

Gonçalo Dias 

Universidade do Porto, Porto, Portugal
CETAPS: JRAAS
goncalo.dias.2398@gmail.com

“Barren, Silent, Godless”

Void and Wilderness in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*¹

This paper proposes to explore how, through apocalyptic destruction, a characteristically American landscape in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* has undergone the process of removal of identity, and has, therefore, reverted into the hostile wilderness that marked Early American experience in its attribution of meaning to space. Considering Leo Marx’s “The idea of nature in America,” the journey delineated by both protagonists can be located as the heir to a Puritan tradition and/of American Nature. Yet, in the diegetic postapocalyptic landscape, human senses grow dim and biblical Words grow unspoken, as the potential for civilization turns into silence and a return to dust – and, most importantly, ash. If a characteristically American identity has been obliterated, how can meaning, if any, be found in the same material space it once held? Where can references to the past reside? Ultimately, if a dystopian destruction of both identity and the material plane has subverted American utopian anxiety, in what ways has the possibility of considering American mobility through space in search for meaning turned void? McCarthy’s novel appears to provide no answer. However, as Toni Morrison stated – in “Unspeaking Things Unspoken,” – “a void may be empty, but is not a vacuum.”

Keywords: American studies, nature, wilderness, post-apocalyptic, silence

¹ The article is an edited and extended version of presentation entitled “‘Barren lands bear no fruit’: Un-placing and Wilderness in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*,” delivered at the 42nd Meeting of the Portuguese Association for Anglo-American Studies, with the title *Environments: Ecologies and (In)Hospitalities*.

Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) presents to its reader a post-apocalyptic landscape that an unnamed father and son are forced to navigate in search of civilized salvation. As the descriptions of the material landscape display a world that is "[b]arren, silent, godless" (McCarthy, 2006, 4), the protagonists move southward in a landscape that is not only destroyed but hostile. On account of humankind having become threatening in a world marked by destruction and violence, the father and son evade and escape the majority of human contact, whilst struggling with the clash between the father's suspicion of strangers and the son's benevolence, the latter of which is perceived by the father as divine, but in need of protection.

The diegetic backdrop of McCarthy's novel is marked by ash-riddled darkness which provides no explanation as to its origin – while markings of divine punishment echoing that of the Christian *Book of Revelation* can be considered visible (Grindley), no specificity to its factual origin is granted. One is faced with an environment which has obliterated all references to past experience and which refuses any possible future. The protagonists' journey through this world is primarily conducted along a material road, the overarching and overbearing presence of which becomes defining in its menacing quality. It is on this material road that the protagonist duo undergoes overlapping inner and outer journeys inside a world which has reverted from civilization back into wilderness, often echoing Puritan concerns of contrasting evil. As the hostility of the material landscape reflects that of early American considerations of Nature as an object of negativity (in all its forms in and beyond materiality) pervading the narrative, the road itself is revealed as an American motif which similarly influences one's reading. Despite the purposeful lack of clear geopolitical reference in the novel, one can determine the plot as characteristically American through the maintenance of mythologized materials connecting the landscape to a cultural identity which has been stripped of meaning. Even before the arrival of Puritans to the American continent, an American identity had already been fashioned by figures such as John Winthrop.

Aboard the *Arabella*, a ship in sail towards New England, John Winthrop delivered a sermon entitled *A Modell of Christian Charity*, which established an entering "into Covenant with Him [God]" (46) by those moving into the American continent. In order to maintain the Puritan experience as a new Chosen People in a new land, this covenant commanded them to create "a city [*sic*] upon a hill" (47) that would be an example for all the world. Similarly, it is towards such an idealized location that the father and son move, in hope of finding a regenerative possibility for a world that has been obliterated.

Another factor in Winthrop's sermon regarded the maintenance of a socioeconomic hierarchy as an integral part of Puritan ideology, considering that it was the duty of those in financial privilege to aid those who did not possess such an advantage – socioeconomic power being perceived by Puritans as a sign of predestination, this aid became a moral responsibility towards those spiritually fallen from grace. Considering that *The Road's* diegetic world has seen its economic systems erased, it is the moral duty of (re)generating civilization that remains. Yet the existence of the idealized location desired by Puritans rested upon dichotomous and binary perception of a predestined people against a negatively-perceived surrounding world. While the latter was composed not only of native communities, but also of a wild and threatening material landscape (perceived as representing all that had

not yet been submitted to a seemingly-civilized experience), it was the former's responsibility to proceed with the implementation of civilization on that same landscape and peoples.

As Leo Marx proclaimed in the initial lines of "The idea of nature in America," "from the founding of Jamestown in 1607 to the closing of the Western frontier in 1890, the encounter of white settlers with what they perceived as wilderness – unaltered nature – was *the* defining American experience" (8). The contact between a previously-existing (Puritan) concept of civilization and a realm of European unknowns imprinted the material landscape with foreign perception: because "the newly discovered terrain [appeared] to be untouched by civilization, a cultural *void* populated by godless savages, and not easy to distinguish from a state of nature," Europeans "accommodated their immediate impressions of American places to their imported – typically religious – preconceptions about the nature of nature and the character of indigenous peoples" (10, *emphasis added*). Such a palimpsestic process of appropriation of a new continent, in its capacity for erasure and re-imagining, allowed for the further cultivation of the binary tension between the supposedly-positive Puritan presence of God's "ouen [*sic*] people" (Winthrop 47) and their negative surroundings.

Yet Toni Morrison argues that:

(...) invisible things are not necessarily 'not-there'; that a void may be empty, but is not a vacuum. In addition, certain absences are so stressed, so ornate, so planned, they call attention to themselves, arrest us with intentionality and purpose, like neighborhoods that are defined by the population held away from them (190).

The existence of a "void" that is negatively defined (both in the term's rejecting and oppositional connotations) is equally revealing of the positively-defined community's self-perception, as the two polarized points become mutually informing. If contact with a natural "wilderness (...) was *the* defining American experience," (Marx 2008, 8), it is because the presence of the wilderness helped define America as much as those attempting to overtake it.

Additionally, Leo Marx states that "[i]n the lexicon of Protestant Christianity in America, the essential character of primal nature was conveyed by epithets like 'howling desert' and 'hideous wilderness,' and by the malign names – savage, cannibal, slave – assigned to indigenous peoples," adding in reference to John Winthrop's sermons that:

In Winthrop's argument, accordingly, the unarguable existence of a separate (unredeemed) state of nature helps to justify his a priori condemnation of the unregenerate, who constitute a potential threat of lawlessness, anarchy, and misrule. Their geographical location underscored the theological argument: the only escape from natural unregeneracy open to them was the reception of divine grace (10-11).

This condemnation also justifies the attempts at transformation and conquering of the wilderness into a civilized experience based upon Puritan belief, and *The Road's* protagonist duo similarly engages in this polarizing self-conception and consideration. The polarized identities described by Marx and Morrison perfectly overlap with the father and son's perception over themselves, as well as over the diegetic material world and social organization described in McCarthy's novel – the

protagonists exist in a malevolent desert, which bears “savage[s], cannibal[s] [and] slave[s]” against the morality reinforced by the father and son.

Similarly to Winthrop’s use and consideration of nature, the father-son duo developed a preconception of the images of human existence which set them apart quasi-fully from the rest of the world. They measured their own existence and validity against their unwillingness to concede to the ash-riddled wilderness, to concede to being “bad guys” (McCarthy 77), as they repeatedly call those whose extreme measures of survival cannot be integrated into their moral standard and dynamics, precisely due to the opposing groups’ “lawlessness, anarchy, and misrule” (Marx 2008, 11). The organized and structured community proposed by Winthrop finds in the father-son duo a manifestation of prevalence amidst wilderness – especially as regards morality. Even if the world is destroyed, morality prevails in the father and son’s abstract wish of “carrying the fire” (McCarthy 83).

The intangible consideration of a moral “fire” against an indefinite group of “bad guys” (77) displays how the void-like material environment that is uncooperative with their existence can also be perceived as part of the negatively-coded “bad guys.” Indeed, the protagonist duo is fully alone and immersed in their own dynamics and relationship for the majority of the novel, but hostility pervades their journey and the road they travel itself. If the father and son travel southward in order to reach a regenerative point for human experience, the territory they travel absorbs the opposite end of the duo’s moral predestination. By describing the protagonist duo “[l]ike pilgrims in a fable swallowed up and lost among the inward parts of some granitic beast” (3), the father and son become charged with an intention of (re)implementing civilization in a physical territory marked by indifference and death. The concept of civilizing (self-)perception along the duo’s pilgrimage is transposed into the recurrent consideration of “carrying the fire” (83), in mutual information between the two oppositional ends of the binary system – the regenerating “fire” and the destructive “bad guys.”

However, what one faces when reading McCarthy’s *The Road* is not imaginative consideration of an unconquered nature separated from civilized territory, and, thus, wilderness, but a nature which, in its previous conquering and establishment of civilization, has grown into destruction, stasis and death. While it is unclear whether the natural world of McCarthy’s novel is fully dead or merely unyielding in its distancing and indifference towards human life – and, therefore, refusing to cooperate and contribute to its existence – there is a strong consideration and allusion to death in the relationship between the apparently civilized individuals and the material world around them. In diegetic terms, there is not an “unaltered nature” (Marx, 2008, 8), but a nature which refuses to be altered.

From the opening lines of the novel, the diegetic post-apocalyptic world is described as “dark” and “cold,” with “[n]ights 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” (McCarthy 3), and where no signs of the continuation of life – be it fauna or flora – can be located. Evidence of this lack of continuation can be perceived in the fact that the only nourishment existing in this static world has originated in pre-apocalyptic times, as the food the protagonists enjoy during brief intervals between starvation periods is mostly canned. The two exceptions to this lack of nourishment are confined to an apple orchard that the father finds, in which

the apples are described as "[h]ard and brown and shriveled" as well as "[d]ry and almost tasteless" (121), which, despite being better than no nourishment at all, may prove to be of poor nutritional value, and frowned-upon cannibalism.

The latter option is encountered by the protagonists recurrently throughout the narrative, and, in a moment in which the protagonists are eating the last of the lightly nutritious apples, the son reticently asks the father: "We wouldnt [*sic*] ever eat anybody, would we?" (128) to which the father responds that such an action would not happen regardless of their conditions. When the son feels confident in his father's answer, the young boy verbalizes the unspoken covenant between the pair of protagonists in saying "[b]ecause we're the good guys [and] we're carrying the fire" (129). The protagonists' choice of maintaining a moral standing in a world of nonsensical order – even if not without sense – reveals their ingrained understanding of binary morality that they are to develop and retain against post-apocalyptic wilderness. The protagonists navigate an obliterated world in which the sensorial experience of the body has been dimmed and severely limited: if sight, smell and touch are limited by the darkness and ash which permeate all contact of these senses with the world, taste grows quasi-inexistent without recurring to the past in a present which proves to be "almost tasteless" (121). Yet silence, in its truncation of hearing, is another factor prevalent in the diegetic wilderness.

In enumerating possible kinds of silence, Jean-Jacques Lecercle considers the existence of "the silence of things that are mute because they are not endowed with speech or any form of expression," specifying that it correlates to "the silence of a world indifferent to human affairs as symbolized by the ability to speak" (8). Indeed, the difference *The Road* bears from Marx's understanding of Christian thought in early American experience (2008, 10-11) is limited to the sound attributed to the desert-like quality of Puritan wilderness. In contrasting considerations regarding the "Word" – the Christian perspective of original vocalization into existence – and the Puritan "howling desert" (11) carrying a painful and distorted image of the capacity for life, existence, and vocalization, one finds that, in *The Road*, there is a recurrent characterization of the material world as silent. One ponders, then, if this silence is not "the silence of God, who knows all through intuition and has no need of speech, except when he addresses his Word to humankind" (Lecercle 10). Indeed, the destruction of the diegetic world unravels the possibility of a God-forsaken world, as, in a moment of despair, the father registers:

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. (McCarthy 11-12)

The pervading ash in the landscape of this post-apocalyptic scenario is an adaptation of the biblical dust to which one is said to return, to nothingness. The father's constant attempt at communication with an absentee God is truncated and halted recurrently by the unresponsive, silenced environment, a void world of oblivion – or by God's unwillingness to interact with humanity. Throughout the novel, spiritual connection to a hope-bearing entity is truncated by a material wasteland which surrounds the protagonists and all other (human) life forms. It is in this material wasteland, then, that the father recurrently perceives the hope of a return from the

dust-state of post-apocalyptic conditions in the communication he develops with his son in the living world and Word.

While the diegetic environment is silent and unreceptive to any human interaction, communication shared by the father and the son, mostly non-verbal, is charged by an unspoken covenant between the two, and displays the potentiality of silence as a generative force. The minimalist conversations shared between the father and the son portray what Lecercle considers the “silence of communion,” a correspondence “in which silence is golden, that is when the deepest form of communication is achieved through silence” (9). In navigating a hostile environment, the protagonists resort to a mutual understanding which often shuns verbal language in favor of non-verbal understanding and correspondence. Yet even the verbal exchanges between the protagonists are meaningful, as their reiteration of “carrying the fire” (McCarthy 83) is presented to the reader both as a counter to the sensory darkness and silence of the diegetic realm of experience, as well as a maintenance of human life and transposition of the pre-apocalyptic world’s values onto the post-apocalyptic scenario the characters exist in, specifically through the figure of the son as a harbinger of hope – according to the father, “[i]f [the son] is not the word of God God never spoke” (5).

Lecercle also argued that “men are situated between God and the world of things, and articulate language was given them to name things in the name of God” (10-11). As the father considers the son to be the Word of God, their communication becomes even more revealing in its capacity for sharing understanding not only of themselves, but of the world around them. They recurrently exchange the names and definitions of objects, now-extinct animals and the like because such is the son’s way of coming into contact with the protagonists’ surroundings. However, many times, this naming is used in reference to the past by the father, and it is the son who forces the father’s perspective into integrating the post-apocalyptic diegetic present, such as when encountering a soft drink. While the son directly confronts the incompatibility of the drink with the present and future – when the father offers the beverage to his son, the young boy says “[i]t’s because I wont ever get to drink another one, isnt it? [*sic*]” – the father attempts to maintain a hopeful perspective over the regeneration of previous human experience – “Ever’s a long time” (McCarthy, 24). In the son’s argument, such references to the past can no longer exist in the postapocalyptic world, the God-like act of naming becomes unnecessary inasmuch as past systems hold no functionality in the diegetic present. If the son is the spoken Word of God, God communicates in the new world through charged silence – a silence which the father refuses to accept.

The father’s hope for regeneration largely stems from a knowledge and contact with the previous world, which is no longer adequate or possible, as is the morality which he attempts to transfer onto the son’s perception of the world, and through which he perceives the young boy in a God-like status. Similarly to how spiritual connection to God as a figure of hope is truncated in the new world, as formerly argued, so is the transference of knowledge and perception. As a consequence, the father enters a cycle of revisitation of the past which interrupts his connection to the son, as the boy is only capable of perceiving life in post-apocalyptic terms – because, if he is God’s Word, he is the Word of a new, but yet unspoken world, incompatible with previous human experience.

Accordingly, Marc Augé opens "From Places to Non-Places" by pointing out "[t]he presence of the past in a present that supersedes it but still lays claim to it" (61), which accurately represents the father's (self-)perception. In moments of anachronistic overlapping of the past and present, such as the aforementioned granting of a soft drink to the son, there is characteristic distance between the protagonists. Despite the father's well-intentioned wish to share an element of past experience with his son, the son immediately expresses his awareness of the father's fixation on the past and fear of an uncertain and apparently sterile future. Such moments of overlapping of an unrecoverable past with an un-regenerative present lead, often-times, to exposure to danger, whether it comes into fruition or not – meaning that whenever the father encounters an object or glimpse of the past, such as a soft drink or his childhood house, he immediately abandons the dynamics needed for survival in this new world in favor of these anachronistic images, leading to situations of danger that are to be signaled by the son.

Once more, the father is drawn towards a past which can no longer exist and which is charged with referential images which are not available to the son – as Marc Augé states, "[i]f a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place" (63). The southward journey, the pilgrimage the protagonists bearing civilization undertake through the territory into regeneration, then, must be considered not only inside of a hostile nature in all its facets, but also located in an American non-place, an American impossibility of identity as a consequence of the father's revisitation of the past. Because the father proves to be incapable of forsaking all relational points and forms belonging to the old world, he becomes, himself, a symbolic representation of incompatibility in time.

In considering that "[p]lace and non-place are rather like opposed polarities: the first is never completely erased, the second never totally completed; they are like palimpsests on which the scrambled game of identity and relations is ceaselessly rewritten" (64), one can understand that the father bears this tension between what was and what can no longer be, and attempts to drive the son into a possibility of the regeneration of both sides. In the father's perception, the revitalization of a not fully dead, even if not fully living past would translate into the full rewriting and rewinding of present conditions into a familiar sight, landscape and identity.² However, the mutual inadequacy of the son and the new world to the expectation created by the father truncates and halts both characters in their dynamics and respective perceptions of the world – a tension which is reflected in the seemingly hybrid, but destroyed landscape that ultimately treats relational objects as inadequate.

The father perceives this landscape as riddled with nothingness, and recognizes it as a "void" (11) in the beginning of the novel, but he fails to see that, as Toni Morrison considers, "a void may be empty, but is not a vacuum" ([190]). In the apparent nothingness, the son – a figure of hope and possibility – perceives opportunities for good practices; in the darkness, the son carries the fire, and, in the silence, the

² Albeit there is no sign of life in the diegetic present, the father considers all references to the former realm of experience a haunting memory and dangerous dream that may harm one's chances of survival in the post-apocalyptic ambiguous landscape (McCarthy 18).

son's continuation of "carrying the fire" (McCarthy, 83) allows for a mutation of the quasi-fully silent world into the possibility for generation — even if there is no place for regeneration.

Despite the misplacing of the father's expectation concerning the son's impossible regeneration of pre-apocalyptic experience, upon the father's death, the son becomes free to fully disconnect from references to a past unknown to him and to immerse himself into a present which carries both reality and possibility. The son promises his father to remember him, and in doing so and engaging in conversation with the memory of his father, the son replaces the old-world God with a new-world *Father*, which allows for a complete transmutation of the material world in its non-placed quality. In this action, the son clears both the inner and outer landscape of the tensions carried out by his father, as he fully recognizes the impossibility of regeneration of the world's previous conception, and attributes anew the possibility of meaning and creation of the world to the space he occupies.

Most characteristically, the novel's closing paragraph evidences this possibility:

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 muscular and torsional. On their backs 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. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery (287).

The mapping and mazing on the backs of the brook trout present a renewed possibility for life — not one which is based upon previous experience, but one which begins anew and upon which nature is no longer wilderness, but the realm of fruitfulness. There is, indeed, no possibility to recover what has already been lost, or to recreate "a citty [*sic*] upon a hill" (Winthrop 47) — as Leo Marx proposes in Chapter 6, "Epilogue: Garden of Ashes" of *Machine in the Garden* regarding pastoral conceptions, "the old symbol of reconciliation is obsolete" (Marx, 2000, 364). The southward movement undergone by the protagonists, in its referencing to a preapocalyptic world and ideology, becomes lost in translation — with regard to movement and language. However, the humming which evokes a quasi-vocalization of a new-world Word capable of creation emerges in its stead, diverging radically from the (now) impossible systems carried over by the father. It is unclear whether the suggested vocalization would turn into another howl of destruction and pain, or if its creative powers would allow for a generation — rather than regeneration — but the possibility of the quasi-Word becomes embodied by the son.

Conclusion

Despite the father's attempt at maintaining a regenerative possibility of preapocalyptic experience, of the American "citty [*sic*] upon a hill" (Winthrop 47), the son sees past this façade and understands the frustration which overbears this hopeless pursuit. As the concepts, senses and language pertaining to a world which no longer exists grow mute, they must be rebirthed and reformed without reference to the obliterated past if they are to endure. After all, the *void* world of McCarthy's *The*

Road "is not a vacuum" (Morrison [190]), and the son becomes the non-vocalization of this possibility after the complete severance with a past unfit for survival.

These possibilities and the son's generative capability, however, are not bound by the limitations of the present (essay's) *Words*. McCarthy's novel, in its use of rich and meaningful silence, allows for multiple interpretations, and its potential for interpretation still flows and buds, contrary to the diegetic ash desert. One might consider, for example, how dystopian landscapes affect humanity's capacity for communication, in developing a comparative analysis between *The Road* and other post-apocalyptic works.³ If world and order are disintegrated in dystopian frameworks, in what ways does humankind rely upon a familiar nature for the maintenance of an identity that is to be shared in a language that is also familiar, albeit inadequate to destroyed societies? And how does the natural world respond – if at all – to the impossibility of language? Moreover, considering the (non-)American landscape of McCarthy's novel, how do the melted experiences of American communities react to apocalyptic annihilation if they are forced to use a language which, oftentimes, rejects them?

These considerations are a mere glimpse into the fertile sea that McCarthy's novel constitutes. Even if further research opposes the arguments presented here, the infinite possibilities included in *The Road* render no reasoning obsolete. Instead, the convergence of all alternatives becomes the representation of the son's generative power, the continuation of critical thinking, and the maintenance of words, worlds and Words that can *always* be.

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³ I have dabbled in this topic in another essay, entitled "'You'd just come after her': Images of American Literary Experience in *The Last of Us*," which, while also considering McCarthy's novel (along with brief mentions to Marx and Winthrop), provides a wider perspective on post-apocalyptic landscapes and on the role of duos in American Literature.