

The End of the Landscape at the End of the World¹

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Abstract

*The tension between local and global narratives has emerged as one of the key concerns in contemporary cultural and literary production, and this dichotomy is particularly apparent in our changing understanding of identity in the light of globalization, the increasing difficulty of identifying a cultural centre and our changing attachment to place. Landscape is a recurring topos in the work of Cormac McCarthy, but while his earlier fiction, such as the Border Trilogy (1992-1998), portrays the highly specific regional landscape of the American Southwest, his later novels feature more global or even universal landscapes. This shift can be associated with new readings of McCarthy's works in the light of climate fiction. This article examines the literary representation of landscape in *The Road* (2006), a novel which is increasingly recognized as a representative work of climate fiction.*

Keywords: local, global, climate fiction, landscape, borders

There's not a lot of good new on the road. In times like these.
(McCarthy 2006:186)

Cormac McCarthy is generally regarded as one of the most significant and successful contemporary American writers. In addition to the many literary awards which he has received, including the Pulitzer Prize for his 2006 novel *The Road*, his work has also inspired numerous mainstream film adaptations such as *No Country for Old Men* (Movie 2007), *The Sunset Limited* (TV Movie 2011), *The Road* (Movie 2009) and *The Counsellor* (Movie 2013). This commercial success is matched by the extensive academic interest in McCarthy's writing, but there is little academic consensus on how his works should be read; even after the publication of comprehensive studies such as Bloom's *Modern Critical Views on Cormac McCarthy* (Bloom 2009) or *The Cambridge Companion to Cormac McCarthy* (Frye 2013) the lack of a unified treatment of his works remains apparent. With the recent publication of his first novel in 16 years, *The Passenger* (2022), and its forthcoming sequel *Stella Maris* in December 2022, we can expect to see an even greater diversity in the interpretations of McCarthy's oeuvre in the near future.

The variety of approaches to McCarthy's work range from modernist to post-post-modernist, pastoral to anti-pastoral, theological or even anthropological interpretations. His intertwining of historical events with myths and legends means that some of his works are almost beyond any classification. While his earlier fiction can be read as lying within the framework of the Southwestern literary tradition, his later works show a departure from this tradition and embrace more global themes through post-post-modernist narratives. McCarthy's fiction also represents a challenge to conventional genre classification schemes since he fuses narratives which are both generic but yet also highly idiosyncratic and unique. George Guillemin even distinguishes between high-brow and low-brow works in McCarthy's oeuvre in an attempt to explain the success of *All the Pretty Horses* (1992): ““the *simplicity* of the quest stories, the *generic* proximity to the Western, and the *conventionality* of the plot structures as heroic journeys have apparently caused the novels' *complexity* to go largely

unacknowledged”” (quoted in Dorson 2017). Furthermore, some of McCarthy’s works can be re-read within a relatively short time span and acquire entirely new interpretations. This is particularly the case with *Blood Meridian* which was widely considered peculiar and even unreadable upon publication in 1985, a work whose revisionist account of the country’s ruthless 19th century expansion was out of step with the mood of mid-eighties America. However, the perception of the novel underwent a dramatic shift in the subsequent decades, most notably with Harold Bloom’s interpretation of the work as the most authentic American apocalyptic novel and which has now gained an even greater relevance than when it was first written (Bloom 2019).

A similar process of reinterpretation can be seen in the case of *The Road*, a novel which was initially read as a work of post-apocalyptic science-fiction but which has come to be seen as a reflection of the growing threat of an environmental collapse and a resultant environmental anxiety, a reading which is often interpreted within the context of climate fiction (Stark 2013: 72). Jillet notes that McCarthy had been engaging with the concept of ecocriticism long before the term gained its current prominence:

One could argue that McCarthy has been interested in issues of ecocriticism since before it became a commonly referred to term in the field of literature. He was exploring the ethics of environmental degradation in his earliest work, *The Orchard Keeper*, around the time that environmental ethics was beginning to be considered a valid field of research for philosophers and environmental scientists.

(Jillet 2016: VIII)

Another innovative reading of *The Road* is offered in the context of the new capitalism which places a greater focus on the consumerist consequences of the novel’s depiction of apocalypse (Schleusener 2017). These newly emerging readings of *The Road* invite novel interpretations of the McCarthy’s depiction of landscape in the work, an approach which is very different from that found in the more firmly local and regional spaces of McCarthy’s earlier novels. While the earlier Appalachian novels were set in specific landscapes such as Knoxville and rural Tennessee and the Southwestern novels and screenplays are intrinsically linked to the US-Mexico borderlands, the setting of *The Road* lacks any identifiable geographical context; when read in the light of climate fiction, the novel reveals a new treatment of landscape which calls for a redefinition of the term in contemporary literary production in which the human relationship to landscape reflects an individual and collective response to the changing environment.

The term “climate literature” was first coined by the journalist Dan Bloom in 2007 who defined the genre as works whose narratives incorporate the climatological paradigm of anthropogenic global warming into their plots (Andersen 2020: 9). Although the expression of this paradigm is not made explicit in *The Road*, we can nonetheless see the novel as a representative example of the climate novel. Andrew O’Hagan considers *The Road* to be “the first great masterpiece of the globally warmed generation” (quoted in Stark 2009: 74), and the work has received an ecocritical reading in several other studies such as *Borders and Landscapes* by Loise Jillet (2016) or Guillem Georg’s *Pastoral Vision of Cormac McCarthy* (2004). Jillet even argues that an ongoing process of critiquing and questioning the mechanism of modernity, the ideology of industrialism, and the imperative to expand into ever-new territory appears in McCarthy’s Appalachian and Southwestern novels, a complementary

aspect to the geographic, thematic, and syntactical innovations found in these works (2016: XI).

The story of *The Road* opens by confronting the reader with the two protagonists, a father and his son, who have set out across a world which has been destroyed by some unspecified catastrophe. Throughout the novel, the landscape which McCarthy depicts is extremely monotonous, dull and gray, lacking any of the poetic and pastoral detail which is so characteristic of the landscapes in his earlier novels:

When it was light enough to use the binoculars he glassed the valley below. Everything paling away into the murk. The soft ash blowing in loose swirls over the blacktop. He studied what he could see. The segments of road down there among the dead trees. Looking for anything of color. Any movement. Any trace of standing smoke. He lowered the glasses and pulled down the cotton mask from his face and wiped his nose on the back of his wrist and then glassed the country again. Then he just sat there holding the binoculars and watching the ashen daylight congeal over the land. He knew only that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke.

(McCarthy 2006: 5)

The desolate setting of the novel and the minimalistic descriptive style contribute to the impression of a complete absence of a specific geographical space. In both *No Country for Old Men* (2005) and the *Border Trilogy* (1992-1998), the geographical space is highly specific, with McCarthy's characters inhabiting the shifting and permeable borderlands between the US and Mexico. The crossing of borders in the landscape serves as a metaphor for the period of transition between the old "romanticized" America and the America that is yet to come (Buráková 2020), while the precise socio-historical dimension of the landscape of *Blood Meridian* refers to the geopolitical violence wrought upon the continent through the belief in Manifest Destiny. In contrast, the post-apocalyptic setting of *The Road* eradicates any sense of place or attachment to it and the landscape serves as a backdrop to a pilgrimage or a quest undertaken by the father and son. The lack of a geographical space and the concept of a pilgrimage across a devastated landscape emphasize the lack of borders which McCarthy has used in his previous fiction as a highly effective means of historical, cultural or even genre transitions. This does raise the question, however, of what can actually be traversed in a space that has no borders such as the post-apocalyptic landscape of *The Road*, an environment in which all distinctions between the natural and the artificial have vanished.

The mundanity of the landscape is enhanced by textual devices such the single uninterrupted narrative flow of the novel; through this approach, the absence of geographical borders is emphasised by the absence of textual borders. Jillet references Trotignon's examination of the peculiarly fragmentary nature of the text, the sense that, rather than interrupting the narrative flow, the gaps encourage the reader "to read on" "no matter what"; to persist in their engagement with the text despite the eternal deferral of meaning. Thus, even in a novel in which borders have been all but eradicated (both textually and within the world of the story), there is still a road on which to travel, along with the impetus to do so (Jillet 2016: XIV). The absence of borders is furthermore indicated by the lack of commas or interpunctuation to separate dialogues from interior monologues. While each chapter of *Blood Meridian* is introduced with a brief description of the itinerary of the Glanton Gang or with prologues in *Suttree* (1979), *The Road* lacks any chapter separations. This textual "wasteland"

contributes to the sense of the complete annihilation of the landscape and denies the reader the opportunity to pause and consider otherwise.

The Road is the tale of a nameless boy and his father who head south through a deadened landscape where the few remaining survivors they encounter are either scavengers or cannibals. The world as we know is obviously a thing of the past, and no clear explanation is given regarding the nature of the disaster that has caused this breakdown of civilization. The only direct references to the event that marked the end of the old world are a few inconclusive lines: “The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions” (McCarthy 2006: 45). Although there has been some speculation over the cause of the cataclysm, McCarthy himself explained that ultimately it does not matter: “but it could be anything—volcanic activity or it could be nuclear war. It is not really important” (“Hollywood’s Favorite Cowboy”). The dark landscape of the end of the old world is described right at the beginning of the novel where a glimpse of ashen daylight seems “like the onset of some cold glaucoma dimming away the world” (McCarthy 2006: 3).

The journey across the devastated countryside transitions into an uninterrupted pilgrimage as the father and son make their way southwards. Nonetheless, as we learn at the end of the novel, not even this remote destination can offer the pair any hope of survival. Throughout the novel, the depictions of landscape are interlaced with death, ruin and despair, with the lack of borders generating a sense of urgency in the protagonists and driving them across the landscape with a ceaseless flow:

The long concrete sweeps of the interstate exchanges like the ruins of a vast funhouse against the distant murk. He carried the revolver in his belt at the front and wore his parka unzipped. The mummied dead everywhere. The flesh cloven along the bones, the ligaments dried to tug and taut as wires. Shriveled and drawn like latter bogfolk, their faces boiled to sheeting, the yellow palings of their teeth. They were discaled to a man like pilgrims of some common order for all their shoes were long since stolen.

(McCarthy 2006: 23-24)

The pilgrimage mutates further into a sci-fictional runaway survival story, a development which undoubtedly marks a sudden departure from the western tradition which had been predominant in McCarthy’s work to date. However, as Ibarrola-Armendariz (2011) has suggested, it might be possible to interpret this odyssey across the post-apocalyptic landscape as a reversal or a retreat from the conquest of the American West.

While the concept of crossing borders in McCarthy’s early works appears as somewhat of a gradual process, in *The Road* we are confronted with the idea of a de-geographed America from the very beginning of the novel. Nature here is treated as a landscape in which trees are charred and limbless, buildings wrecked and blackened, meadowlands stark and gray, rural roads and rivers covered with a thick layer of ash that makes them look frozen and deadly: “Everything as it once had been save faded and weathered” (McCarthy 2006:6).

Although the father and son carry a roadmap to help them in their journey southwards, the landscape through which they pass remains nameless; no geographical names are mentioned throughout the novel and the map gradually loses its importance. The general futility of navigation of this new borderless world is depicted in the repeated portrayal of the landscape as dark, vacant and silent:

He walked out in the gray light and stood and he saw for a brief moment the absolute truth of the world. The cold relentless circling of the intestate earth. Darkness implacable. The blind dogs of the sun in their running. The crushing black vacuum of the universe. And somewhere two hunted animals trembling like ground-foxes in their cover. Borrowed time and borrowed world and borrowed eyes with which to sorrow it.

(McCarthy 2006: 138)

The map is one of the few material references to the prelapsarian world and serves as a contrast between the humanity of the past and the humanity of the present, but this is also true of the relationship between the father and son and their quest to “carry the fire”. The novel also casts the two unnamed protagonists as a representation of good in a Manichean opposition to almost all of the other characters whom they encounter on their journey: “*Are we still the good guys? He said. Yes we’re still the good guys. And we always will be. Yes. We always will be*”(my emphasis) (McCarthy 2006: 77). The caring relationship between the father and the son can be seen as a return to the quest narratives which McCarthy had employed in his earlier novels but it also functions as a stark contrast to the charred landscape of the new world which seems to offer little comfort to humanity.

In addition to the map, the only other references to the material culture of the prelapsarian world are an expired can of Coke and the shopping trolley in which the father and the son carry all their belongings, but there is also a general absence of references to the nature of the pre-apocalyptic landscape. The father is conscious that his memories of how the world was before the fall are gradually fading:

He slept little and he slept poorly. 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 just such siren worlds. Lying there in the dark with the uncanny taste of a peach from some phantom orchard fading in his mouth. He thought if he lived long enough the world at last would all be lost. Like the dying world the newly blind inhabit, all of it slowly fading from memory.

(McCarthy 2006: 17)

The description of the landscape in the father’s memory is a pastoral, almost Edenic vision, a motif which holds a central place in McCarthy’s fiction and which forms a strong contrast to the featureless void of a post-apocalyptic landscape which, shorn of its previous meanings and associations, is left silent and empty. Through the father’s fragmentary memories of the pastoral landscape, McCarthy juxtaposes the Edenic past with the dreadful landscape of the present. A similar juxtaposition of landscapes can also be seen at the very end of the novel in a passage which describes brook trout as they swim in the mountain streams:

They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their back were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again.

(McCarthy 2006: 241)

The final passage in the novel brings us back to the old world and its wealth of life and the predominance of nature. The landscape as it appears in the father’s fading memories is serene,

beautiful and harmonious, but the last sentence suggests the impossibility of ever returning to such a world. The father's memory of the old world is already filled with an awareness of its transitory nature and the knowledge that it will gradually disappear. "He thought if he lived long enough the world at last would all be lost" (McCarthy 2006: 17); ultimately, he will become a witness to the disappearance of the world.

Concluding thoughts

Landscape is crucial in the works of Cormac McCarthy, serving as a recurrent topos throughout his novels, and it has rightly been the focus of considerable academic interest. Our previous study of landscape in the context of his 2005 novel *No Country for Old Men* (Buráková 2020) focused on the metamodernistic tendencies present in the literary depiction of the landscape which is used as a means of delineating the transition of American society in the 20th and 21st centuries through the crossing of both territorial borders and also the historical boundaries between modernism and metamodernism. However, McCarthy's use of landscape is radically different in *The Road*, offering a depiction which suggests that global ecosystems have been irreversibly damaged and that they will soon be irretrievably lost. In contrast with much post-apocalyptic fiction which usually offer their readers a glimmer of hope in the future rejuvenation of the Earth, there is an overwhelming sense in McCarthy's work that the human race is doomed to extinction, an impression heightened by the similarity of the world of *The Road* to the predictions of the era of the Anthropocene in which unstoppable environmental collapse will render the planet incapable of sustaining human life. The all-encompassing ecological disintegration in the novel is combined with a psychological and social breakdown, as the father and son are unable to connect with any of the other broken and violent travelers they encounter on the road. The pair are left disoriented in a world which has changed so dramatically that it no longer corresponds to their surviving map, an obsolete guide on which they can no longer rely. This spatial disruption is also mirrored in the borderless textual arrangement of the text which offers the reader few landmarks by which to orient themselves. The ending of the novel confirms our initial assertion regarding McCarthy's departure from the pastoral, local depictions of landscapes found in his previous works, offering instead a depiction of a global landscape in the light of climate change fiction.

Notes

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