized by the incident, the father repeats, "It's okay. It's okay," to the boy, but the boy shuts down, refusing to speak (67). The break in verbal

communication between them is referred to as "sinister" (67), and despite the father's

continual pleadings, the boy will not open the lines of communication: "The boy sat

slumped, his face blank. The filth dried in his hair and his face was streaked with it. Talk

to me, he said, but he would not" (68). Much of the conversation between the father and

the boy involves the father trying to coax the son into speaking, because for the father, to

speak is to affirm one's own existence.

The father's reluctance to embrace a new language is also seen in his attitude

towards dreams. For him, dreams are not to be trusted because they represent a world

beyond his ability to name, and thus control. He tells the boy, "When your dreams are of

some world that never was and some world that never will be and you are happy again

then you will have given up" (189). Dreams represent worlds that exist beyond linguistic

interpretation, worlds radically different from the one that they currently inhabit, and

therefore are dangerous from the father's perspective. He dreams of "creatures of a kind

he'd never seen before. They did not speak" (153). Another of his dreams is described in

this way: "Kin long dead washed up and cast fey sidewise looks upon him. None spoke"

(187). The father's dreams are filled with silences, and these are seen as threatening

because to him, naming represents the ability to control his surroundings. In his dreams,

he is stripped of this control, showing his irrelevance in the new world. Similarly, the boy

is haunted by a dream that shows the rupture between his father and the world:

> What is it?
>
> Nothing. I had a bad dream.
>
> What did you dream about?
>
> Nothing.

Are you okay?

No.

He put his arms around him and held him. It's okay, he said.

I was crying. But you didnt wake up.

I'm sorry. I was just so tired.

I meant in the dream.

In these dreams, the father's inability to exist in the new world because of his dependence on the old signifiers is manifested.

The other possible answer to Heffernan's question is that the breakdown between language and the world can liberate the world from the human construct of naming, which can in turn open up meaning. In *Understanding Cormac McCarthy*, Steven Frye argues that the minimalism in dialogue between the father and son is not limiting at all, but in fact signifies a deeper emotional understanding between the two that transcends verbal language: "*The Road* also explores the soul's capacity to transcend, perhaps in passing moments of hope, and more important in the permanent inscription of the Word, gone now from pages of books, but resident with latent emotional force in human memory" (166). Signifiers existed in the pre-apocalyptic world to better help humans make sense out of the world; *The Road* suggests that, in the postapocalyptic world, these old signifiers are no longer necessary. For instance, early in the novel the father and son come across a lightning-struck man on the road. The man is "burntlooking as the country, his clothing scorched and black. One of his eyes was burnt shut and his hair was but a nitty wig of ash upon his blackened skull" (49-50). The man does not plead for help. Rather, "he [sits] there in "silence" (50), and this silence can be interpreted as

representing the man's irrelevance in the new world; he is silent because he has nothing

to say. He is even stripped of his humanity in the postapocalyptic world, as he is

described as simply one of many dead things littering the postapocalyptic landscape:

"The burned man had fallen over and at that distance you couldnt even tell what *it* was"

(emphasis mine) (50).

While traversing the road, the father and son encounter Ely, another character

who can be seen as representing the emptiness of the pre-apocalyptic language. His

words are paradoxical, full of riddles and self-negation, seemingly parodying the pre-

apocalyptic language, which was often contradictory, overly complicated, and which has

been revealed as essentially meaningless. He speaks cryptically to the father, telling him,

"Even if you knew what to do you wouldnt know what to do" (169), "Nobody wants to

be here and nobody wants to leave" (169), and, "There is no God and we are his

prophets" (170). Shortly after, it is revealed that even the name Ely is a lie:

> I couldnt trust you with it. To do something with it. I dont want anybody
>
> talking about me. To say where I was or what I said when I was there. I
>
> mean, you could talk about me maybe. But nobody could say it was me. I
>
> could be anybody. I think in times like these the less said the better. (171-
>
> 72)

Ely is symbolic of the old language because he uses language to obscure the truth; he

invents a name so he will not be held accountable for himself, and in his interactions with

the father and son, his language is convoluted and meaningless. While initially the boy

shows compassion for Ely, it soon becomes clear to him that Ely has no place in the new

world. Soon Ely disappears down the road "like some storybook peddler from an antique

time, dark and bent and spider thin and soon to vanish forever" (174). Significantly, "the boy never looked back at all" (174), because he is responsible for looking forward to the new world.

Finally, postapocalyptic language allows the father and son to create new mythologies to replace the old ones. Rambo's definition of "redemption" involves first a "state of disrepair," and second a restoration to an "original, if not perfected state" (102). The old world, the world of the father, can be seen as the world in disrepair, and as Kunsa argues, it is the son that is charged with "carrying the fire" into the new world. She points to the phrase's religious undertones, claiming it becomes "incantatory in the manner of a litany or a prayer" (59). There is no mention in *The Road* as to how or when "carrying the fire" originated, but it, along with "the good guys," gives the son a divine mission, even in a landscape that is "[b]arren, silent, godless" (4). "Carrying the fire" becomes a creed unto itself, and it serves the function of preserving a sense of humanity, of ensuring that the father and son remain "the good guys" even in the face of unspeakable evil:

> We wouldnt ever eat anybody, would we?
>
> No. Of course not.
>
> Even if we were starving?
>
> We're starving now.
>
> You said we werent.
>
> I said we werent dying. I didnt say we werent starving.
>
> But we wouldnt.
>
> No. We wouldnt.
>
> No matter what.

No. No matter what.

Because we're the good guys.

Yes.

And we're carrying the fire.

And we're carrying the fire. Yes.

Okay. (128-29)

"Carrying the fire" becomes the boy's reason for existence. The father's "old stories of courage and justice" are merely fictions for the boy (41), and he quickly tires of hearing them because, as he tells the father, "Those stories are not true" (268). "Carrying the fire," on the other hand, is simple and pure, and represents the new mythologies that will come to define the postapocalyptic world of the novel.

The Road concludes somewhat enigmatically. The final scene does not end with the father or son, the two characters the novel is centered around, but rather ends with a picture of a time when the world was not defined by human language. Some brook trout are in a mountain stream, and "[o]n their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which would not be put back. Not be made right again" (287). It is significant that a novel that focuses so heavily on what is to come, on what new world is to replace the old world after the apocalypse, ends with a scene of a time before words. This, though, is the return to an "original, if not perfected state" before the old signifiers imposed a human agenda upon the world (Rambo 102). In *After the End*: *Representations of Post-Apocalypse*, James Berger writes that every postapocalyptic narrative involves "measuring the incommensurable" (13). The new world is incommensurable because the language that is to exist in the

postapocalyptic world has not yet been formed. The postapocalyptic setting of *The Road* consistently resists linguistic interpretation, yet through the prose style of the novel, the communicative bond that exists between the father and son, and the emergence of new mythologies, the novel imagines the beginning of a world and a new language that is to save humanity from a world wrecked by apocalyptic disaster.

CHAPTER 3: THE DEATH OF DIFFERENCE: POSTAPOCALYPTIC LANGUAGE
IN *ORYX AND CRAKE*

Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* is a novel that depicts the extinction of the

human race at the hands of Crake, the whiz kid scientist responsible for creating the

deadly ReejoovenEsence virus, which he hides in the BlyssPluss sexual potency pill and

disperses to an all-too-eager public. Snowman, the supposed last man on earth, is secretly

given the vaccine by Crake and has inherited the postapocalyptic waste land in which the

novel is set. He is left with only a few meager possessions and the throwaway phrases

from old self-help books that continually intrude on his consciousness. The novel

alternates between the postapocalyptic present and the futuristic pre-apocalyptic world

when Snowman was known as Jimmy. Gradually, through Snowman's fragmented

recollections, the novel fills in the "blank spaces in the stub of his brain, where memory

used to be" (5), revealing piecemeal the conditions that existed in the pre-apocalyptic

world. It is a world ruled by multinational scientific corporations and boundless,

unchecked scientific progress. Bioengineers and geneticists and their families live in

"Compounds," enclosed areas separated from the "pleeblands," the decaying urban areas

where the rest of the population lives. Corporate scientists constantly invent new products

that perpetuate the public's insatiable desire for youth, beauty, convenience, and pleasure,

and in turn perpetuate their own empowered status since they provide these products.

Science is no longer used for the betterment of humanity, but instead is recklessly

ambitious and has become entangled with commercialism; all ethical boundaries have

been broken down. Scientists entertain themselves by splicing together various animal

genes to form bizarre, grotesque, sometimes dangerous hybrids: "There'd been a lot of

fooling around in those days: create-an-animal was so much fun, said the guys doing it; it made you feel like God" (51). Jimmy and Crake are two children of scientists who live in the Compounds, where the world is divided between "word people" and "number people," those who value the humanities and those that value math and science; the former group is marginalized, while the latter group is privileged. The "number people," and specifically the corporations that provide products to the masses, have achieved absolute power through making "youth, health, beauty, sexual pleasure, birth control, and scientific and technological advances appear highly desirable" (Rúa 152), thereby marginalizing "word people" since word people can do nothing to satisfy these desires. Paula López Rúa adequately sums up the pre-apocalyptic world of the novel: "In a word, it is a world ruled by science, corruption, inequality, selfishness, consumerism, violence and insecurity" (152). In the novel, the language and meaning-making systems that exist in the pre-apocalyptic sections of the novel are revealed as bankrupt because the pre-apocalyptic world is defined by binary oppositions, and these binaries ultimately play a part in its destruction. At the same time, the novel suggests that language is an immutable part of humanity and therefore must be carried over, in some form, to the postapocalyptic world.

One of the most basic principles in semiotics is the idea that humans order their world through "binary oppositions." In *Course in General Linguistics*, Ferdinand de Saussure famously claims, "In language there are only differences" (70), meaning one linguistic sign has no intrinsic value, but instead only makes meaning when it is viewed in relation to other signs. Since humans use language to make meaning in the world, it can be assumed that such a way of using language can translate to the real world.

According to Robert Dale Parker, "For structuralists, we understand everything by seeing its difference from something else. We interpret the world by juxtaposing different concepts against each other" (40-41). In *Oryx and Crake*, we are presented with a stark example of binary oppositions through what Jennifer Lawn refers to as the "showdown between words and numbers" (386). The fact that this binary ultimately leads to the world's destruction suggests that in the postapocalyptic world, a less destructive language must come into existence. Two of the novel's main characters, Jimmy and Crake are foils for one another; Jimmy represents word people while Crake represents number people. A third main character, Oryx, can be seen as an alternative to the destructive either/or mindset that plagues the pre-apocalyptic world of the novel.

Early in the novel, the strict division between word and number people is established. In one particularly telling scene, Jimmy as a young boy eats lunch with his father and one of his father's colleagues, Ramona, at the cafeteria of OrganInc Farms. At OrganInc, Jimmy's father is "one of the foremost architects of the pigoon project" (22), in which human-tissue organs are generated inside pig hosts, called "pigoons." As Jimmy watches Ramona eat, he observes, "Ramona was supposed to be a tech genius but she talked like a shower-gel babe in an ad" (25). Jimmy's father explains that "[s]he wasn't stupid[;] . . . she just didn't want to put her neuron power into long sentences," adding, "It was because they were numbers people, not word people" (25). Jimmy's father and Ramona are emblematic of the prevailing attitude towards words during the time of the novel; to them, words use up valuable brainpower that should be conserved for more worthwhile, that is to say scientific, efforts. Jimmy, on the other hand, feels an affinity for words throughout his entire life, and he realizes that he possesses qualities different from

the ones valued by society. Even as a child, he "already knew that he himself was not a numbers person" (25).

As the novel progresses, Jimmy is constantly ostracized because of his preference for words instead of numbers. He is one of the marginalized relics of a bygone era living in a culture where "quantitative description [has] displace[d] qualitative discourse" (Dunning 86), and his status as a "word person" dogs him throughout the novel. His first memory of linguistic curiosity involves him as a student at HelthWyzer Public School, sneaking away during lunch to watch a CD-ROM featuring Alex the parrot, a character that invents new words, like "*cork-nut*, for almond" (54). Jimmy soon begins using "cork-nut" in everyday speech: "*Cork-nut*, he'd say to anyone who pissed him off. Anyone who wasn't a girl. No one but him and Alex the parrot knew exactly what cork-nut meant, so it was pretty demolishing" (59). Jimmy's passion for language and words is so atypical that he is forced to develop a clandestine friendship with a fictional parrot in order to feel accepted. Since he is so totally excluded from the meaning-making system that is valued by the ruling class of the novel, he attempts to reappropriate language in order to gain some measure of power, which becomes increasingly scarce given his designation as one of the marginalized few who values words and not numbers.

Later, Jimmy attends the second-rate Martha Graham Academy, an institution close in proximity to the pleeblands "named after some gory old dance goddess of the twentieth century" (186). Martha Graham, in keeping with its status as an inferior institution, is poorly run and physically decaying: graffiti-covered walls that "could have been scaled by a one-legged dwarf" (185), leaky buildings, broken air conditioning, poor electricity, cafeteria food that is "mostly brown and look[s] like rakunk shit" (186), and a

swimming pool "that look[s] and smell[s] like a giant sardine can" (186) all characterize the Martha Graham Institute. Moreover, the gendering of arts and sciences in the highly patriarchal world of the novel—Crake attends the more prestigious Watson-Crick, named after the two male scientists who discovered the double helix structure of DNA molecules—serves as a reminder that words and imaginative language are condemned to remain inferior to numbers and empirical, logical thinking. Jimmy is conditioned to believe that he, as a word person, is beneath number people, and while he seems resigned to his plight as a word person, he buys into his own subjugation:

> So a lot of what went on at Martha Graham was like studying Latin, or book-binding: pleasant to contemplate in its way, but no longer central to anything, though every once in a while the college president would subject them to some yawner about the vital arts and their irresistible reserved seat in the big red-velvet amphitheatre of the beating human heart. (187)

Like many oppressed groups, Jimmy has been manipulated by the group in power into believing in his own essential inferiority.

While ostensibly a school devoted to the arts, Martha Graham appears complicit, even cooperative, in the devaluing of language encouraged and perpetuated by the scientific elite. Underneath the school's motto, *Ars Longa Vita Brevis* ("art is long, life is short"), runs the newer, more pragmatic motto: "Our Students Graduate With Employable Skills" (188). The education that takes place at Martha Graham is merely in service to the scientific elite, as is evidenced by its course offerings. Rúa writes, "Although considerably devalued due to their uselessness for the privileged group's interests, the humanities also try to keep up with the times by offering degrees like

Problematics or *Pictorial and Plastic Arts*, and subjects such as *Webgame Dynamics* or

Applied Rhetoric" (154). The "educational utilitarianism" espoused by the school

illustrates the unquestioned dominance of science during the pre-apocalyptic world of the

novel (DiMarco 179). Students at Martha Graham are destined to become "wordserfs"

(253), valuable only as ad writers for one of the scientific corporations, ultimately

powerless to effect any real change in the world. Not surprisingly, soon after entering

Martha Graham Jimmy finds that the liberal education provided there is something of a

joke, not taken seriously by the school or its students:

> Jimmy had a couple of term papers to finish before the holidays. He could
>
> have bought them off the Net, of course—Martha Graham was notoriously
>
> lax about scorekeeping, and plagiarism was a cottage industry here—but
>
> he'd taken a position on that. He'd write his own papers, eccentric though
>
> it seemed. (194)

Even while attending a school with presumably like-minded students, Jimmy realizes that

those, like him, who possess a passion for words have been virtually stamped out by the

societal pressures to conform to the whims of the scientific elite.

At Martha Graham, Jimmy begins to fulfill the role he is seemingly destined for:

"champion," "defender," and "preserver" of words (195). While at the school, he takes

sanctuary in the school library, which, predictably, is depicted as ancient and decrepit:

"Better libraries, at institutions with more money, had long ago burned their actual books

and kept everything on CD-ROM, but Martha Graham was behind the times in that, as in

everything" (195). Jimmy feels a kinship with the library because it, like him, has been

pushed to the margins. He feels rejected by the system, and so he takes refuge in words, which have also been devalued:

> Part of what impelled him was stubbornness; resentment, even. The system had filed him among the rejects, and what he was studying was considered—at the decision-making levels, the levels of real power—an archaic waste of time. Well then, he would pursue the superfluous as an end in itself. . . . Who was it who'd said that all art was completely useless? Jimmy couldn't recall, but hooray for him, whoever he was. The more obsolete a book was, the more eagerly Jimmy would add it to his inner collection. (195)

Jimmy sees himself as a guardian of words, which are being threatened by the progressively scientific world. Jimmy's identification of himself in this way continues into the postapocalyptic scenes in the novel. Even after the old words and signifiers have been ruptured from the world and it has been made quite clear that they possess no intrinsic value but only make meaning in relation to other words and signifiers, he clings to them:

> "Hang on to the words," he tells himself. The odd words, the old words, the rare ones. *Valance. Norn. Serendipity. Pibroch. Lubricious.* When they're gone out of his head, these words, they'll be gone, everywhere, forever. As if they had never been. (68)

Jimmy identifies himself so strongly with words as a way of resisting the authority of number people. This type of tension exists only because of the word/number binary that exists in the pre-apocalyptic world of the novel.

While Jimmy can be seen as representing the first half of the destructive word/number binary that exists in the novel, Crake represents the opposite side. Crake, like Jimmy, grew up on the HelthWyzer Compound, but while Jimmy, being one of the marginalized word people, is doomed to a lifetime of "[w]indow-dressing," of "decorating the cold, hard, numerical real world in flossy 2-D verbiage" (188), Crake possesses the power to enact real change. The fundamental, irreconcilable difference between Jimmy and Crake, and between word people and number people in general, is revealed in a conversation they have regarding the relative merits of art. Jimmy feels compelled to defend art, while Crake, endorsing the predominant view of art in the novel, believes it is essentially worthless: "'When any civilization is dust and ashes,' [Jimmy] said, 'art is all that's left over. Images, words, music. Imaginative structures. Meaning— human meaning, that is—is defined by them. You have to admit that'" (167). Crake does not admit it because to him, art does not define existence. While art is the only avenue for truth for Jimmy, Crake views art as mere amusement for those who do not possess "elegant minds" (142). To Crake, scientific advancement is the only real truth, and art is only valuable insofar as it serves what he perceives to be a superior, that is to say biological, function; it is nothing more than a "stab at getting laid" (168). While this conversation may superficially appear to be nothing more than a theoretical argument between college students, it also represents the word/number binary that exists in the novel.

As a result of his dismissal of art, Crake is depicted as coldly detached from humanity and as seeing no value in life of any kind. Tellingly, he is ultimately responsible for the world's destruction. Stephen Dunning contends that *Oryx and Crake*

is "arguably Crake's story, at least in so far as we must grasp Crake's relation to his world to understand what drives him to this radical therapy" (89). Crake buys into the idea espoused by his culture that science is superior to art, and his extreme adherence to this binary opposition allows him to justify the wholesale slaughter of humankind through the dispensation of the RejoovenEsence virus. His disregard for human life is hinted at throughout the novel, which can be read as a foreshadowing of his "final solution" (Dunning 89) as well as suggestive of the dangers inherent in seeing the world in terms of binaries. Crake's mother dies when a "hot bioform chew[s] through her like a solar mower" (176), and the mysterious nature of her death—"It was an accident, so went the story" (176)—and his indifferent reaction suggests that Crake's early scientific tinkering may have caused her death. Crake is unemotional when recounting for Jimmy his trip to the hospital to see her, and his cool, unmoved response is puzzling to Jimmy, who is traumatized by the loss of his own mother throughout the novel: "Jimmy didn't understand how he could be so nil about it—it was horrible, the thought of Crake watching his own mother dissolve like that" (177). Crake is depicted as devoid of basic human feelings like compassion because of his strict adherence to the ideals of a society in which "language has become purely instrumental, used rather than experienced" (Lawn 391).

In another similar instance, the reader learns that Crake's father, a minor character but one of few scientists who remains ethically uncorrupted in the novel, dies under similarly shadowy circumstances. The "general opinion" was that he jumped off a pleebland overpass (182-83), but the novel hints that he was executed for his refusal to adhere to the belief in unchecked scientific progress espoused by the scientific elite.

When Jimmy questions Crake about his father's death, Crake's response is, again, disturbingly absent of human sentiment: "'He was kind of uncoordinated,' said Crake, smiling in an odd way. 'He didn't always watch where he was going. He was head in the clouds. He believed in contributing to the improvement of the human lot'" (183). Crake's father's death and Crake's response to it is further proof of the suppression of human compassion by the scientific elite of the novel. By setting up a binary between words and numbers in which those who step outside of the cultural value of scientific progress without bounds are punished, just as Crake's father was, the ruling class in the novel reinforces the word/number binary.

The novel further depicts the dangers inherent in binary oppositions in the powerlessness of the majority of the population in *Oryx and Crake*. By nature, binary oppositions are exclusionary; they work to oppress those on the outside while privileging those on the inside. In *Oryx and Crake*, the population has become defenseless against the corrupt biomedical corporations that prey upon their fleshly desires. People have become mere subjects for the experiments of the scientists, who have taken control of the discourse and thus determine how the population sees the world. As Lawn states, "People [have] become incapable of any figurative sensibility that might prompt critical thinking precisely by impeding or recontextualizing the outpouring of corporate communications" (391). By conditioning the world to value technological advancement at any cost, the scientific elite of the novel has enslaved the population who await eagerly whatever technological innovation will fulfill their desires for immediate pleasure and gratification. Rúa claims that the scientific elite in the novel perpetuates their own authority by controlling language and discourse, thus depriving the public of any agency:

Scientists (the group in power) create a discourse which suggests the existence of a convenient system of values which must be preserved. Therefore, discourse (and new lexical terms within discourse) makes youth, health, beauty, sexual pleasure, birth control and scientific and technological advances appear as highly desirable. This truth is blindly accepted by the public, whose demands are satisfied by scientists by means of inventions. (152)

A close examination of some of the linguistic changes put in place by the scientific elite reveals that the group in power exploits people's tendency to see the world in terms of binaries in order to benefit themselves.

Similar to Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the most effective use of linguistic manipulation in *Oryx and Crake* occurs through the group in power's narrowing of thought through language. Rúa writes that in the novel, "the simplification of vocabulary in both form (respelling) and meaning contributes to this process of mental restraint" (163). In other words, by stripping humans of language and in turn their ability to make meaning of the world, scientists have rendered the public unable to understand the depths of their own oppression; instead, they are forced to rely on the scientific elite to make meaning for them. The linguistic changes implemented by scientists range from the subtle, such as simplifying product names ("AnooYoo"), to the more overtly sinister, such as the misnaming of products in order to inspire positive thinking (the "BlyssPluss" pill), to the outright extreme, such as the systematic elimination of books and the humanities. Each of these measures represents a devaluing of language by the group in

power, which ultimately convinces the public to become complicit in its own extinction by willingly ingesting the BlyssPluss pill for sexual gratification.

Thus far, it has been established that the old language, in which the world is defined by binary oppositions, is depicted as destructive in *Oryx and Crake*. The question of an alternative method of viewing the world is answered through Oryx. Jimmy and Crake encounter Oryx for the first time on HottTotts, a child pornography site: "She was only about eight, or she looked eight. They could never find out for certain how old she'd been then. Her name wasn't Oryx, she didn't have a name. She was just another girl on a porno site" (90). However, Oryx never confirms that she is the same girl Jimmy and Crake saw on HottTotts. She leaves her past ambiguous; she merely obliges Jimmy by answering him when he bombards her with questions about her past. Jimmy, according to Lawn, "tries to contain Oryx by embodying her, wanting to attach her to hard facts, names, dates, places" (397), and Jimmy suspects that she is only playing along: "Sometimes he suspected her of improvising, just to humour him; sometimes he felt that her entire past—everything she'd told him—was his own invention" (316). Oryx, with her untraceable past, is an "enigma," a character who is "[c]onstructed from disparate scraps of information, the proliferation of details about her life and her past only serve to perversely further obscure her from the reader" (Tolan 286). Because of the mysterious nature of her identity, Oryx becomes a character that represents a break in the dualistic word/number binary represented by Jimmy and Crake. She comes to represent the possibility of the existence of another kind of language not based around difference.

Late in the novel, Crake hires Jimmy to write ad copy for AnooYoo, the corporation for which Crake works, which sells "[p]ills to make you fatter, thinner,

hairier, balder, whiter, browner, blacker, yellower, sexier, and happier" (248). One such

pill is the BlyssPluss pill, the first of two initiatives taking place in the Paradice dome.

BlyssPluss is an all-in-one pill that would prevent sexually transmitted diseases, improve

libido, energy, and well-being, and prolong youth. A fourth, unadvertised capability,

Crake tells Jimmy, is a "sure-fire one-time-does-it-all birth-control pill, for male and

female alike, thus automatically lowering the population level" (294). The second

initiative, which Crake describes as his "life's work," is the next logical step to follow

BlyssPluss: "The Pill would put a stop to haphazard reproduction, the Project would

replace it with a superior method" (304). "The Project" is the Paradice Project, in which

Crake had invented a "dehumanized" human. Jimmy recalls seeing the "floor models" of

the Children of Crake for the first time:

> They were naked, but . . . there was no self-consciousness, none at all. At
>
> first, he couldn't believe them, they were so beautiful. Black, yellow,
>
> white, brown, all available skin colours. Each individual was exquisite.
>
> (302)

The Children of Crake, referred to also as the Crakers, were programmed by Crake to be

free of what he deemed the more "destructive features" in humans (305). Racism,

hierarchy, territorialism, fear of death, and "harmful symbolisms" such as "kingdoms,

icons, gods, or money" had all been eliminated from these creatures, according to Crake

(305).

By placing Oryx, a character that seemingly exists outside of the binary-

controlled world of Jimmy and Crake, in charge of the Crakers, Crake allows for the

possibility of the existence of a new language that is no longer reliant upon the old

signifiers. According to Lawn, "Oryx manifests the illusion that there could exist a being who completely understands one's desires, obviating the mediation of language" (397). Just as Oryx is not beholden to the damaging binaries exhibited by Jimmy and Crake, through her teachings the Crakers can similarly avoid defining the world according to difference. She teaches them to live in harmony with nature rather than to try to contain nature by applying limiting signifiers to it. She teaches the Crakers "[s]imple concepts, no metaphysics" (309), and in the postapocalyptic sections of the novel, it becomes clear that she has taught the Crakers to revere nature: "Oryx has told us that the ground is our friend," one of the Crakers tells Snowman (351). Such teachings form the beginnings of a system of meaning based around unity and harmony rather than difference, and a system that the Crakers will carry into the postapocalyptic world.

At the same time, the novel depicts the figurative language representation thought by Crake to be "harmful" as a necessary and immutable part of humanity. Crake sees abstractions as dangerous—"*Watch out for art*, Crake used to say" (361)—and so he has removed the ability to comprehend abstractions from the Crakers: "It was one of Crake's rules that no name could be chosen for which a physical equivalent—even stuffed, even skeletal—could not be demonstrated. No unicorns, no griffins, no manticores or basilisks" (7). The Crakers are "doggedly literal in their comprehension" (Lawn 394), and therefore after Crake and Oryx are dead, they make poor companions for Snowman with his flair for linguistic creativity. For instance, Snowman unthinkingly tells the Crakers to "piss off," and not surprisingly, they become confused: "'Piss off? Piss off?' They look at one another, then at him. He's made a mistake, he's said a new thing, one that's impossible to explain. Piss isn't something they'd find insulting. 'What is *piss off*?'" (9).

In another instance, Snowman tells the Crakers, "If you don't stop doing that, you'll be toast" (97). Predictably, this metaphor confuses the Crakers:

> *Toast is when you take a piece of bread—What is bread? Bread is when you take some flour—What is flour? We'll skip that part, it's too complicated. Bread is something you can eat, made from a ground-up plant and shaped like a stone. You cook it. . . . Please, why do you cook it? Why don't you just eat the plant?* (18)

Even this simplest of metaphors becomes an endless chain of signifiers with no end as Snowman begins to explain it to the Crakers, and it is here that he begins to realize the complexity of the old language and the impossibility of it ever being repaired: "'Forget it,' says Snowman" (98).

Snowman soon finds, though, that despite Crake's best efforts, he is ultimately unable to suppress the human compulsion towards figurative representation. When he returns from his journey, he discovers that in his absence the Crakers have constructed a "scarecrowlike effigy" (360) and are "chanting":

> *Ohhhh*, croon the women.
>
> *Mun*, the men intone.
>
> Is that *Amen*? Surely not! Not after Crake's precautions, his insistence on keeping these people pure, free of all contamination of that kind. (360).

Snowman realizes they are chanting not "Amen," but "Snowman," and that the effigy represents him. The Crakers have, without assistance, developed the capacity to "substitute the present with the not-present" (Lawn 395). Lawn writes, "The chasm is beginning to open between what *is* and what *might be*" (395) as the Crakers have begun

to build the foundations for storytelling, narrative, and art. Lawn argues that the Crakers' newfound abilities to symbolize will lead to technology, which spells doom for humankind as they are destined to repeat their mistakes: "Art begins the process toward catastrophe, technology finishes it off" (Lawn 395). However, this species of humans does not depend on binaries in order to make meaning; rather, as Oryx observes during her time with the Crakers, they are "quietly content" (311). This change from the old dependence on binaries is significant because, according to Danette DiMarco, "*Oryx and Crake*, with its focus on . . . personal profit, has repeatedly revealed the oppressive and degenerative nature of man-made barricades, divisions, separations, and enclosures" (192). The new language that will exist in the postapocalyptic world, then, is one that will not depend upon difference, binary oppositions, or other "man-made barricades" for meaning.

Oryx and Crake highlights the word/number binary to suggest that a language, and thus a worldview, based around difference and binary oppositions necessarily leads to destruction. Rúa argues that it is a novel about "the birth and death of words" (164). The pre-apocalyptic scenes of the novel show the birth of new words that more closely reflect the scientific, empirical nature of the world. With Crake's unleashing of the ReejoovenEsence virus, the death of those words is also seen. One of the necessary tropes in postapocalyptic narratives such as *Oryx and Crake*, though, is that after death must come rebirth. Through Oryx, and ultimately the Crakers who will inherit the postapocalyptic world, a new language that no longer relies upon difference will replace the old signifiers, which are no longer necessary in the postapocalyptic world of *Oryx and Crake*.

CHAPTER 4: THE WALKING DEAD AND THE GOD OF BULLSHIT: RE-
IMAGINING LANGUAGE IN *THE ROAD* AND *ORYX AND CRAKE*

Undoubtedly one of the appeals of writing postapocalyptic literature for

established writers like Cormac McCarthy and Margaret Atwood is that such narratives

liberate their authors from the conventions of what Margaret Atwood calls "the novel

proper" ("*The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* 'In Context'" 514), or so-called

"realistic fiction." Rather than being limited by what is, writers of postapocalyptic fiction

get to envision what might become. In postapocalyptic narratives, the world becomes a

blank slate, allowing the writer to invent a world from scratch, to imagine the

unimaginable and write it into existence. So while the events leading up to the end of the

world in these narratives are depicted with varying degrees of depth—the pre-catastrophe

world is described vividly in *Oryx and Crake*, while the reader is afforded only brief

glimpses of the time before in *The Road*—it is what replaces the old world that is often

most compelling for readers and writers and that is most productive for analytical

exploration.

There is a significant moment towards the end of *Oryx and Crake* when

Snowman, having just shown himself to the Children of Crake for the first time, realizes

his position as storyteller and conveyer of meaning in the postapocalyptic world. When

the Crakers begin to question him, he finds that they will obediently and unquestioningly

believe anything he tells them, any story he makes up: "These people were like blank

pages, he could write whatever he wanted on them" (349). In *The Road*, the father is

similarly responsible for explaining the world to the boy, who is a "blank page" in his

own right, born just after the apocalyptic event and knowing only the "nothingness" that

has come to define the postapocalyptic world (15). Both Snowman and the father are throwbacks to the old world and therefore are still bound within the old strictures of making meaning. Not surprisingly, their attempts to carry over meaning from the old world to the new by teaching language to the boy and the Crakers consistently fail.

One similarity between these two disparate works of literature is that each shows postapocalyptic worlds still in transition, not yet fully formed, awaiting a re-imagining of language. While it is clear that the old discourses are no longer viable, the new language is still yet to be established. Each of these two novels features characters that represent the past, the father and Snowman respectively, that act as bridges between the old and new worlds; they are burdened with the old language that is no longer adequate in the new world. The novels also feature characters that represent the future, the boy and the Crakers, that are the first generation of inhabitants of the postapocalyptic world and thus will determine the nature of the language that will define the new world. It is in the moments that the father and Snowman attempt to teach the boy and the Crakers the ways of the world, despite their own unfamiliarity with the world after the apocalypse, that the failure of the old language becomes evident. While the old language has proved useful in certain ways, its usefulness extends only so far. In order for a complete transition from the old world to the new, a new language, a new system for making meaning in the world must replace the old system. This new system must run through the boy and the Crakers.

In *The Road*, readers are constantly reminded of the chasm between the father's language, the once "sacred idiom" now "shorn of its referents" (89), and the postapocalyptic landscape that exists beyond his comprehension. Interestingly, in *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy*, published nearly twenty years before *The Road*,

Vereen M. Bell discusses how roads often function symbolically in McCarthy's writing: "Metaphorically a road is the equivalent of a signifier in language or structure: it points us in the direction and leads us somewhere that could reasonably be anticipated to be a vicinity of meaning. But the roads of McCarthy's novels . . . do not do that" (1). He argues that McCarthy's works often feature language that is disconnected from reality, never able to achieve the perfect, complete meaning it seeks. The title *The Road*, then, points to more than simply the physical road upon which the father and son travel. It is also suggestive of the signifiers the father is equipped with that never reach their destination, the signified, where meaning is made. Like the physical road, which leads nowhere and is never ending, "running from dark to dark" (*The Road* 261), the linguistic path between the word and meaning is one that cannot be completed for the father. Since he is bound to the language of the old world, he can never reach his destination on his journey towards meaning in the postapocalyptic world.

Early in the novel, the "godless" nature of the landscape indicates that the world of *The Road* still awaits meaning (4). The father recognizes that God, and in fact all the "sacred narratives" that once defined the pre-apocalyptic world, have been revealed to be empty. He desperately seeks verification that a god still exists, but his calls go unanswered:

> Then he just knelt in the ashes. He raised his face to the paling day. Are you there? he whispered. Will I see you at the last? Have you a neck by which to throttle you? Have you a heart? Damn you eternally have you a soul? Oh God, he whispered. Oh God. (11-12)

Here he realizes the totality of his isolation from the world; he is so cut off that even God cannot hear him. For the father, the "absolute truth" revealed by the apocalyptic event is that the world is harsh and unforgiving, indifferent to human concerns (130). Linda Woodson argues that the mythologies and beliefs that once defined human existence in actuality only served to obscure the real truth, that death is unstoppable. He writes that "one by one the narrative dismantles those human creations designed to avoid the truth of death, that which is created as a hold against death's inevitability and a desire for immortality" (91). The fact that death is the only certainty is not lost on the father, who tells himself, "Every day is a lie. . . . But you are dying. That is not a lie" (238). For him, the blind belief in happy endings, that good will triumph over evil, is no longer tenable in a world where evil is around every corner. Yet the text suggests that there was a time when the father still clung to mythologies of the pre-apocalyptic world. The boy, despite the absence of meaning-making institutions from the pre-apocalyptic world, like books, schools, and churches, possesses a rudimentary understanding of God and the afterlife. He says to the father, "Can I ask you something?"

> Yes. Of course you can.
>
> What would you do if I died?
>
> If you died I would want to die too.
>
> So you could be with me?
>
> Yes. So I could be with you.
>
> Okay. (11)

The boy also sees value in praying. When they discover an abandoned bomb shelter with stores of food and he and the father are preparing to feast, the boy says a prayer thanking

those who left the food behind. He concludes the prayer, "And we hope that you're safe in heaven with God" (146). Clearly, the boy's belief in God, prayer, and the existence of an afterlife was taught to him by his father.

Time has passed since then, though, and in the novel's present, the father has come to realize that the sacred narratives of the old world are dead; the faith in religion that he and the boy once ostensibly possessed has been reduced to mere ceremony, performed only as empty ritual. The father is estranged from the world of the novel because the old signifiers he once used and which helped him understand the world can no longer make meaning. His wife foresees this alienation from the world in a conversation they have during the time when the cataclysm has only recently occurred. The father, in an attempt at heroism, claims that they are "survivors" (55). His wife assesses the difficulties that lie ahead more fatalistically, answering, "We're not survivors. We're the walking dead in a horror film" (55). What she recognized, and what the father failed to recognize, at least at first, is that "surviving" only means his being an alien in the new world, unable to understand the environment since he is equipped only with old signifiers. Shelly L. Rambo discusses the exploration of the term "survival" in Derrida's essay "Living On," in which Derrida translates the term literally as "over-living" (Rambo 106). Rambo applies this definition to the father's survival in *The Road*, claiming, "It is . . . as if the survivor was not intended to live on" (106). Throughout the novel, it becomes clear to the father that he is "over-living" in a world where he does not belong, as he exists on "borrowed time and borrowed world and borrowed eyes with which to sorrow it" (130).

The written and spoken word fare no better than religion; they, too, are revealed to be "remnant[s] of an irrecoverable world" (Rambo 101). While it is in the father's nature to try to preserve the language that once defined his world—"Make a list. Recite a litany. Remember," he tells himself (31)—he soon comes to the realization that his is a "gypsy language" (180), and his attempts to conjure meaning using the old signifiers are as "hopeless" as the messages to loved ones they see scrawled on rock cairns along the road (180). Expressions that the father takes for granted mean nothing to the son and are strangely out of place in the postapocalyptic world:

> I'll be in the neighborhood. Okay?
>
> Where's the neighborhood?
>
> It just means I wont be far.
>
> Okay. (95)

In a world where the only means to survival is the strict avoidance of "neighbors" at all costs since the world is populated mostly by cannibals, thieves, and other "bad guys," and where most people no longer live in houses, the concept of a "neighborhood" becomes absurd. When the father unthinkingly uses the expression "as the crow flies" (158), the son is confused. Crows, of course, became extinct with everything else on earth; they exist "just in books" (158), simulacra without referents, merely ideas. The father feels "rage at the lies arranged in their thousands row on row" when he enters an abandoned library (187) because it is a visual reminder that the foundational truths that once defined human existence are now meaningless.

His attempts to define himself in the world according to place names prove equally futile. While he admits that there are no such things as states anymore, he

constantly appeals to the "tattered oilcompany roadmap" that they carry with them. Tellingly, the father is consistently wrong when he attempts to locate himself and the son on the map: "it was no country that he knew" (202); the names of towns and rivers no longer apply, which at least partially explains the absence of proper place names in the text. Ashley Kunsa argues that the absence of proper place names is a narrative strategy, a "provocative rhetorical move that forces the reader to imagine new possibilities, to think not solely in terms of the world that was, but also of the world that will be" (62). She adds, "The burned out landscape, strangely, is a new if unlikely Eden awaiting once again those perfect names" (62). The old meaning-making institutions, all once responsible for shaping reality—"Nation states, machinery, books, social codes of civil conduct, even that basic ingredient of all advanced civilisations, the road"—cannot persist (Graulund 60). They exist as only "traces" of what humanity once was (Graulund 61).

The boy's faith in the signifiers of the old world gradually diminishes throughout the novel as well. Just as the father cannot connect meaning to the new world from the old signifiers, the boy cannot connect meaning to the old signifiers from the world he inhabits since he never witnessed the pre-apocalyptic world firsthand. The son, like the father, seems to gradually intuit the futility in clinging to the old signifiers throughout the novel as he grows tired of the father's "old stories of courage and justice" that obscure the truth. Late in the novel, he tells his father he does not want to hear his stories because "those stories are not true" (269):

> They dont have to be true. They're stories.
>
> Yes. But in the stories we're always helping people and we don't help

people.

> Why dont you tell me a story?

> I dont want to.

> Okay.

> I dont have any stories to tell. (268)

It is not difficult to imagine the types of stories the father tells the boy; most likely they

are the types of stories fathers typically told their sons in the old world, stories which

contain a "beginning, middle, and end" (Rambo 102), and which convey "the basic belief

that human beings confront struggle, rise above it, and come to a better place as a result"

(Rambo 102). The boy is not satisfied with stories that envision a brighter future, though,

because in his world, it is only surviving the immediate present, "the next piece of bread,

the next shelter, the next violent encounter" that matter (Graulund 66). Tales of

redemption, of light at the end of the tunnel, seem oddly foreign to him, fantasies of a

world he never knew; he "leads an all but storyless existence in which meaning,

motivation, and resolution have no place and nothing to do" (Chabon).

Ultimately, given the inevitability of the failure of the old language, the purpose

of language must be re-imagined, and the impetus for this re-imagining must occur

through the boy. He, not the father, is charged with creating the structures wherein

meaning will be made. The boy's messianic status is made clear early in the novel: "If he

is not the word of God God never spoke" (5). Later, when the father and son meet Ely on

the road, the father again alludes to the boy's responsibility of creating meaning in the

new world, asking Ely, "What if I said he's a god?" (174). Although Ely, like the father,

is a product of the pre-apocalyptic world and has long since abandoned his faith in the

existence of a god—"I'm all past that now. Have been for years," he says (172)—his kind will soon "vanish forever" (174), and it will be the boy's responsibility to take over, using his "God-given capacity to name the world correctly" (Kunsa 60). The boy seems to sense his role in the new world. When the father catches a thief stealing their shopping cart and leaves him naked and shivering in the street as punishment despite the boy's pleas to show mercy, the boy begins to sob. The father tells him, "You're not the one who has to worry about everything," and the boy responds, "Yes I am. . . . I am the one" (259).

Considering that the boy is charged with shaping the language that is to exist in the postapocalyptic world, his oft-repeated mantra, "carrying the fire," is instilled with a new significance. "Carrying the fire" is the boy's reason for existence. As a metaphor, it is childlike in its simplicity and stands in stark contrast to the millions of complicated, contradictory "truths" that defined the pre-apocalyptic world. Throughout the novel, the boy's silences often convey more meaning than when he speaks; in fact, the boy seems to prefer silence. In this way, the boy represents the transformation that will take place between the old and new worlds. Whereas the human constructs of words obscured meaning in the old world, the new world is allowed to simply exist in silence, free from the meaning-obscuring words and signifiers that arguably led to the world's destruction.

The father recognizes that, in the world's destruction, it has returned to a prelapsarian state before the advent of language and man-made ideologies limited the freedom of the world to exist independent of human thought:

> Perhaps in the world's destruction it would be possible at last to see how it
>
> was made. Oceans, mountains. The ponderous counterspectacle of things

ceasing to be. The sweeping waste, hydroptic and coldly secular. The

silence. (274)

The new world is to be characterized by silence, by the absence of the old signs and

signifiers and "absolute certainties" that Bell claims are "always a form of unfreedom"

(8). He adds that "ideas and systems, the pursuit of essences and of first principles, are as

dangerous and reifying as imposed social orders" (8), and so it is fitting that in the new

world, meaning is free to exist without humans having to name it or categorize it in some

way. This is not to suggest that language will not exist in the postapocalyptic world. It

simply means that the sophisticated, overly complex language of the pre-apocalyptic

world will be replaced by a simpler, purer form of language, carried into the new world

by the boy. Kunsa writes that neither the father nor the narrator can form this new

language because "each is of the old, pre-apocalyptic world; each began his story there,

came into language there and failed there" (65). It is the boy, then, who is responsible for

ushering in the new world and the new language.

In *Oryx and Crake,* Snowman is a character that, similar to the father in *The

Road*, is chained to the language of the pre-apocalyptic world. He is out of place, leading

an anachronistic existence in the new, postapocalyptic world. To once again borrow

Bell's metaphor, his signifiers are roads that never quite reach their destination.

Snowman is portrayed as being alien to the new world from the outset; he is "The

Abominable Snowman—existing and not existing, . . . known only through rumours and

through its backward-pointing footprints" (*Oryx and Crake* 7-8). He cannot help pointing

backwards to the old world since he is equipped with old signifiers that are exhausted of

all meaning-making potential. His consciousness is routinely interrupted by "echoes"

from the pre-apocalyptic world (Mundler 90), which appear in the form of obsolete words memorized from old library books, words of encouragement from his ex-lovers, and moribund tips from twentieth-century self-help manuals. Tellingly, his watch no longer works and has become only a "talisman," pointing back to the pre-apocalyptic world when there was an "official" time: "A blank face is what it shows him: zero hour. It causes a jolt of terror to run through him, this absence of official time. Nobody nowhere knows what time it is" (3). Neither language nor time, both human constructions designed to impose order on the world, work in the postapocalyptic world. Like the father in *The Road*, Snowman finds himself in perpetual limbo between the two worlds.

Initially, Snowman, always the "romantic optimist" (346), still believes in the power of words to rescue him from the waste land he inhabits. Naturally, in an effort to retain his humanity, he clings to words and the ontological certainties of the pre-apocalyptic world that had once given his life purpose: "'Hang on to the words,' he tells himself" (68). He even writes a farewell letter of sorts in which he attempts to "set down what [he] believes to be the explanation for the recent ~~extraordinary events~~ catastrophe" (346). Snowman's faith in words is short-lived, though. The letter is never completed, and as Snowman soon realizes, without an audience, "It's the fate of these words to be eaten by beetles" (347). As Earl Ingersoll writes, "He is a castaway in a culturally vacant cosmos, with no hope that his message-in-a-bottle could ever find a reader" (170). Soon, Snowman realizes that he has been thrust into the middle of a "recreated, rewritten trashcan Eden" (Mundler 92), where the language that he held sacred has been revealed to be as useless as the flotsam that the Crakers find washed ashore. In order to survive, language must be re-imagined. He has become aware of the idealism implicit in his

earlier claims that "'when any civilization is dust and ashes, . . . art is all that's left over. Images, words, music. Imaginative structures. Meaning—human meaning, that is—is defined by them'" (167). The civilization he inhabited has indeed become dust and ashes, but the art that Jimmy claims will retain meaning does not. When Snowman comes across a *Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, he quickly observes that its owner "must have been . . . an ideological plumber, a spin doctor, a hairsplitter for hire" (233). Then he tosses the book aside carelessly and moves on. In the post-catastrophe world of the novel, he has become "amputated from language" (Lawn 395):

> From nowhere, a word appears: *Mesozoic*. He can see the word, he can hear the word, but he can't reach the word. He can't attach anything to it. This is happening too much lately, this dissolution of meaning, the entries on his cherished wordlists drifting off into space. (39)

He envisions the words that he spent his pre-apocalyptic existence championing fading into oblivion, unable to be recovered: "What's happening to his mind? He has a vision of the top of his neck, opening up into his head like a bathroom drain. Fragments of words are swirling down into it, in a grey liquid he realizes is his dissolving brain" (149). With the loss of language, Snowman feels that he is losing his humanity. He likens himself to an "orangutan" (169), still existing in the biological sense, but no longer equipped with the ontological capacity necessary to remain fully human.

Yet Snowman is responsible for leading the Crakers out of Paradice and constructing new mythologies and "sacred narratives" that will shape the world to come. The Children of Crake, despite Crake's attempts to "edit out" (305) the need for what he deemed to be "harmful symbolisms" (311), have an immutable desire for stories,

narratives, fictions, mythologies: "Today they asked who made them," Oryx tells Crake

and Jimmy upon returning from one of their lessons (311). Just as the boy in *The Road*

needs to know that he and the father are "carrying the fire," the Crakers possess an innate

desire to believe in something larger than themselves. They are not content to serve

strictly biological functions, as Crake intended. Rather, they have quickly moved beyond

what Crake designed them to be.

The mythology Snowman creates, which Mundler claims "bear[s] a parodic

resemblance to that which has been so summarily swept away" (89), is haphazard,

contradictory, thoughtless, invented off-the-cuff, and very often self-serving. Snowman

has become the "God of bullshit" (102), and at first, the Crakers believe every story he

offers, no matter how absurd. After all, they are "blank pages," upon which Snowman

can write anything he wishes: "Snowman's brain was spinning; the illogic of what he'd

just said dazzled him. But it seemed to have done the trick" (351). These mythologies

parody the multiplicitous, contradictory "truths" that those of the pre-apocalyptic world

saw as essential to humanity, and the carelessness Snowman employs problematizes the

sacredness of these once "sacred narratives":

> *Crake made the bones of the Children of Crake out of the coral on the*
>
> *beach, and then he made their flesh out of a mango. But the Children of*
>
> *Oryx hatched out of an egg, a giant egg laid by Oryx herself. Actually she*
>
> *laid two eggs: one full of animals and birds and fish, and the other one full*
>
> *of words.* (96)

The indecisiveness and improvisatory nature of Snowman's invented mythology

contrasts with the father's more careful passing down of knowledge and stories to the boy

in *The Road.* The father takes seriously his responsibility of shaping the world for the boy, realizing that "the things you put into your head are there forever" and cannot be undone (12). Snowman, on the other hand, comes to see his role as creator of mythologies as an annoyance: "'Crake was never born,' says Snowman. 'He came down out of the sky, like thunder. Now go away please, I'm tired'" (104).

Bizarre as it may seem given some of the more outlandish characteristics of the Crakers—they purr in order to heal one another and urinate to keep away predators, for instance—it is the Crakers, not Snowman, who, like the boy in *The Road*, will "carry the fire" into the new world. That the Crakers will possess this role becomes clear in a pivotal scene towards the end of the novel. Snowman, returning from his journey, hears "an odd crooning, high voices and deep ones, men's and women's both—harmonious, two-noted. It isn't singing, it's more like chanting. Then a clang, a series of pings, a boom" (360). This scene, reminiscent of the scene in *The Road* in which the boy takes the flute the father carved for him and plays "a formless music for the age to come" (77), is significant because it shows the Crakers forging something new, something untranslatable from the old langue. When the Crakers come into view, Snowman sees that they have constructed a "grotesque-looking figure, a scarecrowlike effigy" (360). He realizes that the effigy is of him and that they are not chanting "Amen," which would imply the carrying over of the old "sacred narratives"; rather, they are chanting "Snowman," which suggests that, instead of relying on the old narratives for meaning, the Crakers are creating a new mythology, wholly separate from those that existed in the pre-apocalyptic world. Moreover, they begin to gain critical thinking skills; when Snowman makes a "narrative mistake," he receives "puzzled looks," and the Crakers begin to

question the authenticity of his story (362). Each of these human traits arises organically; Snowman did not show the Crakers how to perform the ceremony or think critically. This fact suggests that the Crakers are moving beyond their initial reliance upon Snowman and becoming more than "marginally human" (Dunning 98). Ultimately, they will determine the language and discourse that will exist in the new world.

Snowman seems to intuit his own obsolescence in the new world. At the end of the novel, he finds out that another small group of humans has survived the pandemic who are "thin" and "battered-looking" (373) and, according to Fiona Tolan, are "suggestive of an exhausted civilisation" (296). Snowman is faced with a dilemma: does he join the group of humans who, like him, are from the pre-apocalyptic world and are therefore destined to fade into oblivion? Or does he rejoin the Crakers with whom he has achieved godlike status but is losing his fragile grip on relevance? His indecision at the end of the novel indicates his concession that Crake was correct when he asserted that once one generation has been eliminated, the old civilization cannot simply be put back together:

> It's not like the wheel, it's too complex now. Suppose the instructions survived, suppose there were any people left with the knowledge to read them. Those people would be few and far between, and they wouldn't have the tools. Remember, no electricity. Then once those people died, that would be it. They'd have no apprentices, they'd have no successors. (223)

Snowman realizes fully the impossibility of his existing in the new world amongst the Crakers when he realizes his language no longer has any meaning. He ponders what to

say to the Crakers, whether to offer them "a sort of sermon," "a few words to remember," or "some practical advice" (366). He finally concedes that holding onto the old language is "hopeless" (367).

While *The Road* and *Oryx and Crake* offer wholly different visions of what might become of the world, they both offer telling commentaries on the nature of language and on the form it could potentially take once the road between signifier and signified has been ruptured. Both feature characters, in the father and Snowman, that are saddled with the old language which serves as merely a reminder of the old world and has become as useless as "baby teeth in a box" (*Oryx and Crake* 261). Both also feature characters, in the boy and the Children of Crake, with no ties to the old world and that increasingly gain independence from the old meaning-making structures. Each of these novels suggests an inherent need for metaphor, figurative representation, and narrative discourse; the boy needs to know that he and the father are "carrying the fire," while the Crakers depend on Snowman for a mythological framework and display the immutability of symbolism when they erect the "scarecrowlike effigy" in Snowman's absence. Each also depicts the transition of language from the old world to the new. In *The Road,* it is never fully clear whether the group of people the boy meets after his father's death are in fact "the good guys," but the mere possibility that they are offers a glimpse of hope that humans, and with them a new, potentially less destructive, language will prevail. *Oryx and Crake* ends on as ambiguous a note as *The Road* with Snowman indecisive about whether to remain with the Crakers or to join the humans. Still, the text suggests his resignation that the old language is no longer meaningful, opening the door for the Crakers to determine how language will be used in the new world. Each of these novels has shown a rupture

between signifier and signified as a result of an apocalyptic event, and while the exact nature of language to come is yet to be determined, it is clear that a re-imagining of language through the boy and the Children of Crake will occur.

CHAPTER 5: THE END

More than ever, contemporary Western cultures have become obsessed with the idea of apocalypse. Simply performing a quick survey of current events and their coverage by news media provides sufficient evidence of a public that increasingly sees the world in terms of endings. This year alone, many "apocalypses" have come and gone. Natural disasters in Japan and elsewhere across the globe were described with apocalyptic significance. Mass animal deaths in places like Beebe, Arkansas have been seen by many as a sure-fire sign that the end is coming. Perhaps most conspicuously, California religious leader Harold Camping prophesied that the Rapture would occur on May 21 of this year. This fascination with endings has manifested itself in the increasing prevalence of apocalyptic narratives in literature, film, and television. But, as James Berger writes, "nearly every apocalyptic text presents the same paradox. The end is never the end. The apocalyptic text announces and describes the end of the world, but then the text does not end, nor does the world represented in the text, and neither does the world itself" (5). Implicit in this desire for endings is the belief that something must remain. Postapocalyptic texts such as *The Road* and *Oryx and Crake* explore what comes after the end.

Each of these novels depicts the ending of the old language. Language, in its most basic sense, is nothing more than a shared system used by humans to make sense of the world. If we are to view the apocalyptic events of *The Road* and *Oryx and Crake* as absolute breaks from the past, which is impossible to avoid given the near-totality of the destruction depicted in the novels, then the language of the old world must likewise

undergo a radical shift towards something new and previously unimaginable. The characters who inherit the postapocalyptic world and who are thus charged with determining the new languages in each of these novels were never a part of the pre-apocalyptic world; the boy was not born until after the apocalypse in *The Road*, and although the Crakers existed prior to the apocalypse in *Oryx and Crake*, they were sheltered within the Paradice dome. Therefore, they are not beholden to the conventions of the old world.

These novels attempt to portray worlds that will exist after the disappearance of the old signifiers. It is significant that both *The Road* and *Oryx and Crake* begin with their respective protagonists, the father and Snowman, awaking to realize the futility of attempting to describe the indescribable world around them:

> When he woke in the woods in the dark and the cold of the night he'd reach out to touch the child sleeping beside him. Nights dark beyond darkness and the days more gray each one than what had gone before. Like the onset of some cold glaucoma dimming away the world. (*The Road* 3)

> Snowman wakes before dawn. He lies unmoving, listening to the tide coming in, wave after wave sloshing over the various barricades, wish-wash, wish-wash, the rhythm of heartbeat. He would so like to believe he is still asleep. (*Oryx and Crake* 3)

In the first passage, the narration struggles to find the words to describe the father's surroundings, and ultimately settles on the imprecise phrasings such as "dark beyond

darkness" and "days more gray each one than what had gone before." Moreover, the simile in the final sentence of the passage indicates the lack of a precise descriptor. The reason for this is clear: the right words do not exist. In the second passage, the "wish-wash, wish-wash" that is the "rhythm of heartbeat" indicates a world creating its own language that cannot be contained by the human constructs of words. Snowman, an alien to this world, wishes to go to sleep to escape the fact that he is an outsider in the world he once knew.

According to Teresa Heffernan, the failure of language is a major cause for the supposedly damaged condition of the modern world. She writes, "At least part of the anxiety about the fragmentation and meaninglessness of the modern world stems from the diversity of perspectives in contemporary global culture and from the resulting breakdown of a shared sense of language" (13-14). The language of the old world, with its "fragmentation" and "meaninglessness" is depicted as barren in the postapocalyptic worlds of *The Road* and *Oryx and Crake*. The father's attempts to pass on language to his son are mostly ignored, as when the boy falls asleep while listening to his father's "old stories" (41). Similarly, Snowman, who is a "living repository of rare antiquarian words," has become acutely aware of the uselessness of his words by the end of the novel when they do nothing but confuse his interactions with the Crakers.

Both of these novels, though, offer an alternative by returning language to the "original, perfected state[s]" (102) in which they existed prior to being shaped and manipulated by the human-constructed signifiers. The simple, almost childlike reverence for the world has been restored as well, suggesting that the humans of the world to come will be far less destructive than the ones who caused the apocalyptic events. Both worlds

exist in a prelapsarian eloquence, full of meaning without the human imposition of constant naming and manipulating. It is the boy and the Crakers, who both prefer silence, who will determine how language is to be used in the postapocalyptic worlds.

Simultaneously, though, each of these novels suggests that the need for fiction and figurative representation is an inherent and irrepressible part of human existence. The boy relies on simple maxims, needing to know that he and the father are "the good guys" and that they are "carrying the fire" because such fictions do offer hope in a world where hope is elusive. The Crakers possess their own set of rudimentary mythologies, taught to them first by Oryx and then by Snowman. Helen E. Mundler writes, "Like many such novels, *Oryx and Crake* moves along the double axes of the destruction of the world/word, and its rebuilding" (95). Most apocalyptic narratives focus on the physical destruction that takes place in the world, and understandably so. Humans have always been captivated by images of destruction, so focusing on the physical destruction of the world is a huge part of the appeal of postapocalyptic literature. However, with the world's destruction also comes the destruction of the word. This destruction equals, if not surpasses, the physical destruction, because just as the world must be rebuilt, language also must be re-imagined in the postapocalyptic world.

The endings of both *The Road* and *Oryx and Crake* can be read as final concessions that the pre-apocalyptic world is no longer adequate and must be replaced for meaning to be made in the new world. In *The Road*, McCarthy paints the picture of a stream full of brook trout, and in these brook trout can be found "maps of the world in its becoming" (287). The final sentence of the novel indicates a world returned to a state in which it existed before it was limited within the confines of human language: "In the

deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery" (287). For audiences seeking resolution, and this desire for endings is a quality seemingly built into humans, this ending can be a maddening one. The final word, "mystery," seems to be a direct challenge that readers accept this mystery that is to exist because the new world cannot be defined or pinned down using the old human signifiers. The postapocalyptic world is to exist outside the realm of comprehension of humans, and so *The Road* ends, appropriately, on a note of uncertainty.

The end of *Oryx and Crake* is similarly frustrating for readers seeking closure in their narratives. Snowman has recently discovered that Crake's plan to extinguish the human race has not succeeded; a group of three humans, seemingly not infected with the ReejoovenEsence virus, has survived. Snowman is watching them, pondering whether to join them peacefully or threaten them with violence. He asks the open air for advice, and rather than any conclusive answer, he hears a few meaningless phrases from the old world: "*Oh Jimmy, you were so funny. Don't let me down*" (374). He looks at his watch, again searching for meaning from the human constructs of the old world. What it shows him is "zero hour" (374). Clearly, the signifiers with which Snowman once defined the world are useless, which renders him an outsider in the new world. He is "The Abominable Snowman" because in the new world, his existence is shadowy and unclear. The new world exists beyond his ability to name it. Like *The Road*, *Oryx and Crake* ends on an inconclusive note because the postapocalyptic world must involve a re-imagining of language; it cannot be represented using the old signifiers.

The question of what happens to language after the end of the world is one that has been, and will continue to be, explored by writers of narratives that envision

alternative futures. Some authors, like Cormac McCarthy and Margaret Atwood, explore the linguistic elements of apocalypse more explicitly than other authors. Because of the directness with which *The Road* and *Oryx and Crake* explore postapocalyptic language, these novels reveal much about the function and purpose of language for humans and about its necessity to human experience. While postapocalyptic literature by definition tends toward extreme representations of the world's end, as stated in Chapter 1, the term "apocalypse" does not necessarily refer to the literal end of the world; it can also refer to an uncovering of something previously unknown or unimaginable. Since the world is constantly changing and constantly evolving, revealing every day that which was previously unimaginable, it can be stated that apocalypses are not limited to the grand, world-altering culminating events as depicted in narratives such as *The Road* and *Oryx and Crake*. Rather, apocalypses occur all around us every day. The world is constantly breaking from the past, and so language, the complex, ever-evolving system humans use to make meaning of the world, must constantly evolve and change to better represent this changing world. Postapocalyptic narratives such as *The Road* and *Oryx and Crake*, in their depictions of linguistic shifts that take place after cataclysmic events, are extreme examples of the inextricability of language from human existence.

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