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The Road Home: Cormac McCarthy's Imaginative Return to the South

The End of the Road: Pastoralism and the Post-Apocalyptic Waste Land of Cormac

McCarthy's *The Road*

In an article titled “A Thing Against Which Time Will Not Prevail: Pastoral and History in Cormac McCarthy’s South,” John M. Grammar writes, “[i]t is hard to imagine Cormac McCarthy on some platform in Stockholm, assuring us [as William Faulkner did] that man will survive and prevail” (19). McCarthy’s latest novel, *The Road*, addresses that very issue of survival—not just humankind’s survival but that of our planet. *The Road* concludes with an enigmatic but pastoral image of “brook trout in the streams in the mountains.... On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes” (241). Such a pastoral coda suggests an almost Emersonian sense of Nature as sacred text, a book to be interpreted, a hieroglyphic, as Walt Whitman would have it, that *means*. It is, in fact, one of many texts we find embedded or interpolated within the topography of the narrative, and we will concern ourselves with a number of these. However, to return briefly to the sequence at hand, this passage is not only pastoral but elegiac, for those brook trout are gone, those mountain streams barren of life in the post-apocalyptic waste land of McCarthy’s stark and disturbing novel.

Landscape imagery in Cormac McCarthy’s novels has never been far from the minds of McCarthy scholars. Those such as Georg Guillemin have urged us to read McCarthy’s larger canon through an ecocritical or ecopastoral lens. The title of Grammar’s article, referenced above, indicates the pastoral thrust of his reading of

McCarthy. Others working in the field of McCarthy studies have found a naturalistic impulse in works such as *Blood Meridian*, where we find an appropriately naturalistic western landscape devoid of pastoral beauty, “blasted by eons of natural violence . . . into terrifying, sublime postures,” as critic Barclay Owens has observed (7). This paper aims to negotiate the gulf between the naturalistic landscape of *Blood Meridian* and more pastoral landscapes of some of McCarthy’s earlier fiction by concentrating on the landscape images of *The Road*—for McCarthy’s most recent novel offers a landscape blasted not by natural violence but by human violence. Furthermore, McCarthy’s text of nature offers not solace and comfort in the traditional romantic sense but dire warning indeed. But other texts—equally haunting, equally gothic in their own ways—also inscribe McCarthy’s novel.

McCarthy’s novel *The Road*, it seems to me, recalls Leo Marx’s discussion of a “variant of the machine-in-the-garden trope” (380), a variant, Marx sees arising in texts published some years after his now classic study of American pastoralism, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*. In his afterword to the thirty-fifth anniversary edition of his book, for instance, Marx recognizes how the voices of the environmental movement of the 1960s and beyond seem to echo many of the ideas he presented in his 1964 publication. In the twentieth century, Marx observes (and certainly he would agree in the twenty-first century as well), the machine in the garden has become much more threatening than the steamboat or the locomotive, those harbingers of industrialism that haunt the works of so many nineteenth-century American authors: no, the machines have grown deadly, even universally deadly, having taken on new forms in the threat of chemical waste, air and water pollution, and of course, nuclear

technology and all of its attendant dangers. In fact, in *The Road* the machine in McCarthy's garden is in fact the Bomb itself, whose apocalyptic arrival as "[a] long shear of light and then a series of low concussions" (45) leaves behind a cauterized world, frozen in nuclear winter—and, significantly, a landscape (deathscape, really) bleak and decidedly unromantic, a landscape, in a sense, *without* meaning: "Barren, silent, godless" (4).

By way of clarifying procedure here, we should refer briefly to a foundational text of one variety of American pastoralism—Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Nature*. For Emerson's transcendentalist manifesto, perhaps surprisingly, in a sense provides a framework for discussing McCarthy's novel. First, we should consider how McCarthy's novel seems to present landscape as text. Emerson for his part, of course, sees the natural world as an edifying text, even a sacred text, a source of poetry and metaphor and truth. And as nature is a text of sorts, Emerson quite naturally privileges the sense of sight, rejoicing in the clarity of vision—literal, metaphorical, and spiritual—that man finds in his interaction with Nature, a complex relationship Emerson symbolizes with the surprising image of the transparent eyeball. And an associated image is that of the sun, which Emerson references repeatedly in the early passages of his essay, noting that "The sun only illuminates the eye of the man, but shines into the eye and the heart of the child." Both of these tropes, too, are important features of *The Road*, which is also threaded through with a network of ocular references as well as significant references to the sun, the dawn, and so on. Finally, of course, among the many nature images Emerson's essay conjures are those of the earth itself—"the woods," "the distant line of the horizon," those "plantations of God" where the flowers nod to us and seem to acknowledge our presence

and where man finds “reason and faith” by gazing upon and meditating upon the “uncontained and immortal beauty” of the wilderness (Emerson 487-88). In McCarthy’s novel, the earth, blistered by nuclear blast and withered by nuclear winter, presents us, of course, with a very different kind of landscape, one that seems stripped of meaning, “shorn of its referents” (75).

On one level, then, McCarthy’s landscape resists interpretation, for the landscape itself is largely mute, darkened, clouded, its color palette stripped of beauty and diversity and reduced to variations of gray. The visionary clarity of Emerson’s nature is notably absent from the blasted environment of McCarthy’s world in *The Road*. Nevertheless, the opening sequence of the narrative establishes several image motifs that return in one form or another throughout the novel. One such motif is that of darkness. McCarthy’s unnamed main character, referred to simply as “the man,” awakens, as he so often does in the narrative, in the woods—not from any desire to commune with nature but rather in an effort conceal himself and his son from their fellow men, most of whom have turned to cannibalism, cultism, and savagery. Inevitably, it seems, the man awakens to a darkened nature: “Nights dark beyond darkness and the days more gray each than the last. Like the onset of some cold glaucoma dimming away the world” (3). That first ocular reference—“some cold glaucoma dimming away the world”—is followed hard upon by other similar references to sight, or more correctly, impaired sight. The man recalls a dream of a subterranean beast “with eyes dead white and sightless as the eggs of spiders” (3). And, cautious as he is with his precious son in this unforgiving world, the man is constantly scanning the landscape with his binoculars, seeking out threats. What he finds most frequently is a sort of *tabula rasa*—a landscape erased of many of its previously defining

features: “he glassed the valley below. Everything paling away into murk. . . . Looking for anything of color. Any movement. Any trace of standing smoke. . . . Then he just sat there holding the binoculars and watched the ashen daylight congeal over the land” (4). Indeed, all too often, the result of his surveillance yields the same result: “Nothing to see. . . . Nothing” (7). The sun—variously described as “alien,” “lost,” and “banished”—is notable chiefly for its absence. The theological implications of a sunless sky are underscored by the man’s frequently looking to the heavens and finding “there was nothing to see” (87). Not only the landscape, then, but the very heavens themselves seemed expunged of all referent and meaning.

Other texts within the novel—disturbing ones, to be sure—are more easily accessed. For what can be read in McCarthy’s landscape tells a terrifying tale indeed. The old text of the world is virtually lost, a dead language preserved only as fading memory. The new text of this post-apocalyptic world proves to be a tale of terror, a gothic nightmare rather than a transcendental dreamscape. An especially powerful passage is introduced with a description of one of many orchards that the two pilgrims encounter: “They followed a stone wall past the remains of an orchard. The trees in their ordered rows gnarled and black and the fallen limbs thick on the ground. . . . The soft ash moving in the furrows” (76). In this former domain of pastoral beauty and order, the man finds evidence of the chaos that has broken loose in the ruined garden of the world: “He’d seen it all before. Shapes of dried blood in the stubble grass and gray coils of viscera where the slain had been field dressed and hauled away” (76). What is more, these horrors are presented to us as a kind of language, as a text: “The wall beyond held a frieze of human heads” (76), their skulls tattooed with “[r]unic slogans, creeds misspelled,” some “painted

and signed across the forehead in a scrawl” (76). This is a text the man can in fact interpret: “He’d come to see a message in each such late history, a message and a warning, and so this tableau of the slain and devoured did prove to be” (77)

Finally, the text of memory is one that presents itself again and again to us. The man is in fact haunted by memories of his past life and his past world, a world sometimes, but not consistently, regarded as Edenic. On the other hand, *The Road* looks squarely and unflinchingly at the horrors of the ruined garden in the wake of man’s most precipitous Fall yet. As we have seen, several key images from Emerson’s essay—the eye of man, the sun shining benevolently from above, the sympathetic landscape and its flora, all essential elements of what Leo Marx calls “romantic American pastoralism” (230), also constitute the core around which McCarthy’s narrative is shaped, though in a startlingly debased and mutated form. We might say something similar about McCarthy’s use of memory in the novel. The romantic poet, for instance, is after all the poet of nostalgia, of memory, of emotions recollected in tranquility. In some ways, *The Road* is both romantic and anti-romantic in this respect, for so much of McCarthy’s novel juxtaposes past and present—though perhaps in a gothic rather than a romantic or transcendental sense.

Significantly, most (though certainly not all) of the memories and dreams that haunt the unnamed man in McCarthy’s novel are pastoral, even romantic or transcendental. A key dream sequence, one of several dreams or memories that focus on the man’s wife, is especially startling: “in dreams his pale bride came to him out of a green and leafy canopy. Her nipples pipeclayed and her rib bones painted white” (15). We should note how the underlying gothicism of the passage here counterpoints the more

romantic imagery of the leafy canopy, and the entire image is undercut by the closing lines of the vignette: “In the morning it was snowing again. Beads of small gray ice strung along the lightwires overhead” (15). This passage rehearses in miniature what McCarthy’s novel as whole accomplishes: a juxtaposing of a seemingly Edenic past with a clearly hellish present; yet that Edenic past seems to carry in it, somehow, the seeds of its own destruction. The mixed nature of this lost past is further indicated in another memory sequence, an extended description of a day on the lake with the man’s uncle: “This was the perfect day of his childhood. This the day to shape the days upon” (12). Yet even this passage is undercut with vaguely gothic images: dead fish, gnarled and weathered trees, and birches described as “bone pale” (13). The man also recalls on at least two occasions observing brook trout much like those that reappear in the enigmatic coda we considered at the beginning of this discussion, not only foreshadowing the novel’s somber closing sequence but extending this network of connections between past and present, between a once beautiful and abundant planet and a now charred, ice-bound rock.

But perhaps the most revealing of these passages emerges as yet another dream sequence, one that depicts the man and his son strolling beneath a cloudless sky with Emersonian Nature beautifully and bountifully enfolding them:

He dreamt of walking in a flowering wood where birds flew before them he and the child and the sky was aching blue but he was learning how to wake himself from such siren worlds. Lying there in the dark with the uncanny taste of a peach from some phantom orchard fading in his mouth. . . . Like the

dying world the newly blind inhabit, all of it slowly fading from memory.

(15-16)

The “aching blue” sky alive with birds, the “flowering wood” framing this scene—these images seem lifted right out of Emerson’s essay; and the ocular reference of a darkening, dying, myopic world underscores just how lost the paradise of old truly is, reduced to torturous, siren-like memory, haunting phantoms of a world forever lost. In fact, this phantom orchard reference prefigures a later incident in which the man and the boy discover a dead apple orchard and feast upon the dried and withered fruit. The Edenic allusions in both of these scenes take greater urgency when we recognize that the man, if not the child, seems to be a sort of anti-Adam, who literally sees his world being uncreated or deconstructed before his eyes, a process of destruction rendered in terms of language, or more properly, the loss of language: “The world shrinking down to 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. . . . The sacred idiom shorn of its referents” (75). The man’s world has been reduced, it seems, to a tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing.

How and why Cormac McCarthy constructs such a tale of nothingness is suggested by Michael Chabon’s review of *The Road* in the February 15, 2007 issue of *The New York Review of Books*:

The only true account of the world after a disaster as nearly complete and as searing as the one McCarthy proposes, drawing heavily on the “nuclear winter” scenario first proposed by Carl Sagan and others, would be a book

of blank pages, white as ash. But to annihilate the world in prose one must simultaneously write it into being.

And indeed, somehow McCarthy achieves that extraordinary feat: to both create and destroy the world—through language—simultaneously. But to what end? As some reviewers have noted, a storyline that just a few short years ago would have seemed more naturally suited to the Cold War era has taken on a greater urgency in a post-9/11 world. Indeed, Alan Warner, in his review of the novel, worries that *The Road*'s "nightmare vistas [could] reinforce those in the U.S. who are determined to manipulate its people" through fear of terrorism. For Warner, "[t]his text, in its fragility, exists uneasily within such ill times." But politics aside, McCarthy tells a tale that needs to be told, one that warns us that the "[m]aps and mazes" of the world's becoming, once lost, cannot be recovered, despite the man's insistence to his son that everything will be "okay." Though the man's son, in the end, seems indeed to find "goodness," we cannot ignore how that closing coda undercuts whatever hopeful ending the boy's rescue has promised: Like the man's dreams and memories, those maps and mazes are of a world that "could not be put back. Not be made right again" (241). In that sense, "the blank pages" of Cormac McCarthy's novel are all too clearly legible: *The Road*, in the end, is a prophetic hieroglyphic of horror, an American jeremiad more terrifying than even the Puritan imagination could conjure.

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