Cormac McCarthy’s "The Road": Language and Memory in Post-Apocalyptic Fiction

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Abstract: In an age of existential turmoil, post-apocalyptic fiction envisions a depopulated world—a world ravaged by war, plague, ecocide, or cosmological judgments. Often times, it is mankind's own hand that strikes. But the story doesn't end there. Because the post-apocalyptic world is often a place of survival and afterlife, nothing like the bleak wasteland of Cormac McCarthy's The Road (2006). Set in a world ravaged by an unnamed cataclysm, the novel examines the ecological, psychological, and sociological changes that take place after the apocalypse. Just as the "before" world is replaced by the "after" world, the memory of the past should be replaced by the beginning of the future. But just as we cannot write outside language, we cannot write outside past and memory. As much as they attempt to portray a lifeless world, post-apocalyptic fiction, against its will, evokes memories, undoes the end, and brings new life to life. Even post-apocalypse can't be the end of the story because it's ultimately a story itself.

Keywords: Cormac McCarthy, The Road, post-apocalyptic fiction, representational impasse, memory, storytelling.

Apocalyptic horrors have long been perceived as a repeating historical pattern. Apocalyptic rhetoric, prophecies, movements, films and literary works are proliferating under the pressure of existential pressure. This fear and fascination with imagining the end of days has taken root in the imagination of artists, who envision brave new worlds and wastelands. At the turn of the millennium, Teresa Heffernan reportedly witnessed a major resurgence of apocalyptic narratives in cinema, literature, science, politics and religion. Her disturbing comfort, damned by the knowledge of absolute finality and order". The ideological underpinnings of this recent rise in popularity are clear. The aftermath of September 11, the war in Iraq, global warming, the impending environmental catastrophe.

Cormac McCarthy's 2006 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel The Road is the product of these difficult times. As Diane C. Ruth notes,

*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 (probably soon after their relocation to Santa Fe, perhaps not long after September 11, 2001), and stood looking at the still city at two or three in the morning from the window of their room, hearing the lonesome sound of trains and imagining what El Paso “might look like in fifty or a hundred years.” “I just had this image of these fires up on the hill and everything being laid waste and I thought a lot about my little boy. And so I wrote those pages and that was the end of it.”*

McCarthy's comments are instructive of how the tensions of a particular chronicled conjuncture generate future (post)apocalyptic representations, and, in spite of the fact that the novel ought to
not be diminished to a positivist worldview, it is difficult to maintain a strategic distance from true to life readings. After all, the narrativization of existential fears may be seen as an exertion to come to terms with a crisis-ridden show and to move toward distant better; a much better; a higher; a stronger; an improved" a (higher) future. Post-apocalyptic fictions can hence be deciphered too in terms of their verifiable specificity and not only as all inclusive cautionary stories.

In his seminal The Sense of an Finishing, Kermode regrets that in well known culture the term end times is caught on to be identical to catastrophe. He goes on to illustrate that, owing to the broad impact of the Book of scriptures, the end of the world is continuously bound up with thoughts of redesign and disclosure within the history of its devout and common usage. As “a commonplace show of history”, the scriptural demonstrate has been settled profoundly into the way Western societies make sense of reality, that's, as advancing from a starting toward an unavoidable end. Western perusers anticipate scholarly writings to reflect their discernment of the world, wanting customary determination and closure. For such perusers, and for Kermode, anecdotal endings are “mini expressions of a confidence in the next arrange or extreme design that though itself will stay maybe until the end of time darken, all things considered, loans a sense of reason to our presence within the world” (Heffernan 4).

What to create of post-apocalyptic fictions at that point? How can they solidify the schematic desires of the peruser and the sense of extreme closure on the off chance that they, by definition, take put “after the end”? James Berger focuses to the confusing expression inalienable in this express, thinking that “before the starting and after the conclusion, there can as it were be nothing. At the starting, something starts; and at the finishing, it ends”. We know this is often not the case, in any case, as indeed the scriptural eschaton is taken after by the Unused Jerusalem plummeting from paradise. By the same token, secular eschatology nearly constantly expects a post-apocalyptic world, provoking Berger to break down prophetically catastrophic and post-apocalyptic composing into a single nonexclusive category:

_The end itself, the moment of cataclysm, is only part of the point of apocalyptic writing. The apocalypse as eschaton is just as importantly the vehicle for clearing away the world as it is and making possible the post-apocalyptic paradise or wasteland._

_Temporal sequences become confused. Apocalyptic writing takes us after the end, shows the signs prefiguring the end, the moment of obliteration, and the aftermath. The writer and reader must be both places at once, imagining the post-apocalyptic world, then paradoxically “remembering” the world as it was, as it is.

But where Berger genuinely sparkles is in his perception that on the off chance that an end-time calamity were to inundate us we would have no implies of knowing it, let alone speaking to it in a bound together story. In arrange to delineate a cataclysmic consequence and its tribulations one would ought to imagine what is unfathomable, know what is mysterious; this can be what Berger calls the “post-apocalyptic representational impasse”, contending that “it is inconceivable to compose outright alterity. The other can as it were be engraved in an as of now existing discourse”. To put it in an unexpected way, prophetically catastrophic occasions cannot be satisfactorily spoken to, for we need the means to represent them. Instep, we venture our (eschatological) tensions and inductions from the past onto the long run. “Everything after the conclusion, in arrange to pick up, or borrow, meaning, must point back, lead back to that time” . Post-apocalyptic fictions, at that point, are not foresights but retrospections; not disclosures but replications—oblique or explicit—of past fears, injuries, and recollections.

The capacity to represent the tensions of Western social orders is both the substance of and reason behind the prevalent offer of the post-apocalyptic sort. It manages perusers a see of prospects based on fears and fantasies determined from the sociopolitical context. “What is there cleared out after the end?” Berger inquires. He contends there are as it were two conceivable outcomes: “Paradise or shit”. McCarthy's The Street solidly falls inside the last mentioned category. In it we take after an anonymous man and boy, father and child, on a frantic travel over
a cold, crushed, corpse-strewn scene, a few a long time after an anonymous cataclysm has destroyed all trappings of civilization and society from the confront of the soil, and for all intents and purposes all life. The “cauterized terrain” (McCarthy 14) is presently inhabited by foragers, pillaging groups of cannibals, and corpses. It could be a nightmarish location, where the world has ceased to be.

The novel works on two ideological and elaborate levels. On the one hand, it ventures a future that forecloses the plausibility of recovery. The relationship between the world and the dialect that renders it is burst, since dialect can not satisfactorily codify the fruitless and impacted physical and mental scenes of the no man's land the heroes explore. Recollections of things, culture, religion, goodness are all buried underneath the fiery remains of a vanished world. The end of the world is additionally the conclusion of the word. A unused dialect must emerge—one that would reflect the frantic circumstance mankind has found itself in. On the other hand, the debris of the past is still able to catalyze recollections. Language, no matter how disengaged and transmogrified, works within the unexpected benefit of the depiction of the world because it once was. And in the midst of the chaos that sundered human civilization, the man and the boy by one means or another oversee to preserve their ethical judgment and in this manner their humankind, an ardenthearted goodness and essentialness that indeed imply at conceivable remodel. This article, at that point, analyzes the ways McCarthy calls into address what dialect and memory can and cannot do, as he “simultaneously devastates and makes the world through language” (Walsh 290).

“Everyone knows how the world ends”, Michael Chabon unsurprisingly announces in his oft-quoted survey of The Road—“First radiation, torment, an space rock, or a few other cataclysm slaughters most of mankind. The remainders change, slip by into feudalism, or return to ancient brutality … whereas modest respectable groups cling to the wears out of the misplaced civilization” (n. pag.). We know this since post-apocalyptic stories are frequented by our current authentic minute. Usually maybe the reason why The Street takes off the cause of the worldwide catastrophe ambiguous—we discover it simple to fill within the spaces with anything (man-made) epidemic, doomsday gadget, or cosmological adversity happens to be debilitating us in our current verifiable moment. Not unveiling the source of the catastrophe moreover proposes that no plausibility exists of having avoided it from happening; one way or the other, the extreme destiny of mankind is sealed. This sets McCarthy's novel separated from prior works of post-apocalyptic fiction in that it offers no obvious social feedback or political commentary.

The coming about scene through which the The Street winds is an “ashen scabland” (McCarthy 16)—scorched, dead, and sterile. The grimness and dullness of the desolated world and the pared down presence of the heroes McCarthy inspires through straightforward language structure, restricted lingual authority, and account reiteration; accentuation is utilized sporadically, appropriate things are rarely capitalized, clauses are for the most part joined by “and”. Exchange in specific is conveyed in trimmed sentences and is unrestricted by citation marks:

You think we’re going to die, dont you?
I dont know.
We’re not going to die.
Okay.
But you dont believe me.
I dont know.
Why do you think we’re going to die?
I dont know.
Stop saying I dont know.
Okay.
Why do you think we’re going to die?

We don’t have anything to eat.

We’ll find something.

Okay. (McCarthy 100)

The need of hyperbolic, or indeed conventional, dialect underscores the limit of the circumstance; it causes a sense of denial—stylistic and narrative—of life. In case the world has been burned to a cinder, dialect must reflect the characteristic destruction, social breakdown, and franticness of survival. Indeed at his most lyrical—when McCarthy conveys antiquities and neologisms in his expressive entries, words like “vestibular”, “parsible”, and “illucid”, he does so precisely and inside (moderately) straightforward syntactic structures:

He rose and stood tottering in that cold dark with his arms outheld for balance while the vestibular calculations in his skull cranked out their reckonings. An old chronicle. To seek out the upright. No fall but preceded by a declination. He took great marching steps into the nothingness, counting them against his return. Eyes closed, arms oaring. Upright to what? Something nameless in the night, lode or matrix. To which he and the stars were common satellite. Like the great pendulum in its rotunda scribing through the long day movements of the universe of which you may say it knows nothing and yet know it must. (15)

Brilliant and bleak, this post-apocalyptic idyllic is shaped out of the ought to pass on the frightful reality, which could be a world like our own and however totally diverse. In a world unhinged by overpowering annihilation, the plausibility of a bound together representation through the dialect of the ancient arrange is impeded altogether. Not as it were is dialect incapable to typify the traumatic encounter of the downfall of nature and civilization, but so much of what dialect once meant is in reality misplaced:

The world shrinking down around 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)

The fabric referents having been devastated, the comparing signifiers before long take after down the street to insensibility, vanishing from the world's ever lessening lexicon and memory—“The final occasion of a thing takes the lesson with it”. The broken sentences and pithy exchange hence reflect a world that's purged and dead. McCarthy's composition too signals the criticalness and edginess that the heroes confront:

He’d carried his billfold about till it wore a cornershaped hole in his trousers. Then one day he sat by the roadside and took it out and went through the contents. Some money, credit cards. His driver’s license. A picture of his wife. He spread everything out on the blacktop. Like gaming cards. He pitched the sweatblackened piece of leather into the woods and sat holding the photograph. Then he laid it down in the road also and then he stood and they went on. (McCarthy 43)

The disappointment of “old” dialect and its concomitants to relate the truth of the normal and civilizational breakdown is show within the taking after entry, when the heroes enter the ruins of what was once a library:

... 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 the 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. It surprised him. That the space which these things occupied was itself an expectation. He let the book fall and took a last look around and made his way out into the cold gray light. (McCarthy 187)

In the event that books cause desires of way better universes, superior prospects at that point the
man and boy bear witness to their disappointment. Thomas A. Carlson composes that The Street embraces an examination of “what ended up [sic] of time and dialect, of life and story, within the presence of such obscurity, within the appearing collapse of the world … What part would memory and expectation—the stamping of a long time and ages—have played in maintaining the time and dialect of a world adequately living to bear (or be born by) the telling of a story”. The reply McCarthy gives is that social artifacts—language, music, religion—and recollections are relics of a bygone age and as such futile in making sense of the unused reality. When, by the campfire, the man describes to the boy “[o]ld stories of mettle and equity as he recollected them”, “the peruser gets to be mindful that it isn't as it were the stories that exist simply in memory—in McCarthy's no man's land the beliefs of boldness and equity themselves appear to be disappearing” (Gallivan 103). In the event that at to begin with the boy argues with his father to relate one of his stories, he starts to address them as time advances and eventually rejects them:

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\begin{align*}
&\text{You always tell happy stories.} \\
&\text{You don't have any happy ones?} \\
&\text{They're more like real life.} \\
&\text{But my stories are not.} \\
&\text{Your stories are not. No.}
\end{align*}
\]

The man watched him. Real life is pretty bad? (268)

To the boy, who was born after anything catastrophe finished common human civilization, such stories are suspect since they don't reflect his reality and hence hold no legitimacy. For Christopher J. Walsh, “This gives the father with another existential challenge as at times he is incapable to bring out 'the abundance of a vanished world' … for the boy because it gradually blurs from his memory, and he encounters a philosophical predicament … as he agonizes over how he can conceivably 'enkindle within the heart of the child what was fiery debris in his own’” (268). That the boy cannot deliver stories with “happy endings” draws consideration to the significant accomplishment of the novel in making us “re-think our understanding of language” (293). It exposes the risky relationship between dialect and reality—that without quick referents within the existing world, words are purge signifiers.

However, as Chabon brilliantly focuses out, McCarthy closes up caught in “the conundrum that lies at the heart of each story of end of the world. The as it were genuine account of the world after a fiasco … would be a book of clear pages, white as fiery debris. But to demolish the world in exposition one must at the same time type in it into being” (n. pag.). Put in an unexpected way, post-apocalyptic fiction, like every other fiction, works inside the bounds of dialect, and the dialect of The Street, be that as it may distressing and transmogrified, is beneficial of meaning. In this way, “efforts to tell of things that have been lost” unavoidably still carry echoes of their presence (Walsh 268). As McCarthy's dialect reflects a broken world, it concomitantly offsets the pulverization it renders, remaking and reaffirming pitiful pictures and memories—the exceptionally act of composing “undo[es] the passing it deals” [Chabon n. pag.]. Post-apocalyptic fiction hence comes to an unavoidable deadlock; something always remains “after the end” which remnant—rubble, embalmed cadavers, water-soaked books, a can of Coca-Cola—evokes the past, turns around the destroy, and quickens memory.

Consider the taking after depiction of nature: “The another day they headed inland. A endless moo swale where plants and hydrangeas and wild orchids lived on in powder-colored likenesses which the wind has not however reached” (276, my accentuation). Fair as the two survivors carry on down the street, the remainder—physical and linguistic—persists and serves as a update, a representation of that which resists overlooking. This leads the peruser to conjure spatial personality and memory indeed when the story claims that “there is nothing to see”:

On the far side of the river valley the road passed through a stark black burn. Charred and
There's much to see, as the pictures of what “once had been” shimmer distinctively within the reader's intellect some time recently McCarthy bulldozes them. The no man's land, since it fundamentally rendered through dialect, still bears a fleeting similarity of life. Early on within the novel, the man finds a can of Coca-Cola, conceivably the final one anywhere, at an surrendered grocery store and gives it to the boy, who inquires, “What is it, Papa?” For the boy, new with numerous of the thoughts, encounters, fabric goods, and even dialect that characterize modern American society (the man has got to clarify to him the figure of speech “as the crow flies”, since no crows exist any longer), Coca-Cola is fair “a treat”. But for the man and the peruser it bubbles with nostalgic memory whereas it moreover welcomes the peruser to assume the connect between “the excessive—yet enjoyable—consumption signaled by the can of Coke and the horrendous cannibalistic utilization of the novel's present” (Donnelly 72), conjuring and altering such Coca-Cola trademarks as “America's favorite moment”.

In Ibarrola-Armendariz's perusing, which echoes Chabon's, the novel “evokes through its intentionally available and controlled dialect the exceptionally things it appears to abnegate. In spite of the fact that the father finds his control to construct stories always decreased and obstructed, it is as it were narrating that can give their [the protagonists'] travel with a few sense and significance”. Put in an unexpected way, acts of narrating and memory keeping are a location of confirmation in that they loan reality to the objects and beliefs they render. The man tells the boy stories in an exertion to reaffirm their status as “the great guys”, that's, people who don't eat individuals. But as their travel advances, the boy sees his father treat individual travelers with expanding lack of interest or indeed pitilessness, such as when he powers the thief who stole their shopping cart along side all their belonging to remove his dress at gunpoint and after that clears out him on the street, saying, “I'm aiming to take off you the way you cleared out us” (McCarthy 217). Such scenes frequently make the boy cry and slip by into long periods of quiet. To his father's affirmation that he would never have murdered the cheat, the boy reacts, “But we did murder him” (219), suggesting that he claims duty both for his and his father's activities. He consequently moreover rejects his father's stories on an moral introduce:

Those stories are not true.
They don't have to be true. They're stories.

Yes. But in those stories we're always helping people and we don't help people. (McCarthy 268)

Driven by near-religious conviction to keep his child from harm's way, the man demands on their survival at the fetched of ethical erosion: “My work is to require care of you. I was named to do that by God. I will murder anybody who touches you”. The boy's ethical goodness, in any case, is immovable and fuelled by an characteristic want to assist the vexed people they experience in show disdain toward of his possess needs. With his dying words the man tells his child, “You're the finest fellow. You continuously were” (235), subsequently recognizing the ethical code as having been passed on. Goodness and trust do reaffirm themselves through the endeavors of the heroes “to do equity where no equity is either requested or indeed possible” (Snyder 85) and the narrativization of their deeds. These stories of goodness and magnificence are symbolized by “the fire” they carry interior them—a fire that speaks to trust, humankind, the will to stand against insurmountable odds without abandoning the foremost essential standards of profound quality and turning to pernicious implies to outlive. And in spite of the fact that the man may at times disregard his claim lessons, the boy continuously recollects. That the fire is passed from father to child not as it were by ethicalness of case but moreover through stories is verification once more that dialect has held the control to confirm objects and concepts thought misplaced.

Apparently misplaced are too the brook trout displayed within the cryptic and puzzling epilog:
Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and torsional. On their backs were vermicular 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. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery. (286–287)

This pastorally glorious memory is a picture that’s to be examined past the worldly outline of the story, in spite of the fact that it does call to intellect an episode early within the novel when the man stands on a stone bridge “where once he'd observed trout influencing within the current, following their perfect shadows on the stones beneath”. Not at all like most recollections within the novel, whose precision is now and then called into address (the man cannot keep in mind his wife’s fragrance, for occurrence), the relating of the ultimate image of tolerate trout is perfect, “with everything intaglio, fragrance and all” (Hage 104). The coda proposes that there’s a normal arrange within the world that originates before mankind and is blocked off to us, for it is past our meaning-making frameworks, past dialect indeed. And whereas it forecloses the plausibility of normal recovery, it clues, as Matthew Ryan notes, at “a not-yet-achieved consciousness” (qtd. in Hage 145); it is, for presently, past the domain of human information, but is maybe reachable within the future. At the exceptionally slightest, it reaffirms the tirelessness of memory, memory of “things of elegance and magnificence such as that once holds them to one's heart” (McCarthy 54), and the capacity of dialect to render such recondite pictures.

As I have recommended in my perusing of The Street, the novel surrenders to the same catch that characterizes post-apocalyptic fiction; it conceives of post-apocalyptic scene as void of referents, purge of meaning, debilitating of trust. However the brush the craftsman employments to paint the bad dream is additionally what sells out his vision—language. Dialect carries with it remnants of the past, recollections of things thought long gone, follows of magnificence. The leftover, battered, charred, or darkened in spite of the fact that it may be, still shines underneath the cinders. A glint that, in the event that legitimately tended to, may develop into a fire. The allegorical fire of humankind the man and the boy carry is transmitted and supported through recollections and stories of objects and standards the novel takes incredible torment to abnegate. The Street is in this manner a exceedingly unexpected work, announcing the conclusion of dialect, of magnificence, and of morals, all the whereas acting as a witness against itself. The at the same time rough and lovely wonderful disconfirms the paradigmatic desires of an extreme finishing, the kind of story closure or disclosure Kermode celebrates in his hypothetical thoughts. In post-apocalyptic fiction “[t]he conclusion is never the end”, Berger composes. And so, as well, does The Street take off the finishing open. We don't know what will gotten to be of the boy, nor what will gotten to be of the world. But in its restoration of recollections and dialect, the novel proposes there may be trust for us however.

References


