

Fulcrums and Borderlands

A Desert Reading of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

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The article presents a reading of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) in terms of the desert. The desert has been a landscape of central importance for McCarthy since *Blood Meridian* (1985), but it is of unprecedented importance in *The Road*. Physically, emotionally as morally, every choice the protagonists of *The Road* face as they trek across the bleak and abstract wasteland of a future America can in some way or other lead back to the ultimate question of *deserta*, of absence. The problem of the desert, in other words, is the barren ground upon which the central questions of the novel rest. The article concludes with the suggestion that *The Road* may present a new phase in McCarthy's authorship, a shift heralded not just by McCarthy's plunge into a new genre but possibly his entire philosophy.

Keywords: desert, wasteland, entropy, Cormac McCarthy, The Road, Blood Meridian.

This desert upon which so many have been broken is vast and calls for largeness of heart but it is also ultimately empty. It is hard, it is barren. Its very nature is stone. (Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 330)

I.

Whether in the dark and gory Western mythology of *Blood Meridian*, or, *The Evening Redness in the West* (1985), the lighter pastoral of *The Border Trilogy* (*All the Pretty Horses* (1992), *The Crossing* (1994) and *Cities of the Plain* (1998)), or the bullet-riddled landscapes of *No Country for Old Men* (2005), the desert stands as a central motif in Cormac McCarthy's writing. Central though it may be, it is not, however, a landscape whose meaning is stable. At times it is a source of sustenance and rejuvenation, as in *The Border Trilogy*, at others the environment in which both individual and society break under the strain of its unrelenting indifference and meaninglessness, a country not just

too tough for *old men* (*No Country for Old Men*) but for all mankind (*Blood Meridian*).

McCarthy's fascination with the desert has been so strong that critics have been tempted to propose that McCarthy's very style is of the desert. McCarthy's prose, as the argument goes, is as spare as the desert landscape he describes, the texture of his writing as lean and stringent as his tone is sombre. These are arguably terms that can be tied to any sort of minimalist writing, yet to a writer whose authorship is based 'upon an intense awareness of impermanence [...] in a continual and more or less cordial dialogue with death' (Grammer 1999, 33), it does indeed seem 'as if the very hostility of this [desert] environment accommodated McCarthy's wilderness pastoralism better than any other setting' (Guillemin 2004, 75).

The following is first and foremost intended as an examination of the desert motif in *The Road* (2006), the latest of McCarthy's books. Strong as the desert motif may be from *Blood Meridian* on, it is of unprecedented importance in *The Road*; and this despite the fact that the word 'desert' appears but once in the text.¹ Physically, emotionally as morally, every choice the protagonists of *The Road* face as they trek across the bleak and abstract wasteland of a future America can in some way or other lead back to the ultimate question of *deserta*, of absence. The problem of the desert, in other words, is the barren ground upon which the central questions of the novel rest.

Secondly, I want to question whether *The Road* may constitute a new phase of McCarthy's authorship, a move away from the two major phases that has hitherto characterised his writing. The early phase, comprising *The Orchard Keeper* (1965), *Outer Dark* (1968), *Child of God* (1974) and *Suttree* (1979), are all set in or around McCarthy's native Tennessee. The later phase, comprising *Blood Meridian*, *The Border Trilogy* and *No Country for Old Men*, shifts the focus from the South to the West, a change of territory flagged not just by this refocusing of locations, but of genre, too, in a move away from Southern gothic towards the genre of the Western. Distinct as these two phases may be, they do however share the strong sense of place that originally secured him the label of being a regional writer.² Set in an unclear future and an unspecified region of America, *The Road* is thus immediately different when seen in the light of McCarthy's former four decades of writing. Not only is it the first of his

novels to be detached entirely from history, it also breaks with his famous attention to place.

The first and second question cannot easily be viewed in isolation. As Michael Chabon points out in his review of *The Road* in the *New York Review of Books*, it is possible to argue that ‘fundamentally [*The Road*] marks not a departure but a return to McCarthy’s most brilliant genre work’ (Chabon 2007). With *The Road*, Chabon suggests, we see McCarthy returning to his best work, the reappearance of a narrative formula that Chabon believes McCarthy got just right in *Blood Meridian*. What I want to suggest here, then, is that the way in which the books are most alike is not in their tone nor in their (approximate) adherence to the same genre, but in the ability to act as ‘a kind of fulcrum, a borderland’ (Chabon 2007) that sums up what came before yet at the same time heralds something new in McCarthy’s authorship. Consequently, what I will be arguing here is that the main characteristic shared with *Blood Meridian* is exactly what makes *The Road* a journey into undiscovered territory rather than a return to former pastures. Also, I will be illustrating how the differences between the two are never plainer than when seen in their shared yet fundamentally opposed approaches to the topos of the desert.

II.

As the story of *The Road* opens, the reader is confronted by the two protagonists, a nameless man and his son, marooned in a world where both land and history have been decimated by an enigmatic cataclysm roughly a decade earlier. The landscape is in *The Road* an extreme of both presence and absence, more dominant than ever in McCarthy’s authorship while paradoxically also the vaguest. Whether the landscapes in question are verdant and lush, like the fields and forests of *The Orchard Keeper* or *Outer Dark*, or naked, like the dry plains and mountains of *The Border Trilogy*, the landscapes described by McCarthy prior to *The Road* have always been vibrant, bustling with colour and energy, beautiful and moving even when cruel. Even in *Blood Meridian*, set in a landscape ‘blasted and pitted by eons of natural violence – wind, water, earthquakes, volcanoes – into terrifying, sublime postures’ (Owens 2000, 7) and easily the bleakest of McCarthy’s books, the vistas described are always glorious. They may be frightening and overwhelming, but they are also magnificent,

exciting and above all colourful, flaring shades of blue, yellow and green battling it out with an omnipresent red always 'the color of blood' (McCarthy 1990, 152).³

In comparison, the scenery of *The Road* is drab. In the place of stunning colours and extraordinary topography, a wall of grey greets the reader, a monochrome and 'wasted country' where all that moves is the 'ashes of the late world carried on the bleak and temporal winds to and fro in the void', an 'ashen scabland' where the only thing left 'rich in color' are dreams (McCarthy 2007, 4, 10, 14, 20). The landscape is so monotonous, so flat and so dull, that it does not really matter whether one moves or stays put. Unlike the journeys of John Grady Cole of *All the Pretty Horses* or Billy Parham of *The Crossing*, there is no possibility of a retreat to a world of simpler truths by going south of the border, no possibility of a return to a time of former innocence.⁴ Instead, the characters of *The Road* are facing a landscape so vague it almost is not there, yet consequently also a landscape that comes to mean everything. There is nothing to cherish in the landscape, nothing to differentiate it from the next place down the road. Yet there is at the same time no denying it, simply because there is no escaping it.

As with place, so with time, for though history is still present in *The Road*, it is only as a fading memory. It is not a *totally* static world, yet it is one that obviously soon will be, a world in which time has stopped and a world in which progress and evolution are no longer to be found. It is thus a world entirely at the mercy of the Second Law of Thermodynamics (also known as the Law of Entropy), according to which 'the world acts spontaneously to minimize potentials', meaning that all energy will in time disperse and fizzle out. As the nameless man ponders near the conclusion of *The Road*, in a world governed by regression, this is the only real movement left: 'Perhaps in the world's destruction it would be possible at last to see how it was made. Oceans, mountains. The ponderous counterspectacle of things ceasing to be. The sweeping waste, hydroptic and coldly secular. The silence' (McCarthy 2007, 293). In the 'counterspectacle' of a world collapsing, all the prerequisites for history are necessarily fast disappearing. Nation states, machinery, books, social codes of civil conduct, even that basic ingredient of all advanced civilisations, the road, is breaking up:

But there's not any more states?

No.

What happened to them?

I don't know exactly. That's a good question.

But the roads are still there.

Yes. *For a while.*

How long a while?

I don't know. Maybe quite a while. There's nothing to uproot them so they should be okay for a while.

(pp. 43–44, emphasis added)

The traces of humanity will linger on *for a while*, but as the nameless man knows all too well, traces are all that is left. In a world in which humanity is no longer humane, where survival is all and not even cannibalism and filicide are deemed unacceptable acts, all the man and his son can do is wait. There will be no tomorrow, no salvation from the encroaching nothingness that will in the end extinguish all that was once human.

As a post-apocalyptic vision of a future gone wrong, several of McCarthy's central topics are thus pre-empted from the outset by this uncharacteristic choice of setting. There is no longer a wild frontier to explore, no longer a bucolic respite to be gained from the complexities of modern life, simply because there is no longer a hinterland, no city and no civilisation against which the frontier and the rural can be measured. There are not even, as in *Blood Meridian*, any Indians left to scalp. Instead we find a desert that never ends nor begins, a landscape as devoid of difference as it is of life.

III.

Blood Meridian, Dana Phillips remarks, is a novel that 'accepts homelessness as its inevitable conclusion' (Phillips 1996, 452), hence also a novel in which the nomadic life intrinsic to a desert environment is indicative of the way in which its characters view the world and the lives they lead in it. 'We cannot run and hide in the desert, for the desert's vastness already enfolds the shape of our destiny,' Steven Shaviro notes, for in the vastness of the desert there can be 'no retreat, no separation' (Shaviro 1999, 152). According to Shaviro, the characters of *Blood Meridian* experience 'a double displacement – exile so extreme that we are exiled even from the possibility, the hope and despair, of exile' (p. 146). Unlike the deserts of

The Border Trilogy or *No Country for Old Men*, then, the desert of *Blood Meridian* does not present a *phase* or a *border*, a state of simplistic bliss that one yearns for (*The Border Trilogy*) or a brutal territory that one fails to comprehend and adapt to (*No Country for Old Men*), but an ever present and all-pervasive constant. The desert of *Blood Meridian* is not one you pass through, nor is it one that you can set yourself apart from. Hence the central lesson of *Blood Meridian* seems to be that: ‘We cannot deplete the world, we cannot reach the sunset. Beyond the desert, there is only more empty space, the equally daunting infinitude of the ocean’ (pp. 149–150).

In *The Road*, a crucial scene confirms that *Blood Meridian* and *The Road* share a common ground. After having trekked over the vast and grey wasteland for months, the man and the boy, too, reach the coast, only to find the space beyond the shoreline to be as barren and grey as the one they have been trying to escape. Contemplating an ‘ocean vast and cold and shifting heavily like a slowly heaving vat of slag’ (McCarthy 2007, 230), the boy asks the fateful question:

What’s on the other side?
Nothing.
There must be something.
Maybe there’s a father and his little boy and they’re sitting on a beach.
(p. 231)

The man hopes, but obviously does not believe. As with the question asked by the boy earlier in the book – whether there be life on Mars – the answer to this question must ultimately be the same. ‘There’s nothing there’ (p. 167), the man replies to the boy’s query of life on Mars, an answer the man finds as applicable in the face of ‘the desolation of some alien sea breaking on the shores of a world unheard of’ (p. 230) as it is before the voids of space. Beyond, beneath or above the ocean, all that can be found is, as Shaviro remarks on *Blood Meridian*, ‘more empty space’.

In the hopeless meaninglessness of a ‘murderous humankind on this very real killing planet’ (Daugherty 1999, 165), of ‘mindless, atavistic violence [as] the true nature of mankind’ and ‘the earth as a primal killing ground’ (Owens 2000, 6, 11), *The Road* thus tallies well enough with the sense of claustrophobia, or agoraphobia perhaps, haunting *Blood Meridian*. As another of Shaviro’s comments on *Blood Meridian* makes clear,

McCarthy's tenth novel (*The Road*) is however hardly a repeat of his fifth (*Blood Meridian*):

Blood Meridian is a book, then, not of heights and depths, not of origins and endings, but of restless, incessant horizontal movements: nomadic wanderings, topographical displacements, variations of weather, skirmishes in the desert. There is only war, there is only the dance. Exile is not deprivation or loss, but our primeval and positive condition. (Shaviro 1999, 147)

The crucial difference here is one of energy. For although the terror of *Blood Meridian* may be all-pervading, horrible and brutal, we do at least find the *motions* of conflict in it: 'incessant horizontal movements', 'variations of weather', 'the dance' (Shaviro). *Blood Meridian* is a novel whose 'extreme violence is deliberately paced to dramatically overwhelm and subsume all other structural elements' (Owens 2000, 18), but precisely therefore also a novel giving the impression that the violence is never-ending. There is no escaping this bloodshed, but at least it is a brutality that persists, a world in which someone, and *something*, does survive. The world described in *Blood Meridian* is the world in its primal condition, a world in which mercy is non-existent and death will always win out. But it is also a world in which the defeated will be replaced by another living being, be that man, animal or plant.

As Georg Guillemin argues in *The Pastoral Vision of Cormac McCarthy* (2004), *Blood Meridian* need thus not necessarily be read as an exercise in despair. Indeed, if we find it possible to elevate nature 'to an existential rank equal to that of human beings' (Guillemin 2004, 79), we may find the book comforting, perhaps even joyous. Introducing his chapter on *Blood Meridian* with a quote from Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire* (1968), Guillemin indirectly likens *Blood Meridian*'s 'post-humanist' (p. 81) perspectives to the tough, utilitarian romanticism of Abbey. Abbey's *Desert Solitaire*, 'the cornerstone work of modern American nature writing' (Slovic 2001, xx), has no problem with death as long as the dying is done by people. This is provocatively expressed in one of the central passages of *Desert Solitaire*, where Abbey sees little to worry about for a person stranded in the desert. As Abbey argues, you can always:

Comfort yourself with the reflection that within a few hours, if all goes as planned, your human flesh will be working its way through the gizzard of a

buzzard, your essence transfigured into the fierce greedy eyes and unimaginable consciousness of a turkey vulture. Whereupon you, too, will soar on motionless wings high over the ruck and rack of human suffering. (Abbey 1971, 148)

The death of an individual human is thus to Abbey a cause for celebration:

His departure makes room for the living. Away with the old, in with the new. He is gone – we remain, others come. The plow of mortality drives through the stubble, turns over rocks and sod and weeds to cover the old, the worn-out, the husks, shells, empty seedpods and sapless roots, clearing the field for the next crop. A ruthless, brutal process – but clean and beautiful. (p. 269)

In the spirit of Abbey, Guillemin suggests, *Blood Meridian* may consequently be interpreted as ‘a positive, therapeutic’ version of man’s encounter with wilderness, ‘a strange euphoria [of] ecopastoral elation’ (Guillemin 2004, 101). The lesson, though this is arguably Guillemin’s reading of a book that has elicited an astounding array of vastly different and sometimes contradictory readings, remains much the same as that of *Desert Solitaire*: namely that man might die but the land endures.

Compare this, again, to *The Road*. Here, the conflicts experienced by the nameless man and his son offer no ‘incessant horizontal movements’, no ‘variations of weather’, no continual ‘dance’ of war and death (Shaviro), and certainly no ‘ecopastoral elation’ (Guillemin). All that is left are the final spasms of a world about ‘to wink out forever’ (McCarthy 2007, 93). McCarthy’s trademark violence is as cruel as ever in *The Road*, but unlike the ‘overwhelming’ (Guillemin) violence of *Blood Meridian*, we get the distinct impression that the violence of *The Road* is a violence that cannot last. The final couple of pages apart, there is nothing in *The Road* to sustain the possibility of even such fierce hope, no space for romanticism of any kind, not even the biocentric variant that the likes of Abbey represents. All that remains in *The Road* is ‘the worn-out, the husks, shells’ that Abbey so keenly wishes to see replaced by ‘the next crop’.

IV.

The desert of *Blood Meridian* can with little difficulty be read abstractly and metaphorically,⁵ may possibly even be read as a ‘rejection of history as a meaningful category’ (Phillips 1996, 440), but the plausibility of such readings does not detract from the fact that its premise is specific in

historical as well as mythological terms. The desert of *Blood Meridian* may seem alien and otherworldly, a landscape more out of a nightmarish biblical past than a landscape contemporary residents of Mexico or the American Southwest can easily identify with. Yet no matter how strange and eerie the world of *Blood Meridian* may strike its readers, 'We cannot with any respect for the text ignore the fact that history is forcefully present in *Blood Meridian*' (Søfting 1999, 21). No matter how wide we cast our readings of *Blood Meridian*, it is indisputably still a book founded on the mythology of the 'American dream of manifest destiny [...] repeated over and over again, ravaging the indifferent landscape' (Shaviro 1999, 157), meticulously researched and 'founded to a remarkable degree on the reports of first-hand observers' (Sepich 1999, 137).

While *Blood Meridian* unquestionably takes 'part of the continuing reassessment of violence in American culture' (Owens 2000, 10), it is doubtful that one can quite as unequivocally state the same about *The Road*. There are, as we may recall it, neither states nor nation states left in *The Road*, no borders to cross or Indians to kill. Contrary to all his former works, *The Road* is thus *not* a book that we can claim is 'unmistakeably and significantly from a specific region of the US' (Søfting 1999, 13).

There are, admittedly, as Chabon points out in his review, elements of the adventure story and the survival story, of man pitted against the environment and the bad guys down the road, elements that figure large in American literature and most certainly so in the tradition of the Western, the genre that McCarthy has to some extent or other operated within for the past twenty years. As Susan Kollin has pointed out, 'The Western landscape is supposed to be a test of character, bringing out the best in the hero and the worst in the villain' (Kollin 2001, 562), a trait turned on its head in the anti-Western of *Blood Meridian*, but one that fits *The Road* perfectly. The nameless man and his son continually reaffirm each other in the belief that they are 'the good guys', that they 'carry the fire' and that that they will, in the end, triumph. In that sense, *The Road* could be read in terms of a prototypical Western, one whittled down to its pure essentials: a man and his boy, trying to make it across the frontier by fighting their way out of the claws of the bad guys, armed with just one gun but a set of morals firmer than that of any hero of the Old West.

This is in theory accurate, yet once again we must remember that the landscape faced by the man and the boy is not Western, not Southern, nor

even a frontier of the most generic sorts.⁶ Whether as a rejection of the heroic mythology of Manifest Destiny and endless expansion (*Blood Meridian*), or the nostalgic pining for a past defined by adventure and the unspoilt spectacular of a wilderness untouched by man (*The Border Trilogy*), *The Road* does not quite fit the bill. There is nothing ‘adventurous’ about the adventure of the nameless man and his son, nothing that is exciting in the sense of a Huck Finn waiting to see what thrilling experience may await round the next corner. Neither is there any real sense of nostalgia to be found, for although the nameless man obviously does not desire or cherish his atrocious circumstances, the realisation that he cannot afford sentimentalism – in any form or shape – forces him to squash out all remembrance of the past:

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 licence. 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 went on. (McCarthy 2007, 52–53)

Memories are a dangerous distraction from the one thing that truly matters: the present survival of his boy from one day to the other. As the novel progresses, the man becomes increasingly certain of what he has known all along, namely that whatever action he and his boy take, no matter how far they move, survival is not possible in the long run. And yet he keeps on moving, aware that there are no ‘long term goals’ (p. 170) but nevertheless forcing himself and his boy always to take one more step, hoping to locate one more meal before it all ends. ‘Mostly he worried about their shoes. That and food. Always food’ (p. 16). Temporally speaking, there is thus no real possibility to move either forwards or backwards, no chance for a return to the past nor any real hope for the future; all that is left is the immediate present, the next piece of bread, the next shelter, the next violent encounter that they have, somehow, to survive. In the hyper-pragmatic world the nameless man has wrought for himself and his son, the only way in which he can bear to go on living is to work with what he has at hand, however modest: ‘So be it. Evoke the forms. Where you’ve nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them’ (pp. 77–78).

Precisely because of this incessant urgency to keep moving, the constant focus on the present or at most, the next day or week, neither the frontier nor that distinctly American nostalgia of 'being on the road' are particularly helpful categories to force onto *The Road*. Considering the title of the book, such a claim may sound absurd and self-contradictory, yet while it is true that the nameless man and his boy are constantly on the move, they are in fact not going anywhere. They are always 'on the road', but the point of being on the road rapidly dissolves into meaninglessness. In the beginning of the novel, we hear how the nameless man has decided they must go south since they cannot survive another winter. Yet as they eventually do make their way south and it becomes clear that their chances of survival have not improved, the futility of attempting to delineate differing categories (of any sorts) becomes painstakingly clear. One may move as much as one wants to, from north to south, from east to west, or vice versa; one may even move to the other side of the planet, to the shore across the grey ocean or plunge into its depths. But in the end it does not matter whether one moves or stays put. For in a world where everywhere is nowhere, a world in which there is no difference between frontier and civilisation, no difference between being on the road or off the road, everything eventually dissolves into meaninglessness and nothingness:

The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true. More fragile than he would have thought. How much was gone already? The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so its reality. Drawing down like something trying to preserve heat. In time to wink out forever. (McCarthy 2007, 93)

Even the power of the word, McCarthy suggests, is in the end divested of its power in the face of such devastation. In a world 'shrinking down', there can be no beyond, no redemption and no hope. In such a world, there can be only desertion, a space that is 'desert', bereft of any significance but the fact that it has been forsaken.

V.

George Monbiot of *The Guardian* has termed *The Road* 'the most important environmental book ever written' (Monbiot 2007), a claim

which may or may not prove to be true in terms of its reception, but certainly a claim that becomes problematic once authorial intent enters the equation. In a world in which nature has been so decimated that it cannot rightly be said to exist anymore, it is of course appropriate to question whether the author has meant his book as a warning to a humanity run rampant. The fact remains, however, that even the cataclysm, the event that so absolutely defines the terms of the book's premise, remains ambiguous. The fundamental act of anti-creation, the moment which in its destructiveness shaped the world into its present form, even this is never disclosed in enough detail for the reader to ascertain exactly what series of events caused it. Critics like Monbiot have suggested the cataclysm to be caused by global warming, nuclear war, even the strike of a meteor. But when studied closely, it is impossible to say whether it is one or the other.

Since the man remembers a time distinctly unlike the one he is living in, a time and a place where 'if he were God he would have made the world just so and no different' (McCarthy 2007, 234), the change has obviously occurred relatively quickly, possibly over the span of a few decades, years, months or even seconds. Indeed, in one of the man's recollected memories, we are at one point told that, 'The clocks stopped at 1:17' (p. 54). The stopping of clocks followed by a 'long shear of light and then a series of low concussions' (p. 54) suggests that the cataclysm was sudden, yet beyond such scant information, we are told very little. Consequently, this scene *could* be read as the beginning of the end, a sudden and unforeseen event that the man will forever look back to as the point where the world he once knew first began to unravel. Yet McCarthy feeds us so little specific information that it is not possible to tell. As readers, we have no way of knowing whether the stopping of the clocks is but one more event in a string of similarly devastating but externally different events, one more memory of how the world was destroyed, but by no means the first.

In the present, as the man and the boy make their way from one charred and grey place to another more or less entirely like it, the readers are thus constantly face to face with the effects of the cataclysm, but the cause of these devastations is never entirely clear. Near the ending of the book, the man and the boy pass by a 'coastal city' with 'tall buildings vaguely askew [...] softened in the heat and reset again [...] melted window glass hung frozen down the walls like icing on a cake'

(McCarthy 2007, 291). We are never told what might have caused such destruction, but neither are we meant to know. In *The Road*, rational causal explanations are largely useless simply because they are not supposed to make any rational sense as such. Except as a possible but by no means certain (and in all cases very imprecise) warning to protect and cherish the planet in its present state, politics do not provide a particularly useful approach to a reading of *The Road*. There is no real 'reason' for the cataclysmic event. There is simply its inescapable and massive presence.

In the post-historical and post-spatial world of *The Road*, all that remains is thus the relation between the coupling of man and boy, 'each the other's world entire' (McCarthy 2007, 4). Filed down to the bone, bereft of any distinguishing features, the external world offers nothing to the man and his boy other than an other against which they can define not just their own identities, but indeed their 'world entire'. Since '[t]here is no past' (p. 55), since '[t]here is no later' (p. 56), no people with whom they can identify and no place they can find peace, the man and the boy live in a constant present defined solely by the presence of their togetherness. As violence, cold and lack of food pose a constant threat to the survival of the unit that constitutes the man/boy coupling, the strangers they meet and the landscape they travel in are obviously of great significance; yet in the end, all of this is ultimately subordinated to the relationship between father and son.

Now Cormac McCarthy has never been willing to offer his readers the meaning of his books on a silver platter. As some of his critics have suggested, it may even be that the central meaning of McCarthy's authorship, the central message, is that there is no meaning to be found. In this sense, the desert seems the perfect setting, the ultimate scenery for a writer who seemingly adheres fully to Abbey's creed that the desert simply *is*: 'What does it mean? It means nothing. It is as it is and has no need for meaning' (Abbey 1971, 244). The all-consuming desert travelled by the man and his son means absolutely nothing but that it is omnipresent and that 'it is as it is'. This lack of meaning, then, must necessarily remain the central conundrum posed by *The Road*. Faced by surroundings of such complete meaninglessness, is it possible for any meaning to exist at all? Surprisingly, this is a question that McCarthy leaves suggestively, and optimistically, open.

VI.

Like all deserts, the landscape of *The Road* is one that is primarily characterised by absence: absence of sustenance, therefore of life, hence ultimately of presence. Deriving from Latin *desertus* meaning ‘abandoned, deserted, left’ (*Oxford English Dictionary*), the desert is etymologically defined by negation, hence delineated by what it is *not* rather than what it *is*. One thing that is present in the desert, however, is death. As Charles Bowden remarks in *Blue Desert* (1986), in a landscape otherwise devoid of defining characteristics, death becomes its defining state, the one concept summing up a landscape otherwise so hard to summarise:

I have no simple handle on the desert. Murder, rape, robbery, capital punishment, high interest, the stock market – all these matters produce quick and easy opinions. But not the hot, dry ground. I have walked hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of miles in the desert and yet my thoughts about it are very few and I spend very little time thinking these thoughts. [Yet] here I know this fact: the desert is where I want to die, where I do not fear death, do not even consider it. Here death is like breathing. Here death simply is. (Bowden 1997, 143)

Desert travellers (literary as actual) seeking death are thus a common enough phenomenon, for in a landscape as void as the desert, there is often very little other reason to go there. Precisely because travellers like Bowden have *chosen* to engage with death, they can, however, also afford to be cavalier about it.

The problem of all wildernesses, and in particular wildernesses as impoverished as those of the desert, is that if death is forced upon you, if you find yourself in a space where death is indeed ‘like breathing’ (Bowden), the charm of dying wears off rather quickly. This is precisely the problem faced by the man and the boy as they find themselves in a space where they have to ‘inhale’ death every year, every day and every hour, a presence they have as little hope of escaping as the necessity to take another breath. Consequently, they find themselves in a state in which it is very difficult to appreciate anything, even survival itself. The proximity of death may be exciting as well as beautiful, yet as Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant remarked in their studies of the sublime, there is nothing exhilarating about death when it comes *too* close. In *A Philosophical Enquiry* (1757), Burke remarked: ‘When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible’ (Burke 1990, 36), an observation backed up by Kant’s assertion in *Critique of Judgment* (1790) that for a

person cast upon 'the wide ocean, disturbed by the storm' the situation can necessarily only be 'horrible' (Kant 1992, 387). Unless 'we are in security' (p. 390), contemplating the storm from the immediate yet grounded safety of the shore, a sense of the sublime is difficult to maintain for long.

It is thus another and far less celebrated 'desert truth' that *The Road* affirms, namely that in a landscape in which death reigns supreme, it is impossible to uphold romantic illusions of beauty, truth, honour, compassion or any other lofty sentiments. Unlike Abbey who sees the 'finest quality' of the desert to be its 'indifference [...] to our presence, our absence, our coming, our staying or our going' simply because of his belief that no matter what happens, 'living things will emerge' (Abbey 1971, 334), even comforts like these are denied in a world that is as truly and absolutely deserted as that of *The Road*. In the face of relentless pressure from such universal devastation, neither life nor truth can sustain a foothold in the long run. The man stoically attempts to keep 'little truths' alive, the hope of another meal, warmth, a place to sleep, and most essentially, the hope that truth and survival somehow matter. The further he and his son progress into nothingness, however, the more hopeless their situation becomes, the man is eventually forced to admit that even the simple truth of survival itself eventually withers. In a world where nothing new ever comes forth, a world in which the possibility of growth and regeneration is void, the man realises that even just to go on living is to live a life where, 'Every day is a lie' (McCarthy 2007, 254). Hence, in a world in which there cannot be survival in even the basest of its forms, there can as consequence be no truths or lies, no right or wrong, no morals or ethics, no bad guys or good guys. In a fading world like this, a world 'shadowless and without feature' (p. 189), the one and only 'absolute truth' (p. 138) remains that: 'you are dying. That is not a lie' (p. 254).

As it turns out, however, the man may be wrong in this assumption. For contrary to all that McCarthy has ever taught his readers to expect, contrary to his partiality for dire endings, and most certainly contrary to the preceding three hundred pages of the novel, the concluding ten pages of *The Road* grant us a highly surprising finale: an ending that, while not exactly happy, at least contains the seeds for a new beginning.

'Can you do it? When the time comes? Can you?' (McCarthy 2007, 28), the man asks himself in the beginning of the book, a question that

is at the end answered in the negative as he realises that, 'I cant hold my son dead in my arms' (p. 298). The man dies but is not able to fulfil his grim pledge. The ever dwindling spiral of hope that has throughout the novel plummeted deeper and deeper does not, after all, crash and burn. 'You dont know what might be down the road' (p. 297), the dying father admonishes his son, thus contradicting the earlier despairing insight that death remains the one and only real truth we can ever count on.

McCarthy could have stopped the book here and there would have been no marked break from form. This fresh spark of hope in the dark, a spark that once more relights 'the fire' that the man and his son have tried so hard throughout to maintain, could have been left a flickering and unsteady glow that the boy was left to carry, alone, out of the reader's sight. For once, however, McCarthy seems unwilling, incapable even, of such cynicism. Introducing a *deus ex machina* worthy of Euripides, the good guys magically manifest themselves almost instantly the father dies, consequently validating the father's words in physical as well as conceptual form. Contrary to all former expectations, it turns out that good guys *do exist*, in essence as in presence. Not only is the boy rewarded for his persistence in trying to be good, confirmed in the belief that *it does matter* to be good. He is also shown that goodness is able to exist outside the close-knit union of father and son, hence that the world outside the father-son relationship, formerly 'the world entire', is still invested with meaning, purpose and future. Taken in by kindred spirits, a man and a woman, a little boy and a little girl, it seems the world may not be dying after all. Hope, otherwise in short supply in McCarthy's authorship and never before living under tougher conditions than in *The Road*, is suddenly present in abundance.

So what, exactly, are we to believe of that central question posed by the book's desert premise?

If we momentarily ignore both the boy and the ending, the answer to this question seems to be that survival is the one concern that rules out all others. As the man sums it up at the end: 'A lot of bad things have happened but we're still here. [...] It counts for something' (McCarthy 2007, 287, 288). It is vital for the basic truth of life itself to be secured before the more refined truths of ethics and aesthetics have any chance to

develop and grow. To put it crudely, the set of rules by which the man lives, the one truth that rules out all other truths, boils down to a simple credo of ‘survive first, ask questions later’.

This equation of course becomes far more complicated when we add the boy’s concerns. To the boy, base survival is not enough. The boy needs to invest life with meaning beyond the simple mechanics of continued survival. This need manifests itself in many different ways, but most explicitly so in his horror of cannibalism. In a world largely ‘populated by men who would eat your children in front of your eyes’ (McCarthy 2007, 192), it is imperative for the boy that he and his father do not themselves stoop to this level. The boy can to some degree accept his father’s minor moral failings – his lack of compassion towards strangers, his occasional lapses of honesty – but makes it clear that cannibalism is the one sin he will never be able to forgive. Again and again, the boy asks the man for reassurance that they will not transgress this fundamental boundary no matter how desperate they may become. This promise the man continually reaffirms.

Given his constant need for affirmation, however, it seems likely that the boy suspects the same as the reader, namely that the man would be able to transgress not just this prohibition, but any, as long as it serves that central premise of keeping his boy alive. As much as the man marvels and wonders at the boy’s immense capacity for ‘goodness’, the boy’s insistence on moral rectitude remains a quality that inevitably puts man and boy at cross-purposes. For the man, all other concerns are subsumed under the umbrella of survival. He will not allow the few non-violent strangers they meet on their way entry into their companionship, nor will he even temporarily share their food and shelter. From the man’s point of view, any one such act of compassion, no matter how small, will constitute an unpardonable lowering of his guard, directly as indirectly; most immediately so through the possibility of physical assault, but possibly even more so in a lessening of their long-term chances through the squandering away of their already meagre resources. As the man is painfully aware, however, for every refusal of help, the boy becomes further and further removed, not just from the man but also from himself, to the point that ‘something was gone that could not be put right again’ (McCarthy 2007, 145).

As a consequence of this realisation, the man is against his better judgement occasionally forced to depart from his strict survival regimen.

Limited kindnesses are now and again extended to strangers, just as the boy is twice allowed to bathe (first in a pool, later in the ocean) for no other reason than because he wants to. Nowhere better is this dilemma of survival versus good summed up, however, than when the man discovers a flare gun. As father and son ponder the potential uses of the gun, the man admits he does not plan to use it as it was originally intended since 'there's nobody to signal to' (McCarthy 2007, 258). Instead, he aims to use it as a weapon. To this, the boy asks whether they can fire it for 'celebration' (p. 258) rather than harm. According to the man's no-nonsense code of survival, firing the gun will be a pointless gesture, one that will not just waste ammunition but might also alert the roaming bad guys to their presence. Accordingly, firing the gun for 'celebration' may in one way or another be the cause of their death and it should, from a survivalist point of view, remain unfired. As the man also realises, however, if he does not allow his son to fire the gun, the outcome may in the long run be equally fatal. Forever barring his son from any 'celebration', from wonder, it is painfully clear to the man that the boy will eventually not even be able to celebrate that greatest wonder of all, that of life itself.

VII.

In terms of its central desert premise, the conclusion of *The Road* must necessarily therefore be two-pronged.

On one hand it is a novel that is squarely anthropocentric, arguing that since humanity is the only source (and interpreter) of meaning, ethics and beauty, human survival takes precedence over all else. It is not the case of human survival as a species, but that specific part of the human species capable of 'humanity', or in the terms of man and the boy, of 'goodness'. Wilderness, nature, beasts or beastmen, the survival of all such is of no significance as long as 'the good guys' survive. A lesson in anthropocentrism that not only becomes reinforced in the light of the ending, but seems to suggest that a humanist belief in the tenet of goodness is not only worth more than the remainder of creation, but actually able to sustain itself independently of it. In other words, it is not solely a question of realising that the survival of those who 'carry the fire' takes precedence over that of all other living things, but also that the 'fire' (goodness) seems able to generate heat even when no fuel is present. Sunlight and food, clean water and all that

grows may cease to exist, yet innocence and goodness never will: 'Goodness will find the little boy. It always has. It will again' (McCarthy 2007, 300).

On the other hand, the second and contradictory desert lesson to be learned from *The Road* is that without nature, without a 'biosphere' (Monbiot 2007), there can be no humanity either, hence that for 'goodness' to take seed and grow, rich and fertile soil is an absolute prerequisite. Human will and intention may be the very finest, but in a world that is *total* desert, humanity cannot prevail, no matter how hopeful, good, innocent or moral. For where would it go? The good guys magically appearing at the end of *The Road* must necessarily come from *somewhere*, just as their continued survival must imply that the desert is not quite as total as the man, the son and we as readers have hitherto been led to believe.

While we cannot with any certainty say whether it is one or the other, it is, however, remarkable just how ardently McCarthy seems to need to *believe* the latter. Which brings us to a subject that we have so far been careful to stay clear of, a third character that may be as important as the man and the boy although he is conspicuously absent throughout.

As Edwin T. Arnold has suggested, although McCarthy can easily be taken for a nihilist, 'there is also evident in his work a profound belief in the need for moral order, a conviction that is essentially religious' (Arnold 1999, 46). This need for a moral order has never been clearer in McCarthy's authorship than in *The Road*. The man again and again addresses God, though mostly in curses: '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 2007, 10). Angry as he is at this absent God, it is obvious that the man is no atheist. The man, who is the very essence of fatherhood, passionately needs to believe in the existence of God, the absent Father. First of all because this would open the possibility of apportioning blame and hence enact causality and meaning once more (the apocalypse happened because God has willed it/has failed), but most of all because this means an entertaining of the hope that the absent father might at one point return in order to restore the world and relieve the man of his burden. Since God refuses to manifest, however, the hope invested in divinity is eventually transferred to the one being that quite literally seems to be of another, and future, world. Meeting an old man whose name may

or may not be Ely, the man suggests that since ‘There is no God’ (p. 181), perhaps instead the boy is ‘a god’ (p. 183).⁷ Not God, capital G, but *a* god, a prophet of the world to come once the leftovers of the old world have been laid to rest, a spark of life that will enable creation to begin anew.

Once again, however, we just cannot tell. As the man at one point ponders the solitary flute-playing of his son, so are we as readers left to wonder whether such optimism of a new beginning represents: ‘A formless music for the age to come. Or perhaps the last music on earth called up from out of the ashes of its ruin’ (McCarthy 2007, 81). Insofar as the unexpected ending could be constructed as divine intervention and proof of God’s will on earth, or, failing that, that the goodness of the boy constitutes a law unto itself that will form a new divinity, we are, at the very end, left wondering, as uncertain as ever.

What remains amidst all this indecisiveness, however, is a strong core of hope and it is on this bedrock that McCarthy makes his final stand. Depending on what one comes looking for, *The Road* can convincingly sustain readings that suggest we invest our hopes *either* in nature, in humanity or in God. As has hopefully been proved here, any reading focusing solely on one interpretation will have to ignore quite a few signs to the contrary in a novel that tellingly ends with the word ‘mystery’ (McCarthy 2007, 307).⁸ Wherever one decides to put one’s stake, there can hardly be any doubt, though, that *The Road* expresses a passionate hope that *hope itself* matters. Even if it does not absolutely confirm that hope leads to redemption, even if we do not get any definite answers one way or the other, at least *The Road* opens up the possibility that hope *might* matter. ‘This is what the good guys do. They keep trying. They don’t give up’ (p. 145).

As suggested in the above, *The Road* may, like *Blood Meridian*, be seen as ‘a kind of fulcrum, a borderland’ of what came before and what we can expect to see in the future. The recycling of earlier themes are, as noted, palpable, yet so are the ways in which the novel marks its own territory. Certainly so in the uprooting from tradition, history and place by the plunge into a hitherto entirely untried genre (science fiction/post-apocalyptic writing), but most radically of all perhaps the insistence that hope may in fact be worth something. It of course remains to be seen whether *The Road* is a ‘fulcrum’ and a ‘borderland’ to a new and different turn in McCarthy’s authorship. Whatever the answer, one thing seems

certain. Namely that – all former evidence to the contrary – there may, after all, be a country for old men, out there, in the desert.

NOTES

- 1 The one time the word ‘desert’ appears in the text, it is in the sense of ‘dessert’, that is, of food: ‘They ate little mushrooms together with the beans and drank tea and had tinned pears for their desert’ (McCarthy 2007, 41).
- 2 ‘[H]e is a regionalist – first a Southern writer, a native of Tennessee, and since the publication of *Blood Meridian* a western writer who has adopted the Texan border and its aesthetics’ (Owens 2000, xii).
- 3 For one particularly good passage of landscape in colour (mainly various shades of blue and red), see chapter 4 of *Blood Meridian*. For a discussion of the symbolism of colour in McCarthy more generally and in particular of *Cities on the Plain*, see Owens 2000, chap. 5.
- 4 ‘Mexico becomes a region where the hero from the north of the border loses his bearing and his sense of identity’, a place ‘wholly alien and wholly strange’ (Kollin 2001, 580). Also, ‘In a book that is part of a “Border Trilogy,” one of the central themes of which is the vast differences between our two countries, there is significance in the implication that even the weather recognizes that border’ (Campbell 2002, 47).
- 5 It can be read as a work about ‘not just the Wild West but Western culture as a whole’ (Phillips 1996, 435), about ‘the struggle between human will and the materiality of nature’ (Guillemin 2004, 100), even about ‘Gnostic thought’ (Daugherty 1999, 159).
- 6 For a frontier (a zone of transition) to exist, after all, one needs something to differentiate it from: a region that is civilised as well as a space that is barbaric.
- 7 The symbolism is hard to miss here since ‘Eli’ in Hebrew of course means ‘my God’.
- 8 The final half page of the book manages once again to abort the cautious note of anthropocentric optimism offered by the boy’s redemption by insisting that there is in the world ‘a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again’. The very final conclusion to the book is thus simultaneously ominous, to some extent undermining the sense of closure of the boy’s salvation from evil, while at the same time oddly if hesitantly celebratory, cherishing the ‘mystery’ of ‘all things [...] older than man’ (McCarthy 2007, 307).

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