

## CRISES ACROSS THE BOARD IN CORMAC McCARTHY'S *THE ROAD*

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This is a valley of ashes—a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and, finally, with a transcendent effort, of men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air.

F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (1925)

When it was light enough to use the binoculars he glassed the valley below. Everything paling away into the murk. The soft ash blowing in loose swirls over the blacktop. He studied what he could see. The segments of road down there among the dead trees. Looking for anything of color. Any movement. Any trace of standing smoke. He lowered the glasses and pulled down the cotton mask from his face and wiped his nose on the back of his wrist and then glassed the country again. Then he just sat there holding the binoculars and watching the ashen daylight congeal over the land.

Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (2006)

**ABSTRACT**

This article explores the types of crises that author Cormac McCarthy has, overtly or indirectly, represented in his latest work of fiction, *The Road* (2006). This novel, which shows the gruesome picture of a post-apocalyptic world, can be seen to dwell upon at least three different types of crises ranging from the awe-inspiring effects of global catastrophes to the more personal fears that individuals may feel in quickly-degenerating moral environments. The main body of the article is divided into four sections which try to elucidate the specificities of each of these crises and to see how those specificities are illustrated and dealt with in McCarthy's novel. *The Road* can be said to combine some of the newest ingredients of the recent trend of end-of-the-world fiction with features from more classical genres such as Gothic horror or epic narratives. One of the greatest achievements of the work is that it manages to strike a balance between despair and hope by studying in great detail how human beings may react to disasters that they themselves have created.

**KEYWORDS:** Post-apocalyptic fiction – Crises typology – Moral landscapes – Cormac McCarthy – *The Road*

**RESUMEN**

Este trabajo estudia los tipos de crisis que el autor Cormac McCarthy recoge, directa o indirectamente, en su novela más reciente, *The Road* (2006). Esta obra, que muestra la espantosa imagen del mundo tras una guerra nuclear, se detiene a considerar los efectos de al menos tres clases de crisis diferentes, que van desde una de carácter más físico y global hasta otras de corte más personal y espiritual. El cuerpo central del artículo queda dividido en cuatro partes que intentan elucidar las especificidades de cada una de estas crisis y ver cómo aparecen representadas y son tratadas en la novela de McCarthy. *The Road* mezcla elementos novedosos de la nueva narrativa del fin del mundo con otros pertenecientes a géneros más clásicos como el terror gótico o el relato épico. Uno de los logros destacables de la obra es que consigue mantener un equilibrio entre la desesperación y la esperanza al ofrecer un análisis minucioso de las reacciones humanas frente a su propia aniquilación.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Novela post-apocalíptica – Tipología de crisis – Paisajes morales – Cormac McCarthy – *The Road*.

**INTRODUCTION**

Although nearly a century apart, the images chosen by Fitzgerald and McCarthy to show the world in which their characters live bear striking similarities. Both of them are “barren, silent, godless” landscapes (McCarthy 2), deprived of any life and color, in which human beings have a difficult time surviving the conditions that they themselves have created. Despite the fact that these authors belong to very distinct traditions of the American novel, one could still speak of a strenuous effort on their part to capture—and to articulate in symbolic moral landscapes—some of the key questions that their historical periods were posing. As is well known, T.S. Eliot described Fitzgerald's impressionistic portrayal of the “Jazz Age” in *The Great*

*Gatsby* as “the first significant step that American fiction [had] taken since Henry James” (Fitzgerald, *Crack-Up* 310), and something in a similar vein could be argued about McCarthy’s post-apocalyptic novel, in this case with regard to the works of William Faulkner. Both writers seem engrossed in finding what Eliot called “an objective correlative”—that is, “a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked” (145; emphasis in original). In other words, Fitzgerald and McCarthy seem to be after those incidents and images that would best convey symbolically the kind of socio-cultural malaises that their country was suffering from.

Fitzgerald highlights the contrast between the bleak and sterile “valley of ashes” (*Gatsby* 29) and all the superficial affluence and joviality that seemingly filled the lives of most of his characters in the post-WW I years. But, of course, it only takes Jay Gatsby—and the narrator, Nick Carraway—to do a little scratching to find out that, behind those radiant surfaces, there lies a complete lack of moral principles and responsibility for habits that are soon going to lead the country to the traumatic crack-up of 1929. As Hemingway, Fitzgerald himself, and Eliot—most notably in “The Waste Land” (1922) and “The Hollow Men” (1925)—had already shown, beneath that superficial prosperity, the stable structure of values was missing, and without that essential scaffolding the individual lost his/her sense of identity. The post-war society of the 1920s lacked both the firm support of a settled community, and a set of principles and convictions that could provide them with ideals for the future. Most critics agree that the main achievement in Fitzgerald’s classic is his ability to represent “the hollowness at the heart of things” behind that façade of fabulous wealth and prosperity evident in the “roaring twenties” (see Cowley; Bruccoli). If Jay Gatsby ultimately appeals to us as a kind of existential hero against the backdrop of hypocrisy that dominates the social environment, it is because he is still able to cling onto a certain mission and an elusive dream.

Dispiriting and dark as the picture that Fitzgerald painted of America on the eve of the Great Depression may seem, the harrowing landscapes that McCarthy depicts in *The Road* seem still more hostile and disturbing: “Nights 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” (1). Although the main chronicler of the “Jazz Age” was conscious of how the eastern part of the country was already becoming an ash heap of civilization where traditional values were mostly absent and only shallow, money-driven people could live, there are still some symbols in the novel—such as the “green light, the orgasmic future that year by year recedes before us” (Fitzgerald, *Gatsby* 188)—that speak of the promise of that new world that the early explorers had sought. Nothing of the kind is to be found in McCarthy’s utterly devastated and lifeless fictional universe in which the only hints of motion, color, and flavor are to be found in the main character’s vague and fading memories of the past:

[...] He slept little and he slept poorly. He dreamt of walking in a flowering wood where birds flew before them he and the child and the sky was aching blue but he was learning how to wake himself from just such siren worlds. Lying there in the dark with the uncanny taste of a peach from some phantom orchard fading in his mouth. He thought if he lived long enough the world at last would all be lost. Like the dying world the newly blind inhabit, all of it slowly fading from memory. (17)

Of course, the fundamental difference between the two novels is that while Fitzgerald's presents us with a decadent world just before the cataclysmic downfall occurred, McCarthy's shows the aftermath of a global disaster. In Kennedy's words, "Cormac McCarthy's subject in his new novel is as big as it gets: the end of the civilized world, the dying of life on the planet and the spectacle of it all" ("Left Behind"). Unlike *The Great Gatsby*, which brought together a fairly large group of people trying to reach some unattainable dreams, *The Road* follows just two of the last people on earth, a seriously-ill father and his ten-year-old son, as they travel through an incinerated wasteland searching for food and shelter, and often escaping from cohorts of ruthless criminals. There are almost no dreams left for this pair, who need to occupy all their time in struggling to stay alive in this most inhospitable of environments. They walk the interstate roads south and east pushing a grocery cart and hoping that they will find a warmer climate near the ocean, for they know they would not be able to survive another winter in the north. In addition, conditions have become so meager and inhuman that the father is often assailed with doubts about whether keeping alive is worthwhile under these circumstances. As Hoyle and Kincaid, from the very first page, the novel is situated "in a tradition of great narratives of death, despair and hope, and sheer human doggedness" ("Two Views"):

[...] He tried to think of something to say but he could not. He'd had this feeling before, beyond the numbness and the dull despair. 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 of its reality. Drawing down like something trying to preserve heat. In time to wink out forever. (*The Road* 93)

Although the cause of this global disaster that has filled the atmosphere with soot and transformed the earth into a grayish, barren desert is never explicitly established in the text, we do know that it is human-created and probably related to nuclear weaponry: "The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions. He got up and went to the window. What is it? she said. He didn't answer. [...] A dull rose glow in the window-glass" (54). The signs, then, seem fairly unequivocal: charred woods, floating ash everywhere, desolate cities, polluted rivers, and a few gangs of marauders all too ready to turn what is

left of humankind into their last meal. Blackmore has maintained in a recent article linking McCarthy's novel to thermonuclear America that the story should be read as an exhortation and a warning on the human race's "inexorable descent through time and darkness" (cf. Vallina 98-99):

It was also written and published in the context of a planet shoved toward annihilation: The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists' doomsday clock, a monitor of global tension since 1947, now stands at five minutes to midnight—closer than at any other time since the depth of the second cold war in 1984. (Blackmore 22)

Predictably, a number of reviewers have been quite puzzled by McCarthy's drastic swerve toward a sub-genre of science fiction—the post-apocalyptic novel—that he had never visited before and which is sometimes perceived, not without some prejudice, as too bizarre to deserve the attention of serious writers (see Chabon "After"). However, *The Road* strikes a perfect balance between the naturalism that results from a destruction of such magnitude that life and its amenities are reduced to a minimum and a quasi-religious belief that some humane ways of behavior may survive in this squalid moral landscape. Maslin underlines this contrast between the complete physical devastation and the main characters' impetus to hang onto their humanity by noting that "the father's loving efforts to shepherd his son are made that more wrenching by the unavailability of food, shelter, safety, companionship or hope in most places where they scavenge to subsist" ("The Road"). Not unlike Gatsby's longing to keep his pure feelings untainted in a world in which corruption and violence seem to have seized everything and everybody, the protagonists of McCarthy's novel are faced with the unenviable task of preserving their faith in a place where hunger, the frigid weather, illness, and human predators threaten their survival: "We're going to be okay, aren't we Papa? / Yes. We are. / And nothing bad is going to happen to us. / That's right. / Because we're carrying the fire. / Yes. Because we're carrying the fire" (87). *The Road* proves to be an unconventional post-apocalyptic novel because rather than merely exploiting the effects of human hatred and stupidity, it becomes a parable of "humanity's struggles to reconcile suffering with divinity, and despair with the instinct to love. Its success, and it is successful, rests in such a tender dualism" (Hoyle & Kincaid "Two Views").

What seems beyond any doubt is that the book, as Warner and others have remarked, is about the uncertainties and anxieties that U.S. citizens began to feel in the wake of 9/11 and the ensuing war on terror: "In creating an exquisite nightmare, it does not add to the cruelty and ugliness of our times; it warns us now how much we have to lose" (Warner "Road to Hell"). The horrifying pictures that father and son come across during their odyssey are just an index of the immense fragility of nature wreaking havoc as a result of thoughtless human conduct and a human race gradually vanishing in a world so bleak and inhospitable that mere survival seems more like a miracle. Brewton points out that McCarthy shows great skill in

drawing correspondences between contemporary crises and fears, and the kind of cultural expressions that come to dominate the imagination of a whole generation; “a form of influence manifested in film and literature generally, but felt with equal force in the arena of national media culture” (122). Some of the episodes in *The Road* are reminiscent of scenarios that we have become familiar with in comics, movies, and computer games in recent times, which are likely to mesmerize the reader with horror and disgust as the limits of human cruelty are constantly being stretched. Such is the case of the protagonists’ discovery of a cellar where a group of people are incarcerated and are slowly being dismembered by their captors to provide for their next meal:

He started down the rough wooden steps. He ducked his head and then flicked the lighter and swung the flame out over the darkness like an offering. Coldness and damp. An ungodly stench. The boy clutched at his coat. He could see part of a stone wall. Clay floor. An old mattress darkly stained. He crouched and stepped down again and held out the light. Huddled against the back wall were naked people, male and female, all trying to hide, shielding their faces with their hands. On the mattress lay a man with his legs gone to the hip and the stumps of them blackened and burnt. The smell was hideous. (116)

Despite these familiar horrors, to classify Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* as just another post-apocalyptic novel would be a clear instance of analytical myopia, since the book obviously transcends the techniques and purposes of that literary sub-genre. Although it contains some of the typical conventions of that fictional mode—devastated landscapes, ambivalence toward technology, bands of thugs—, there are other elements, such as the Gothic-horror aesthetics and the heroic dimension of the pair’s survival, that make this novel a much more ambitious enterprise. According to Chabon, “*The Road* seems to work its way back to the rich storytelling borderland of horror and the epic” (“After”). Actually, what McCarthy offers in the book is a diagnosis of the ills of a world in which a father can no longer be sure whether it is more sensible to protect his son against all the evil forces around him or to put an end to his life to spare him a fate worse than annihilation. The fact that this dilemma becomes the crux of the novel gives us a sense of how irredeemably doomed the world has become after the unspecified cataclysm. The main aim of this article is to explore the types of crises that are likely to have driven the author to conjure up such a dismal picture of the future and to consider whether some hope is still possible for the faithful in such a context. As much of the criticism of *The Great Gatsby* has demonstrated, both of these questions are relevant and productive, at least if one wishes to determine the position that a particular literary work should occupy in a certain tradition (Bloom 15-20).

## 1. DIFFERENT TYPES OF CRISES IN THE ROAD

Among the main reasons for the success of McCarthy's novel—winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2007 and an Oprah Winfrey-Club favorite—and the film adaptation—premiered only two years later—, one is the ability to plug directly into our unremitting end-of-the-world fears. The harrowing scenarios of apocalypse in both media seem scary primarily because they are far from fantastic or mythical; in fact, they are often fraught with echoes of disasters that the planet has already witnessed—earthquakes, nuclear fallouts, desertification, terrorist attacks, and so on—. Fukuyama had already announced in 1992 the end of history and society, at least as we had known them until then, when the demise of the last communist regimes seemed quite inevitable and the liberal capitalism of the West appeared to prevail. However, on the threshold of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it soon became evident that the ghosts and anxieties emerging during the Cold War period were not gone and that, in fact, more post-modern forms of terror were increasingly casting shadows on the human race (see Gray 219-22). It would be impossible to write a complete list of the fears hiding behind the most contemporary versions of Armageddon: from religious conflicts and ethno-nationalist antagonism to global warming and hazardous genetic engineering. What seems unquestionable is that, despite scientific advances and ever-growing new channels of communication, the old world order is quickly breaking down and impending dangers loom large on the horizon. It is those dangers—or crises—that are probably the mainspring of *The Road*, which, as McCarthy stated in an interview, he “had no idea where it was going” while he wrote it, although he knew perfectly “where it was coming from” (Conlon Writer). As I see it, there are at least three types of crises distinctly represented in McCarthy's novel and they refer us, alternatively, to the conditions on the planet at large, moral values in his country, and his own anxieties as a person and a writer in his mid-70s.

In an article published in *Time Magazine* on January 28, 2008, Lev Grossman wondered: “What's behind our [new] appetite for the apocalypse? Is it a way of confronting deep-seated, species-wide fear? Or is it something more—might there be something about the end of the world that we just can't wait for?” (54). Of course, it could be said that this appetite has been fairly constant in Western civilization from the days of the *Old and New Testament* (“Book of Revelations”) to some of the high modernists mentioned above. Nevertheless, it is also a fact that no historical period has witnessed such an eruption of end-of-the-world images and narratives as the beginning of the new millennium (see Rambo 100-1). Books and movies such as Alan Weisman's *The World without Us* or Shute's *On the Beach*, Franny Armstrong's *The Age of Stupid* or Mel Gibson's *Apocalypse*, are all seen to tap into our collective unconscious and that suppressed fear of what may hide beneath the extremely fragile veneer of civilization that has so far kept us from global annihila-

tion. According to Gabilondo, apart from showing alternative, pagan versions of our deep-seated fears, what characterizes these cultural artefacts is the way they tend to spectacularize the escalating conflicts between different factions. Indeed, “the events of both 9/11 and the two Gulf Wars stand for the ultimate spectacles that then regulate and reorganize the visualization of the public spaces and spheres in both fields, the Western and the Muslim” (Gabilondo 239). As explained earlier on, *The Road* does not reveal a precise explanation of the origin of the worldwide cataclysm; yet, there are some tangential references and religious undertones that can easily be linked to our present-day realities: “On this road there are no god-spoke men. They are gone and I am left and they have taken with them the world. Query: How does the never to be differ from what never was?” (32). The notes of protest and despair heard in the father’s voice suggests that he has been an unfair scapegoat of a political—and/or religious—order that never cared much about the consequences their actions might have on ordinary people. The cold, silent, ravaged landscapes that become the trademark of the novel should then be understood as the foreseeable result of the competition and clashes between new technologies, on the one hand, and old ideologies, on the other. As Juergensmeyer explains, it may be true that uncertainty now dominates the basis of cultural—and national—identity and that sometimes the effects of political tactics are not completely controlled (227), but in many instances anonymous individuals are stranded on barren roads not unlike the one McCarthy represents in his novel:

[...] He walked out in the gray light and stood and saw for a brief moment the absolute truth of the world. The cold relentless circling of the intestate earth. Darkness implacable. The blind dogs of the sun in their running. The crushing black vacuum of the universe. And somewhere two hunted animals trembling like ground-foxes in their cover. Borrowed time and borrowed world and borrowed eyes with which to sorrow it. (138)

But, of course, the consequences of the global cataclysm would not have been so terrible if the few remnants of humankind had not gradually degenerated into beast-like creatures all too ready to prey on each other in order to guarantee their own survival. Several reviewers and critics have found a certain continuity between McCarthy’s earlier novel *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road* in the sense that both present us with a truly Hobbesian world in which, no longer bound by socially-organized moral principles, human beings become vicious brutes who show absolutely no mercy or sympathy for the weaker members of the species:

[...] They passed two hundred feet away, the ground shuddering lightly. Tramping. Behind them came wagons drawn by slaves in harness and piled with goods of war and after that the women, perhaps a dozen in number, some of them pregnant, and lastly a supplementary consort of catamites illclothed against the cold and fitted in dogcollars and yoked each to each. All passed on. They lay listening. (96)

This highly dystrophic image of human nature poses one of the critical questions in the novel: Can good and grace—as personified by the young boy, who is the only one willing to give and assist when everybody else is taking and abusing—survive in a context where all signs of civilization and social rules have disappeared? No doubt, this theme has been treated in other literary classics, such as *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord of the Flies*; however, it receives a new twist in McCarthy's novel as, in this fully-devastated world, no sense of direction or sign of authority remains. In Kennedy's opinion, *The Road* proves to be one of the author's major works precisely because, here, "the face-off of good and evil" ("Left Behind") does not seem to be scaffolded by greed, racism, or any kind of deviant ideology—other than mere survival. What the book really confronts us with, then, is not only the destruction of the planet but, more importantly, the collapse of the value system and the moral restraint on which humans had relied to build their bonds and relations (see Hudock 122-24). McCarthy reveals how quickly those basic principles may go down the drain once figures of authority and guiding doctrines have disappeared:

In those first years the roads were peopled with refugees shrouded up in their clothing. Wearing masks and goggles, sitting in their rags by the side of the road like ruined aviators. Their barrows heaped with shoddy. Towing wagons or carts. Their eyes bright in their skulls. Creedless shells of men tottering down the causeways like migrants in a feverland. The frailty of everything revealed at last. Old and troubling issues resolved into nothingness and night. The last instance of a thing takes the class with it. (28)

Interestingly, the last type of crisis to be considered in this article, instead of reinforcing the previous two, seems to push the narrative in exactly the opposite direction. After seeing all the decay and misery caused by human violence and the gradual disappearance of moral values, the reader is immediately introduced into a microcosm in which love, care, and tenderness prevail. As the narrator notes at the beginning of the novel, father and son represent "each the other's world entire" (4), and the book would have told an utterly different story had the relationship between these two characters taken a different form. The father's fundamental mission is to protect the child from all the rawness and brutality of the post-apocalyptic setting: "Now you know. It may happen again. My job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God. I will kill anyone who touches you. Do you understand?" (80). On the other hand, the father is conscious that the boy is "his warrant" (3) for at least two important reasons. First, his waning life would make little sense in these dangerous circumstances if it were not for the fact that he is convinced that there may still be a future for his son. Secondly, the father is also made aware at several points in the narrative that, had he not been privy to the care and compassion that the child shows when they come across other badly wounded or deranged humans, he himself could easily have been brutalized the way most others have been. Even

when those people who “help” them are no longer there, the boy is more than likely to show his gratitude:

The boy sat staring at his plate. He seemed lost. The man was about to speak when he said: Dear people, thank you for all this food and stuff. We know that you have saved it for yourself and if you were here we wouldn't eat it no matter how hungry we were and we're sorry that you didn't get to eat it and we hope that you're safe in heaven with God. (154-55)

Maslin claims that “*The Road* would be pure misery if not for its stunning, savage beauty” (“The Road”). This beauty is of course closely related to the father-son rapport and their communication which, although generally sparse, is a basic source of faith and reassurance for both characters and readers alike. Mordue has observed that it may make sense to read the novel as a “farewell love-letter” (“*The Road*”) from an elderly father to his seven-year-old child—which was the age of McCarthy’s youngest son when he was writing the book. Certainly, there are many moments in the novel in which the dying father tries to comfort his son by telling him that, despite all the signs indicating the opposite, there are other kinds of people and other landscapes near the sea. Even when he realizes that death is dawning upon him, he still hopes to inject the confidence he needs to move on by himself in his offspring: “I’m sorry. You have my whole heart. You always did. You’re the best guy. You always were. If I’m not here you can still talk to me. You can always talk to me and I’ll talk to you. You’ll see” (298). These lines speak very clearly of the father’s—and writer’s—concern with mortality and of the possibility of prolonging his care and influence on his son, even after he is gone. In comparison with his earlier works, in which the violent and the psychotic finally get the upper hand, *The Road*’s unexpected turn into hope and color seems a bit inconsistent, especially after experiencing all the darkness and desolation of a dying world. As mentioned earlier on, though, this may be read in the light of more personal fears; the novel would be a swan song in which the author is trying to send a message of confidence and gracefulness in an environment which, like Wallace Stevens’ famous “Anecdote of the Jar,” does “not give of bird or bush” (76).

## 2. GLOBAL CRISIS: WHAT WOULD THE END OF THE WORLD LOOK LIKE?

Most critics would agree that one of Cormac McCarthy’s major strengths as a writer is his ability to depict natural landscapes in wonderfully delicate ways and to draw ingenuous analogies between the features of those environments and some of his characters’ psychic qualities. Wood notes that in *Blood Meridian* and *All the Pretty Horses*, for instance, the author manages not just to represent convincingly the unbalanced minds of the key characters, “but nature is almost always precisely

caught and weighed ("Red Planet")." Now, how does a writer so dependent on nature and its local specificities fare when the world has mostly been reduced to a featureless wasteland in which animal life and flora have vanished completely? Would authors such as Frost or Faulkner have been able to see their works completed if they had not enjoyed the endless resources of their New England and Southern landscapes, respectively? This is the immense challenge faced by McCarthy in a novel in which, as Chabon states, in order to "annihilate the world in prose one must simultaneously write it into being" ("After"). Actually, the greatest paradox in *The Road* is probably that, although the cataclysm has left the land almost completely bare and colorless, there are still evocations of what things were like before the apocalypse. Referents may have become gray and silent, but the echoes of what they once were and represented are somehow retrieved:

On the far side of the river valley the road passed through a stark black burn. Charred and limbless trunks of trees stretching away on every side. Ash moving over the road and the sagging hands of blind wire strung from the blackened lightpoles whining thinly in the wind. A burned house in a clearing and beyond that a reach of meadowlands stark and gray and a raw red mudbank where roadworks lay abandoned. Farther along were billboards advertising motels. Everything as it once had been save faded and weathered. (6)

In spite of those vague memories of things past, McCarthy must have faced a real trial representing a world where everything seems to have disintegrated into fragments and ashes. Most of his previous works were packed with descriptions in which the author gave ample evidence of his *jouissance* and skill in employing all sorts of linguistic resources to capture the aggressive beauty and truth of natural environments. Of course, nothing of that nature is to be found in *The Road*, in which the immense variety of the planet appears as a sad mirage that is immediately turned into dust once eyes or hands are set upon them: "The country went from pine to liveoak and pine. Magnolias. Trees as dead as any. He picked up one of the heavy leaves and crushed it in his hand to powder and let the powder sift through his fingers" (209). Kincaid argues that this is necessarily a different type of modern-day Gothic horror, since the author cannot exercise the linguistic exuberance that has traditionally characterized this genre: "the vocabulary is limited, sentences are terse, and punctuation marks are often dispensed with" (Hoyle & Kincaid "Two Views"). But it is precisely this scanty and tightly controlled use of the language that contributes most decisively to that sense of despair that pervades the whole novel. This is probably McCarthy's most naturalistic novel so far because both father and son gradually learn that the grand narratives of the past are of little use in this post-apocalyptic world where even one's ability to remember is radically restricted by the miserable circumstances (see Rambo 111-15):

[...] Sometimes the child would ask him questions about the world that for him was not even a memory. He thought hard how to answer. There is no past. What would you like? But he stopped making things up because those things were not true either and the telling made him feel bad. The child had his own fantasies. How things would be in the south. Other children. He tried to keep a rein on this but his heart was not in it. Whose would be? (55)

In a way, the narrator's role in the novel is not unlike that which the father sees himself compelled to take regarding his son in the story. He must convince him that the tales of goodness and heroism of the past cannot work in a world where the very struggle for good and evil has become a mere question of semantics. In the end, however, he is not willing to raise his son completely "storyless," for he knows that if he does so, the boy would probably decide to give up the way his mother had done not long ago. Similarly, had the author wanted to provide the truest picture of reality after this kind of searing catastrophe, the most accurate description would have been a blank page. But, of course, neither McCarthy nor the father seem to be up to that cruel task, since they repeatedly throw in episodes and comments intended to make us move forward, despite the paucity of life forms on the planet: "The boy traced the route to the sea with his finger. How long will it take us to get there? he said. / Two weeks. Three. / Is it blue? / The sea? I dont know. It used to be. / The boy nodded. He sat looking at the map. The man watched him. He thought he knew what that was about" (193-94). *The Road* gains much of its power from the contrast established between the destitute landscape mirroring the downward movement of loss itself and the few glimpses of hope the father manages to create in order to keep them going. As Warner notes, "Despite this soul desert, the end of God and ethics, the father still defines and endangers himself by trying to instil moral values in his son, by refusing to abandon all belief" ("Road to Hell"). This is not easy in a world devoid of warmth, food, safety, and solidarity. In fact, the father repeatedly fears that his aspirations and hopes may ultimately alienate his son from him, as the child—who was born soon after the disaster—is unfamiliar with many of the referents he uses (smells, colors, sensations, creatures, clean waters, etc.):

[...] He turned and looked at the boy. Maybe he understood for the first time that to the boy he was himself an alien. A being from a planet that no longer existed. The tales of which were suspect. He could not construct for the child's pleasure the world he'd lost without constructing the loss as well and he thought perhaps the child had known this better than him. (163)

Probably, making the son an "offspring" of the cataclysmic event is one of the significant strengths of the book as he is one of the few who can look upon the post-apocalyptic setting without a sense of nostalgia. In his eyes, the results of the nuclear holocaust are presented with stripped-down poignancy and animated by the force of a global nightmare. No doubt, McCarthy carried out his bit of research

on the consequences of a nuclear disaster, since the terrifying visions in the novel show us the kind of devastation that such an event would cause: "Two more days. Then three. They were starving right enough. The country was looted, ransacked, ravaged. Rifled of every crumb. The nights were blinding cold and casket black and the long reach of the morning had a terrible silence to it" (135-36). Ehrlich and Sagan maintain in *The Cold and the Dark* that the two biggest killers in a post-nuclear scenario would be the freezing temperatures and the food shortages. In their view, life in the Northern Hemisphere would be quite unthinkable after "a large-scale thermonuclear war" (35). This is naturally the main reason for the migration of the central characters of the novel, desperately escaping south-east toward the ocean in search of a warmer climate. Needless to say, they are not the first ones traveling that road, but most of those who preceded them died of the cold, the fierce firestorms or the relentless baptism of soot and dust that seems to cover everything:

[...] The soft black talc blew through the streets like squid ink uncoiling along a sea floor and the cold crept down and the dark came early and the scavengers passing down the steep canyons with their torches trod silky holes in the drifted ash that closed behind them silently as eyes. Out on the roads the pilgrims sank down and fell over and died and the bleak and shrouded earth went trundling past the sun and returned again as trackless and as unremarked as the path of any nameless sisterworld in the ancient dark beyond. (192-93)

We are told that the son has never in his life seen the sun—which, we have learnt, is one of the terrible effects of a nuclear winter (Ehrlich et al. 23)—, but even more tragic that this almost total absence of light is the fact that the few things he is allowed to see drive him into a state of terror: "The mummied dead everywhere. The flesh cloven along the bones, the ligaments dried to tug and taut as wires. Shriveled and drawn like latterday bogfolk, their faces of boiled sheeting, the yellowed palings of their teeth" (23). The near extinction of humanity is accompanied by images of violence and depravation that the boy finds hard to understand in a context where the physical conditions per se make survival quite impossible. Many of the questions he puts to his father indirectly poke into the mystery of what conflicts before the disaster could have caused the human race to turn into the sort of ravaging animals that they have mostly become. No wonder the father finds it extremely difficult to provide answers that, to a certain extent, would make him a participant in a system that had prefigured its own annihilation. His urgent concern that his son and himself should not fall into the patterns of behavior of most of the other survivors speak of his awe at reproducing the schemes that caused the catastrophe. Blackmore is clear on this point: "If those weapons run things—the system, the whole apparatus of fear and suspicion that holds them in place—then war has successfully assumed its own life. The rest of us live in the shadow, hoping that the things terrifying us will not lean over and touch us one day" (32). Some

of the most moving conversations in the book take place when the son also senses that they may be drifting towards the kind of cruelty and insanity that has come to dominate the post-apocalyptic planet:

He turned and looked. He looked like he'd been crying.  
 Just tell me.  
 We wouldnt ever eat anybody, would we?  
 No. Of course not.  
 Even if we are starving?  
 We're starving now.  
 You said we werent.  
 I said we werent dying. I didnt say we werent starving.  
 But we wouldnt.  
 No. We wouldnt.  
 No matter what.  
 No. No matter what. (136)

### 3. SOCIAL CRISIS: A CIVILIZED WORLD IN THE UNMAKING

Kennedy observes about *The Road* that McCarthy has written a “visually stunning picture” of what the end of civilization would look like to two anonymous individuals on a road leading nowhere. “Color in this world—except for fire and blood—exists mainly in memory and dream” (“Left Behind”). The woods and meadows have been consumed by the first deflagration(s) and the subsequent firestorms have turned everything into the “ashen effigies” of what they once were, waiting for the slightest breeze to blow them into dust. The extreme oscillations between intense heat and below-zero temperatures have transformed all cityscapes into grotesque vortexes of tar, metal, and glass among which human corpses emerge incinerated and shrunk to the size of tiny children. It is through these desolate and frequently dangerous places that the main characters travel, endlessly searching for the last edibles and refuge against the unbearable weather. Hoyle argues that the author’s intention is to make the readers feel the kind of “episodic drudgery” that the protagonists experience during their journey (“Two Views”)—thus the absence of section and chapter breaks in the novel: “They ate well but they were still a long way from the coast. He knew that he was placing hopes where he’d no reason to. He hoped it would be brighter where for all he knew the world grew darker daily” (228). As noted earlier, though, if these forbidding landscapes have a disheartening effect on the two survivors, what really brings them to the very edge of giving up the fight altogether is the fact that the few groups of human beings they come across are far from hinting at a more promising future for the species. Actually, father and son must usually hide or escape from these hordes of barbarians of the new age:

[...] An army in tennis shoes, tramping. Carrying three-foot lengths of pipe with leather wrappings. Lanyards at the wrists. Some of the pipes were threaded through with lengths of chain fitted at their ends with every manner of bludgeon. They clanked past, marching with a swaying gait like wind-up toys. Bearded, their breath smoking through their masks. Ssh, he said. Shh. The phalanx following carried spears or lances tasselled with ribbons, the long blades hammered out of trucksprings in some crude forge upcountry. The boy lay with his face in his arms, terrified. (96)

There is little question that McCarthy has borrowed heavily from popular movies such as *Mad Max* or *Waterworld*, and from comic books showing dystopian futures. This is certainly not the first time that the author has employed images and scenes from more popular genres and media in order to take shortcuts to the kind of associations that he wants to attach to particular groups and “social” dynamics. In *The Road*, he needs only a couple of references to the “deranged chants” and the “bloodcults” (15) that followed the aggressive wars after the apocalyptic event to characterize these gangs of nomadic marauders, who seem to be driven mostly by hunger and lust. These groups of ugly thugs, traveling the wastelands in panzer-like, diesel-powered vehicles, have perfected all sorts of terrifying skills to satisfy their basest instincts. As some reviewers have remarked, McCarthy could be accused of revealing a certain morbidity in portraying the practices of human scavengers who have become so degenerate that they respect neither age, nor sex, nor even physical handicaps (see Mordue). The main characters often come across the signs of their brutal and sadistic rituals:

[...] He'd seen it all before. Shapes of dried blood in the stubble grass and gray coils of viscera where the slain had been field-dressed and hauled away. The wall beyond held a frieze of human heads, all faced alike, dried and caved with their taut grins and shrunken eyes. They wore gold rings in their leather ears and in the wind their sparse ratty hair twisted about on their skulls. The teeth in their sockets like dental molds, the crude tattoos etched in some homebrewed woad faded in the beggared sunlight. [...] The heads not truncheoned shapeless had been flayed of their skins and the raw skulls painted and signed across the forehead in a scrawl and one white bone skull had the plate sutures etched carefully in ink like a blueprint for assembly. (94-95)

It is not surprising that, after all these savage scenes of moral degeneration, the father should repeatedly wonder whether he will have the strength of character to put an end to their lives before he and his son become the victims of these rapacious monsters. “They lay listening. Can you do it? When the time comes? When the time comes there will be no time. Now is the time. Curse God and die. What if it doesnt fire? It has to fire. What if it doesnt fire? Could you crush that beloved skull with a rock?” (120) Recurrently assailed by this doubt, the father's progress along the road becomes a new Calvary in which he hardly knows whether they have reached the point where their suffering no longer makes sense (see Kunsu). To the very physical

anguish of having to cope with all sorts of deprivations, a psychological torture is added every time he contemplates what would happen to the child if they fell into the hands of these vicious gangs. In this regard, Mordue comments that “few will read *The Road* without running to their own children and holding them close. Few will read it without a worry for the world they will inherit” (“*The Road*”).

The father’s anxieties are further aggravated by his late wife’s elongated shadow, which falls upon him whenever he realizes that his ability to keep his son safe is only rather limited. Before committing suicide, his wife had in fact told him that if it were up to her, she would have taken her son along, since that seemed the right thing to do in such a violent and depraved world: “No, I’m speaking the truth. Sooner or later they will catch us and they will kill us. They will rape me. They’ll rape him. They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us and you wont face it. You’d rather wait for it to happen. But I cant. I cant” (58). Of course, these words must be deeply engraved in the father’s mind, for the fact is that the evidence that he keeps encountering on the road constantly adds weight to his wife’s arguments. Yet, despite all the horrors and dehumanisation that the pair of pilgrims witness during their journey, the father obstinately hangs onto the hope that there may be a better future for his son. There are times when he is tempted to follow his wife’s advice and use the last bullet in his revolver but, more often, he is too much the survivalist to surrender to the circumstances (see Hoyle & Kincaid).

A number of readers of the novel have argued that the man’s determination grows so strong during the story that we could even speak of a degree of masochism and belligerence in his attitude. One cannot deny that the main force driving him is parental love: “He stood listening. The boy didnt stir. He sat beside him and stroked his pale and tangled hair. Golden chalice, good to house a god. Please dont tell me how the story ends” (78). Nevertheless, there are moments when his conduct is colored by an Old-Testament fundamentalism and an obstinacy that seem to surpass the legitimate limits of his struggle to survive. Naturally, others would contend that his strong determination needs to take on those stern nuances if we bear in mind that the forces he is facing are nothing less that the last scourges of humanity and the planet. To some extent, his mission is to fashion a new, alternative religion that can be opposed to the barbarism and moral decadence that he observes around. For this purpose, according to Cleave, he turns his innocent son into a “moral compass” allowing him to discern where grace and mercy lie in such a rapidly-degenerating universe (“Harrowing Portrait”). As he confides early in the novel, “If he [the boy] is not the word of God God never spoke” (3). Again, his attempts to turn sacred everything his son says and does give us a measure not only of how important it is for him to protect the few things that are still pure in this heavily polluted world, but also of his need to recall those earlier features of humanity that are gradually disappearing from the face of the planet (see Hudock).

Much of the despair we experience while reading the novel derives not so much from the mysteries and perpetual hazards arising in a dying world but, rather, from

the fact that no signposts of civilization are to be found anywhere. Most of the values and institutions that man has depended on to build up communities, such as friendship, education, and politics, or libraries and government, no longer bear much significance in this world. People do not care about money, social position or even having a home to live in. Several reviewers have detected a number of satirical elements in the book, for McCarthy quite clearly suggests that the artificial societies we have developed would not last very long if a massive disaster of this kind should occur (see Chabon). In this regard, it is interesting to observe that one of the most revealing encounters that the pair have during their aimless pilgrimage is with an old vagabond named Ely—after the prophet Elijah, perhaps—who has grown extremely cynical of all human dreams and values. The father has one of the longest exchanges in the novel with this destitute straggler who comes across as half real character and half oracle in this post-apocalyptic America: “How long have you been on the road? / I was always on the road. You cant stay in one place. / How do you live? / I just keep going. I knew this was coming. / You knew this was coming? / Yeah, this or something like it. I always believed in it” (179). The old man’s views—although he is almost completely blind—provide us with a good summary of the kind of beliefs that are likely to emerge in this squalid and brutal context in which, as he explains, “There is no God and we are his prophets” (181). Naturally, the father tries at first to resist the dark convictions of this doomsayer who, basically, lives like an animal and would trust nobody, no matter how helpful or generous they were to him. That is why he is so surprised by the presence of the boy and his unusually sympathetic attitude. Nevertheless, when the father suggests that there is something divine about the child, Ely is again quite categorical about the possible implications:

The old man shook his head. I’m past all that now. Have been for years. Where men cant live gods fare no better. You’ll see. It’s better to be alone. So I hope that’s not true what you said because to be on the road with the last god would be a terrible thing so I hope it’s not true. Things will be better when everybody’s gone. (183)

*The Road* is, of course, a very severe critique of a “cauterised” and mostly de-storied world in which most of the remaining survivors are reverting to their pre-social, animal nature of me-first violence. Unlike other post-apocalyptic stories such as *Independence Day* or *I Am Legend*, McCarthy does not seem so interested in digging into the origins of the catastrophe or contriving external forces threatening the survival of the human race. As argued earlier on, the end-of-the-world is more awe-inspiring here precisely because it arises from the collapse of the social and ethical values that had allowed humans to dominate the planet. The novel—and the film adaptation—is more unsettling and gruesome because the author does not need to resort to genetically-modified viruses or invaders from outer space to justify the extreme violence and destruction:

[...] By then all stores of food had given out and murder was everywhere upon the land. The world soon to be largely populated by men who would eat your children in front of your eyes and the cities themselves held by cores of blackened looters who tunneled among the ruins and crawled from the rubble white of tooth and eye carrying charred and anonymous tins of food in nylon nets like shoppers in the commissaries of hell. (192)

As was the case in some of McCarthy's earlier works—*Blood Meridian* and *No Country for Old Men*, most notably—faith in goodness seems quite an anomaly in these settings where murderers, sadists, and psychotic scavengers do their best to bring the last traces of humanity to an end. Despite McCarthy's declared Catholic beliefs, he has a terribly difficult time convincing his readers that there is still the possibility of following a set of basic moral principles, even when those around you have all surrendered to their animal instincts. Maslin explains that much of the impact of the novel “comes from the absolute lawlessness of its backdrop as it undermines the father's only remaining certitude: that he must keep his boy alive no matter what danger befalls them” (“The Road”). As will be seen below, it is this heroic struggle to maintain a glimpse of hope and a sense of purpose alive in such a depressing situation that makes the book particularly moving.

#### 4. PERSONAL CRISIS: CAN HOPE AND GRACE SURVIVE IN A DYING WORLD?

Most readers and reviewers have agreed that this is the central dilemma that McCarthy's novel tries to untangle. In this regard, Mordue admits that “Ten pages into this book, I was depressed, even troubled by its tone. But there's a momentum that pulls you on nonetheless, a momentum that might partly be identified as hope” (“*The Road*”). Indeed, although it is true that the extremely basic plot of the novel grows in suspense due to the constant threat of the killing weather—which makes the main characters huddle under tarp and blankets—, the unremitting need to find water and food in all kinds of premises, and the frequent sightings of those nomadic brutes, the real crux of the story is whether the father will eventually use the bullet remaining in his gun to put an end to his son's miseries. As Cleave explains, grace is supposed not only “to know how to go on living but also when to die” (“Harrowing Portrait”). It is no wonder that against the backdrop of human degeneration that McCarthy sketches, the father should frequently feel beset by doubts about whether he will gather the courage to make the right decision at the critical moment. These disturbing thoughts come to him when he stands in the presence of pre-apocalyptic worries which, of course, in comparison with his current ordeals, seem rather trivial:

He sat by the window in the gray light in an abandoned house in the late afternoon and read old newspapers while the boy slept. The curious news. The quaint concerns. At eight the primrose closes. He watched the boy sleeping. Can you do it? When the time comes? Can you? (28)

Because of the magnitude of the forces that he is facing throughout their journey, this decision acquires the mythic resonance that we associate with those confronted by Huck Finn and Henry Fleming in Twain's and Crane's classics. Slavery and the military code of honor were deeply-rooted rules and institutions that nobody could simply overlook when one felt pressed by an urge to transgress them. However, what universal force could be more compelling than a father's—or mother's—love and the instinct to protect their son? In Hoyle's opinion, because of the overwhelming power of these sentiments, the father "has made an extraordinary burden for himself [and] has also come to believe that it must and should be a painful yoke" ("Two Views").

[...] The boy was tottering on his feet. He asked to be carried, stumbling and slurring his words, and the man did carry him and he fell asleep on his shoulder instantly. He knew he couldn't carry him far.

He woke in the dark of the woods in the leaves shivering violently. He sat up and felt about for the boy. He held his hand to the thin ribs. Warmth and movement. Heart-beat. (122-23)

As observed above, the third type of crisis represented in McCarthy's novel seems to bear a more personal character, since it is closely related to the father's illusions and fears concerning his child's future. Chabon observes that the thoughts of this nameless protagonist "are so often presented without third-person attribution that at times he verges asymptotically near to being the novel's narrator" ("After"). Indeed, there are passages in the novel in which the boundaries between character, narrator, and implied author appear to collapse and we hear a tender voice which could be attributed to any of these narrative constructs: "All things of grace and beauty such that one holds them to one's heart have a common provenance in pain. Their birth in grief and ashes. So he whispered to the sleeping boy. I have you" (126). The fact that many of the feelings expressed by the protagonist are shared by most progenitors around the world is successfully used by the author to raise the emotive temperature of the text. Furthermore, the reader learns from early on in the book that the father suffers from a grave respiratory illness—probably the result of having been breathing smoke and ashes for a decade—and that he is somehow living on borrowed time. This also adds to the dramatic connotations of his fears, as we know that the regular bouts of bloody coughing will eventually kill him:

[...] He descended into a gryke in the stone and there he crouched coughing and he coughed for a long time. 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.

In spite of the repeated protests and accusations raised against a God that seems to have abandoned the world and left humans to finish off the little life that remains on the planet, *The Road* should be read as a highly spiritual work of fiction. It is true that the father is primarily presented as a pragmatist so narrowly focused on his son's survival that there is almost no room left in his heart for human sympathy and solidarity. Their encounters with other human beings, no matter how badly-hurt and inoffensive they may seem, are so deeply marked by his suspicion and instinct of self-preservation that the pair are inevitably condemned to isolation. Yet, as Hellman has argued, his love for the boy is so intense that his hopes manage to keep afloat in an uncertain spirit of faith: "[...] this is not about religious doctrine. Rather it is about the spiritual faith people need to survive, that they need to sustain them in these troubled times, and that has nothing to do with doctrine" ("After the Apocalypse"). Some critics have said that one of McCarthy's major achievements in the novel is to strike a perfect balance between the kind of self-centeredness necessary to survive in such a destitute environment and the humanitarian feelings that would be required to make that survival worthwhile. The father does certainly embody more clearly the former of these attitudes, always afraid of "enkind[ing] in the heart of the child what was ashes in his own" (163), thus he refrains from finding much pleasure in the few moments of respite that they enjoy during their tortuous journey. His mission is so evident in his mind and his time so short that, as mentioned earlier on, a note of fanaticism may sometimes ring in his voice. On the other hand, the boy usually comes across as altruism personified, since their safety is frequently put at risk by his intuitive realization that survival in a dehumanised world would be absolutely meaningless. The kind of redemption and salvation that he aspires to is definitely broader than his father's and, as Chabon points out, "it verges explicitly on the messianic" ("After"). This becomes most evident every time they meet those half-naked and slat-like figures on the road whom the child always wants to assist or take along:

The man squatted and looked at him. I'm scared, he said. Do you understand? I'm scared.

The boy didnt answer. He just sat there with his head bowed, sobbing.

You're not the one who has to worry about everything.

The boy said something but he couldnt understand him. What? he said.

He looked up, his wet and grimy face. Yes, I am, he said. I am the one. (277)

Although the exchanges between father and son also show the concision and sobriety evident in the narrative as a whole, they often contain a lyricism and

complexity that captivate the readers. Messent has remarked that McCarthy's use of the English language achieves a fundamental and universal "mythic resonance" (133) that takes his works beyond national and cultural boundaries, and tends to give them an epic quality. As I have argued elsewhere, this is particularly true of his latest novel, in which he employs all his stylistic skills to provide us with "a sense of the unbreakable bond existing between father and son"—and their shared ideal of a better world—while, at the same time, never upsetting the dramatic restraint that the post-apocalyptic environment demands ("Cormac"). Two or three refrains that the two main characters repeat to each other in order to confirm their faith seem enough to keep them going under the duress of their miserable condition. They are certainly among the few "good guys" who are "carrying the fire" (136) in a self-immolating world destroyed, paradoxically, by intense combustion, where grace and hope seem just echoes of the past. Perhaps the clearest evidence of the author's own fears of mortality and perdition is to be found in the closing paragraph of the novel which, curiously, throws us back to the beginnings of life on the planet. Yet, even there, one could already find signs and premonitions of the kind of ending that was to come. Although the boy does apparently find a caring family after his father's anticipated demise, it is still uncertain whether a real regeneration will really be possible in the material and moral wasteland that man has produced (see Kunsu 69-72):

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. (307)

## 5. CLOSING REMARKS

Some scholars and reviewers have argued that it is quite impossible not to read Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* as an aftereffect of the events of 9/11 and the Gulf Wars. Blackmore, after considering some of the nuclear policies of the most recent U.S. Administrations, observes that "if we admit that we too are on the road, that we are astonishingly few steps from a line leading to the world's death, then we might choose to live as if it mattered and not eternally look away from our nuclear lives" (31). There is little doubt that the desolate and awe-inspiring post-apocalyptic landscapes that McCarthy sketches in the novel are, at least partly, intended as a warning and an exhortation to those who are still contributing to the proliferation of technologies and weapons that may endanger our civilization. More importantly, though, contemporary end-of-the-world fiction also serves the purpose of mak-

ing us, ordinary readers, aware of the possible results of the global crises that we are already experiencing. In this regard, Gabilondo argues that the witnessing of worldwide catastrophes is no longer a mimetic process of individual (dis)identification but, rather, the viewer is incorporated into the fictional construct—terrorist scenario, nuclear winter, alien invasion—whereby “he or she is repositioned as just one more element of the allegory of globalization” (259). The novel can be seen to pursue this massive incorporation of the readership by introducing some reminders that we are walking on that final road where life has been reduced to its minimal expression:

They picked their way among the mummied figures. The black skin stretched upon the bones and their faces split and shrunken on their skulls. Like victims of some ghastly envacuaming. Passing them in silence down that silent corridor through the drifting ash where they struggled forever in the road’s cold coagulate. (204)

As has been stressed at different points in this article, even more troubling and depressing than the destruction caused by those deadly technologies, is that produced by those who managed to survive the first years after the holocaust and have now become beasts of prey always ready to sodomize, slaughter, and eat those who come across their path. If McCarthy’s earlier fiction had already made him an outstanding member of what Warner calls “the Tough Guy tradition”—that is, a group of writers showing an affinity to the gothic, the violent, and the nihilistic (“Road to Hell”). *The Road* clearly offers his crudest representation of how pitiless and depraved human beings can become with each other: “Oh Papa, he [the boy] said. He turned and looked again. What the boy had seen was a charred human infant headless and gutted and blackening on the spit” (212). Cannibalism is, of course, often picked out in the novel as the most horrendous “moral crime” that humans could commit against each other, but McCarthy does not spare us the details of many other revolting rituals that speak plainly of the extremes of degradation that values and principles may undergo in specific circumstances.

All the destruction and brutality contained in *The Road* would definitely make McCarthy one of the most apt candidates for a prize awarded to creators of global nightmares. Yet, as Maslin and others have emphasized, “this narrative is also illuminated by extraordinary tenderness” (“The Road”). Interestingly, this brighter parallel story is also the result of a crisis that both the protagonist and the author could well have undergone simultaneously. Both of them—protagonist and author—live and write under the pressure of knowing that they will not be able to protect their offspring forever in this cruellest of worlds. This fact obliges them to delve into alternative resources that will allow them to entertain a faith in the future that they cannot really find in the situations where chance or misfortune has placed them. It is that epic struggle to create hope out of desperation and to preserve grace when all moral values are collapsing that *The Road* aspires to capture in the rendition of

the father-and-son relationship. One cannot be sure whether the world will become a brighter and saner place thereafter, but what seems undeniable is that these pairs have played their part in the final attempts to save it from complete annihilation.

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