

Paulina Ambroży

Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań

The Limits of Language as the Limits of the World: Cormac McCarthy's and David Markson's Post-Apocalyptic Novels

ABSTRACT

The article examines the correlation between the world and the word in two novels which engage with a post-apocalyptic scenario: David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress* (1988) and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006). Shifting the focus from the very event of catastrophe to the notion of survival through memory and storytelling, both novels problematize the strained relationship between language and reality in an increasingly diminished and dehumanized world. My aim is to investigate the limits of language as well as its capacity to withstand the chaos, loss, trauma, and death that follow the apocalypse. The issues to be considered include the influence of external experience on forms of communication, the role of central metaphors (the archive and the museum in Markson's novel; cinders and the road in McCarthy's) and their relation to the form of both novels, as well as the word's (in)capacity to preserve human values and hopes. Both novels will be discussed as deconstructionist projects in which language becomes a habitat at once impossible and life-preserving: in *Wittgenstein's Mistress* it plays the role of both home and prison, whereas in *The Road* it functions as messianic discourse which simultaneously carries, propels and extinguishes the human hope for a transcendental reality beyond the post-apocalyptic emptiness and doubt.

How to comprehend in fact the discourse of the end or the discourse about the end? Can the extremity of the extreme ever be comprehended? And the opposition between "to be" or "not to be"?
 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 10

In *Philosophical Investigations*, Ludwig Wittgenstein argues that "to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life" (80). The aim of the following study is to juxtapose two literary experiments in which language serves to create a very special form of existence, namely life in the post-apocalyptic world in which the dominant experience is that of fear, social upheaval, alienation, and loss. As acknowledged by one of the modern thinkers of the apocalypse, Jacques Derrida, the apocalyptic and its aftermath confront us with the unspeakable and unimaginable; hence the frequently cryptic, disruptive, ambiguous, and secretive idiom used to describe them. "By its very tone, the mixing of voices, genres and codes," Derrida observes, "apocalyptic discourse can also, in dislocating destinations, dismantle the dominant contract or concordant. It is a challenge to the established receivability of messages and to the policing of destinations" ("Apocalyptic Tone" 159–60). The post-apocalyptic messages in the novels under scrutiny here will likewise reveal a strong penchant for dislocation and broken circuits of semantic and "postal economy" (the code's simple trajectory from the sender to the receiver) (Derrida, *Post Card* 121). In the post-apocalyptic text, words and the imagination are pushed towards the extreme ends of history and humanity, as they oscillate between presence and absence, memory and forgetfulness, articulateness and silence, impotence and healing power, exteriority and interiority. For the purpose of this analysis, I have selected two texts in which the problem of discourse and memory at the end of history comes to the fore: David Markson's 1988 novel *Wittgenstein's Mistress* and Cormac McCarthy's 2006 Pulitzer-awarded novel *The Road*. Both share the "apocalyptic temper" which is connected to moments of "radical discontinuity" and change, and which has informed American mythology since early Puritan times (Dewey 10). The apocalyptic temper, as Dewey argues, "is an attempt by a culture that is genuinely puzzled and deeply disturbed to understand itself and its own time," revealing "[a] culture caught by a crisis that challenges the very undergirdings of its make-up" and yet "strive[s] to create a workable if radical method to respond to the intolerable evidence of its own history" (10–11). In Markson's and McCarthy's works, the cataclysmic imagination—marked by the crisis of representation (Markson) and the catastrophe of 9/11 (McCarthy)—is haunted by Derrida's questions about the impossibility of comprehending the discourse of the end and about the end. The cultural make-up from which those texts derive yields different ways of seeing and understanding the extremes of

history and different defensive strategies, realized with particular poignancy in the novels' ghostly rhetoric, and rich but highly ambiguous and deconstructive metaphORIZATION.

As befits the apocalyptic paradigm, the action of both novels takes place in the aftermath of a catastrophe. In the case of McCarthy, it is most probably a meteor crash, although the author himself does not provide the answer to this question, describing the event in two vague and characteristically minimalist sentences: "The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions" (52). In Markson's novel we are offered even less in that respect, nor can we ascertain if the catastrophe is real or imagined. The reader learns only that one morning the sole protagonist and narrator, Kate, awakes as the last person on earth and begins searching the globe for signs of human life. In the narrative's present, Kate has abandoned her desperate yet futile search for "anybody, anywhere at all" (Markson 17) and, using a found typewriter, has started writing a journal that becomes the narrative offered to the reader, as well as a message to the world. Having shifted the very event of catastrophe to the background and keeping the sources of the catastrophe unidentified throughout, both writers focus on the struggle for survival with a special emphasis on the role and limits of discourse and memory in the dehumanized world.

It is exactly the problem of limits and capacities of language in the context of post-apocalyptic American fiction that will be the subject of my scrutiny. I propose to examine two major questions in this comparative argument. The first concerns the already cited proposition of Wittgenstein, concerning the limits of our language as the limits of our world, and the influence of a reality reduced to a bare minimum on human communication. The second question pertains to the significance of the novels' central metaphors—the road and cinders in McCarthy's text and the museum in Markson's novel—which, as I shall suggest, apparently offer two different visions of the vanishing world's attempted preservation. The visions, however, share a common core—they partake of the paradoxical nature of language understood as a Derridean *pharmakon*—at once a carrier of death and a remedy, a poisonous trace of the irretrievable past and a source of human values and hope.

In both novels, the spaces which the protagonists inhabit and travel through are at once literal and deeply symbolic, affecting all forms of the former's communication. In McCarthy's work, the main hero traverses the desolate and scorched America together with his son—the axis of the story is their hope to get to the South and the sea, where they expect to find better living conditions. The quest begins in the menacing wasteland, a skeletal desert hostile to all life, "chockfull [*sic*] of unforgettable hor-

rors, awash with blood and gore" (Kunsa 58), inhabited by hordes of cannibals who "would eat your children in front of your eyes" (McCarthy 154). "Barren, silent, godless": thus the narrator introduces the landscape. "Everything paling away into the murk. The soft ash blowing in loose swirls over the blacktop" (McCarthy 2–3)—the broken, staccato sentences seem to perform the world's continual reduction. On their way to the sea, the characters pass dead trees, lifeless rivers, desolate cities, grey meadows, while the air is thick with cinders: "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). The ghostly urban horizon is captured well through the metaphor of a charcoal sketch: "The shape of a city stood in the grayness like a charcoal drawing sketched across the waste" (7). McCarthy clearly shows us a world of chaos, a reality in the state of erasure and self-annihilation—losing its contours, colours and shapes: "[t]he world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities" (93).

Cinders, dominating the landscape, become a trace of the irretrievable world:

The ashes of the late world carried on the bleak and temporal winds to
and fro in the void. Carried forth and scattered and carried forth again.
Everything uncoupled from its shoring. Unsupported in the ashen air.
Sustained by a breath, trembling and brief. (McCarthy 93)

According to Jacques Derrida, cinders are that kind of nothingness which can exist, which remains an entity while breathing destruction; it is thus a visible sign of reality that is no longer possible—a trace of the world forever severed from its ground (*Cinders* 35). The power of the trope of cinders, as Derrida claims, lies in its spectral nature—it is the sign in which the absent other appears and persists: what remains without remaining, visible but scarcely readable, but what nevertheless exerts constant pressure on our thinking and memory. Cinders are also temporal—both the fire and what has become ashes can never be recreated, at once pointing to and obliterating specific times, singular events, texts and places. As noted by Cetinić, "the cinder signals past in its fragility, while its circulation activates a persistent relation to the future, the movement of memory" (77). However, it also "name[s] the resilience and the intractability of what is most delicate and most vulnerable" (Lukacher qtd. in Cetinić 77). Cinders, which in McCarthy's novel cover everything, make the protagonists' orientation in the landscape impossible, becoming a trace that hides other traces, muffles sounds, and leaves them with a sense that the ashen reality at once exists

and vanishes. A most perfect trope of destruction and memory, cinders mark an increasingly illegible fragment of the past's disappearing script as they suspend the world in the state of its tangible vulnerability, keeping the ghosts of the past alive, and thus separating the father, whose fading world they represent, from his son, who—brought up in the post-apocalyptic world—is unable to read their meaning.

In this world, it is also language that turns to ashes, as words detach from their signifieds:

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. (McCarthy 93)

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The reduction of the world affects the language of narration: the sentences are often incomplete, brief, simple, paratactic, and asyndetic; sometimes they erode into single words, fragile and broken phrases, repetitions, and echoes. The characters observe that entire categories and concepts become irrelevant in the new reality, for example the notion of the state: "These are the roads, the black lines on the map. The state roads," the father explains, instantly realizing, however, that states no longer exist and that he cannot quite clarify their nature to his son, born after the catastrophe (McCarthy 36). The lack of relational markers and the fragmentation of syntax reveals the continuing desiccation of language, whose condition mirrors the shapelessness, the acute cold and monochromaticity of the post-apocalyptic nothingness. Furthermore, dialogues between the principal characters reveal the plodding reduction and exhaustion of language:

I'm really hungry, Papa.
 I know.
 Will we be able to find our stuff?
 Yes. I know where it is.
 What if somebody finds it?
 They wont find it.
 I hope they dont.
 They wont. Come on.
 What was that?
 I didnt hear anything.
 Listen.
 I dont hear anything. (McCarthy 84)

The short, nervous, monosyllabic sentences—reduced to the communicational minimum and difficult to attribute—capture perfectly the characters' loneliness, exhaustion, anxiety, and deprivation. The reality which is devoid of depth, light, and variety, and in which the dominant experience is constant fear and hunger, empties language of its depth and shades. "There is nothing left to talk about" (McCarthy 54)—those words, uttered by the protagonist's wife shortly before her suicide, serve as an apt summary of the survivors' situation.

In *Wittgenstein's Mistress* the situation is similar, but Markson goes even further—the reader is deprived of the comfort afforded by detailed descriptions, explanatory dialogue, and linear structure. The writer intertwines the large-scale drama of total human extinction with the protagonist's private traumas and unmourned losses that affected her life before the catastrophe—the terminal illness of her parent, the death of her child, and the loss of her husband. The global extinction might thus be a hyperbole of a subjectivity deprived of its communal and social bonds, which normally anchor our sense of interiority. From the dispersed thoughts and scraps of memories that structure the narrative, we learn that, just like the father and the son in *The Road*, the protagonist is "wandering through an endless nothingness," in a terrible "eternal silence" (Markson 31), through deserted streets, with abandoned buildings and cars, encountering only her own reflection in shop windows and mirrors. Here, things and facts also burn and turn to dust, either of "natural happenstance" or by the protagonist's own actions, leaving "bits and pieces of residue" that are "wafted great distances, or astonishing heights" (29). With Kate, however, we are placed at the end of history and the end of memory, experiencing the state of absolute loneliness: there are no other characters here, nor is there a narrative which could organize the events of the plot. As Sherrill E. Grace puts it, nothing actually happens in the novel (209). Another critic, Marija Cetinić, even dubbed Markson's novel "a post-apocalyptic anti-narration" (82), denying the teleological development of the plot towards any sense of futurity. Its epigrammatic and fragmentary structure, as with *The Road*, mirrors both the condition of the world and the mental state of the protagonist, who is trying to communicate her presence to others:

In the beginning, sometimes I left messages in the street.

Somebody is living in the Louvre, certain of the messages would say. Or in the National Gallery. Naturally they could only say that when I was in Paris or in London. Somebody is living in the Metropolitan Museum, being what they would say when I was still in New York.

Nobody came, of course. Eventually I stopped leaving the messages. (Markson 7)

Here too the language is subject to erasure: sentences are short, usually occupying no more than one indented line; often they are unfinished, digressive, and associative. Lacking stabilizing communal reference and external criteria, Kate's private language, as Sue-Im Lee observes, "wavers between a state of absolute omnipotence and one of absolute powerlessness. As the only person alive, Kate can use language in whatever way she wants" (143). At one point in the narrative, Kate admits to having invented her own language, or—more specifically—her own version of "Greek":

In fact I have even written in Greek.

Well, or in what looked like Greek, although I was actually only inventing that.

What I would write were messages, to tell the truth, like the ones I sometimes used to write in the street.

Somebody is living on this beach, the messages would say.

Obviously it did not matter by then that the messages were only in an *invented writing* that nobody could read. (Markson 57; emphasis added)

As the solitary speaker, cut off from any form of public consensus, the protagonist begins to play her own "language game" which makes her Greek legible only to herself. Referencing Wittgensteinian theory, Lee argues that "Kate's private language lacks the kernel of normative game-playing—agreed-upon rules," thus becoming "a game that does not hold the possibility of making a 'transaction,' 'making sense,' 'making oneself understood,' or 'being able to explain'" (153). As noted by the critic further on, paradoxically, this private game, however errant, incomprehensible and complex, enables her to invent and impose the rules and constraints which can be used to protect her against the ultimate erasure of language-as-system and destabilization of truth (Lee 153). By creating this private language, the protagonist becomes not only responsible for the stability of her own reality but also able to give expression to her inner experience, which ultimately cannot be named, represented or articulated in the normative public discourse. The "postal economy," broken by the catastrophe and the ensuing extinction of the community, is thus reinvented according to Kate's own idiosyncratic needs and can be seen as partly liberating. However, the unilaterality of her expression entraps her in a solipsistic language game, ultimately denying her a chance to break out of her isolation (Lee 156).

The turbulent and shifting psychic landscape that emerges from the character's solitary idiom is riddled with both blanks and information overload. Moving between moments of recognition and misrecognition, Kate structures her subjectivity along uncertain recurrent points

and events, rehearsals of facts (at times utterly trivial and of no apparent significance), iterative obsessive concerns, fantasies, texts, and memories. Yet, since she can rely only on her insecure ontological grounds, none of those experiences can be agreed-upon, confirmed, or verified, which is the basis for normative language use. As a result, the reader is instantly lost in a plethora of uncertainties and questions, such as: who is the mysterious narrator? how old is she? why is she alone? what happened? and who is the addressee of her story? Is she fifty years old, as she claims at one point, or forty-eight, or thirty, as she acknowledges elsewhere? Is her son's name Adam, Simon, or perhaps Terry? (all three versions appear intermittently in the narrative).

Markson does not offer easy answers to those questions—the incomplete truth is unveiled very slowly, in broken and solipsistic thoughts; Wittgensteinian propositions and their subsequent refutations; repetitions of names, motifs, and sentences; palimpsestuously layered misattributed citations and labyrinthine references to music, history, literature, art, and philosophy. The reader accompanies Kate in her insecure steps on the brittle surface of memory, touched by unspeakable losses, as she searches for stable ground in the ruins of the world. The blanks in her memory reveal the mental condition of a self traumatized by absolute loneliness, a condition which she herself repetitively calls “time out of mind” (Markson 9), as her mind continuously hovers between madness and forgetfulness. The increasingly unmoored signs and texts become separated from experience, in spite of Kate's desperate efforts to give them substance and meaning. Since they cannot be confirmed by anybody else, they escape logic and narrative structure, pointing to the central question posed by the protagonist herself: “But then what is there that is not in my head?” (Markson 227).

The circumstances force Kate to construct her own world and confront the necessity of becoming an absolute ontological authority, which ultimately will enhance her anxiety, resulting in a failure to control her language and in subsequent madness. The solipsism of her mind and the position as the exclusive rule- and world-maker fuels the solipsism of her idiom and the epistemological instability of her propositions, claims, and speculations.

Despite the radical reduction of language in both works, and an obsessive recurrence of scenery as well as events that exhibit an anti-narrative thrust, McCarthy's novel is more traditional in its form—it progresses linearly, as the author binds the plot with the motif of the road and wandering. Such a structure and the author's decision to uphold traditional elements of the plot both have profound implications for the narrative: the character and the quest-driven action are both part of the hope for the existence

of a post-apocalyptic order. The road and the open-space quest are firmly rooted in American mythology, serving as a synonym of a search for spiritual fulfilment, self-knowledge, truth, and freedom. McCarthy also draws on this myth, informing it with religious (more specifically, messianic) discourse, and the biblical trope of wandering in the desert. The journey of the father and son to the South prevents the maddening solipsism which drives Markson's narrative, especially since it becomes the main goal and the very condition of the characters' survival, as stopping and finding a home is tantamount to death. In darkness and silence, houses turn into a space of estrangement, violence, death, and horror: the encountered buildings are charred ruins which at best hide desolation and emptiness, at worst rotting or dried corpses, or else mutilated victims of the cannibals. McCarthy locates hope in the relationship between the father and the son; it is they who "carry the fire" (234) in this valley of death and violence; the light whose source lies in love, dignity, and faith in the inner moral compass and mutual care.

In Markson's novel, roads eventually disappear. At first, Kate traverses the globe, covering a wide geographical span, visiting cities and countries, sailing to the Greek islands and England, driving to Russia or France, but, at one point, when she has settled in a beach house, she admits that her "failure to locate the road eventually began to become a wholly new sort of perplexity in [her] existence" (Markson 89). In McCarthy's novel, the road and movement sustain hope for change; in Markson's text, the vanishing of the road symbolizes Kate's inability to communicate, to transcend the context of her inner experience and her entrapment in the solitary use of language. Interestingly, in the completely empty world, the museum—or rather what is left of it—becomes the protagonist's home, while her mode of survival is her journal: her private archive of names, places, and memories. The protagonist herself realizes, in horror but also with some sense of omnipotence, that fate has cast her in the role of the last "curator of all the world" (Markson 227), whose mission is to find meaning among the desolate ruins.

Derrida defines the function of archives as a combination of an archontic aspect (i.e., its ordering, unifying, classifying function) with consignation, which implies collecting and preserving artefacts—for the French philosopher, the latter means, above all, "gathering signs" (*Archive Fever* 10). The archives and the museum organize the fragmented reality, repairing rifts between signs, absorbing ruins and changing them into monuments, turning broken pieces into meaningful narratives, art works into collections. Derrida proves that the essence of the museum and the archives lies in a paradox—what fuels the need of collecting and preserving

signs is the threat of their destruction and vanishing. The threat comes from the outside, as Derrida claims, for “there is no archive without the outer reality” (*Archive Fever* 14).

As Cetinić notes, what thus seems more interesting is the fact that it is museums which Markson chooses to preserve in his post-apocalyptic world, and that they provide his protagonist with shelter. Kate lives in the Louvre, London's National Gallery, and in New York's MoMA, burning paintings and artworks to keep warm as well as to signal her presence. Cetinić points out that the museum becomes her home in a reality in which there is nothing but ruins, empty names, and scraps of meaning. Thus, in the critic's own words, she inhabits a world in which

the museum cannot reabsorb the catastrophe into organized artefacts; here, the unearthing of ruins cannot be covered over with monuments. So that “here” is all wreckage, archive outside in, contents and context unbound. The radical gap between site and citation undoes the museum's hold over its artefacts. (Cetinić 82)

In Markson's world, the museum is deconstructed as it is no longer able to absorb and bring together the excess of ruins and signs severed from their contexts (Cetinić 82). Gathering, cataloguing, and writing down signs, followed by an attempt to lend them meaning, become a mission and an obsession of the protagonist, whose mind—as the fragmentary narration shows—is unable to order their surplus. The idiosyncratic discourse (in which repetition intensifies the experience of language and text as the only possible world, and where private history continuously mingles with the public one, memory is checked by moments of amnesia, while language stumbles over metalanguage) reflects the failed attempt at “controlling random and chaotic data of memory and human consciousness” (Grace 211). Kate's mind generates an apocalyptic archive of memory, filled with ever newer variations, infinite chains and networks of signs and associations; nevertheless, these fail to mask the emptiness around her, highlighting instead the thin boundary that separates her from chaos and the total loss of the semantic horizon, caused by a dissemination of unanchored signs. Here is an example:

Certainly I am familiar with Nietzsche, for instance.
Well, or with Goethe.

Although by saying that I am familiar with either of these writers I do not necessarily mean that I am extraordinarily familiar with them.

As a matter of fact by saying that I am familiar with them I do not even necessarily mean that I have read a solitary word that either one of them ever wrote.

Actually the sum of that familiarity may well extend no farther than to my reading of the backs of the jackets on phonograph records.

Such as the back of the jacket on *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, by Richard Strauss, for instance. (Markson 172–73)

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Through a rejection of sense, this technique of “deep nonsense,” to quote David Foster Wallace (221), paradoxically reveals the inability of articulating deeper meanings; in this case, it is “millennial loneliness,” as the condition of the protagonist is described by the author of *Infinite Jest*. Kate’s profound loneliness can also be seen in her compulsive reiterating of various historical figures’ misfortunes, in her obsessive search of a name for a non-existent cat, in her concern with the trivia of famous lives and in her imaginative inventions of impossible relationships. This is aptly illustrated in the following passage:

So who is to argue that one day Rembrandt might not have been standing next to Carel Fabritius’s easel, and Carel Fabritius said he was going to paint something russet, and Rembrandt said that russet is a color one calls a bedspread?

So in a manner of speaking Willem de Kooning was actually a pupil of Rembrandt. . . .

This is scarcely to suggest that Willem de Kooning was anywhere in the vicinity when Giotto was drawing the perfect circle freehand either, of course.

Unless, on the other hand, I suddenly make up my mind to imagine that he was. (Markson 147–48)

However, Markson’s novel does uncover deeper layers of meaning. Both the title and the form of the text, as well as the often cited sentence, “the world is everything that is the case” (78), evoke Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921), and his later *Philosophical Investigations* (1958), in which the Austrian philosopher used a fragmentary form of open propositions. In his introduction to *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein describes his method as what he calls “sketches” reflecting the natural order and progression of thoughts (v); similarly, the eponymous “Wittgenstein’s mistress” avoids absolute statements—all her utterances are subjected to endless refutations, modifications, and supplementations. Here is a sample fragment, directly parodying the Wittgensteinian mode:

The world is everything that is the case.

I have no idea what I mean by the sentence I have just typed, by the way.

For some reason I seem to have had it in my head all day, however, although without the vaguest notion about where it might have come from. (Markson 78)

In *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein poses seven logical propositions, which, as he writes, are “the construction works” (71) of the world. Markson tests the truthfulness of those propositions, at the same time shaking the works and pulling them from beneath our feet, in a ceaseless movement of supplements and traces. Wittgenstein’s system, which, as Wallace observes, was “a metaphysical heaven” for the philosopher, and which proposed that language is in its nature a perfect logico-mathematical system, capable of reflecting the image of the actual world, in Markson’s text becomes a “physical hell”—Kate is not able to distinguish between real facts and imagined ones, having at her disposal only her own imagination and her apocalyptic museum without walls. In Wallace’s apt words, “[Wittgenstein’s] mistress . . . asks the question her master in print does not: What if somebody really had to *live* in a *Tractatusized* world?” (219).

Markson uses the apocalyptic framework to demonstrate the solipsistic nightmare of the private game, the danger of the ultimate instance of language without intersubjective community, shared reason, or rules of public agreement. For Kate the consequence of that game is her descent into madness and something that Cetinić aptly describes as “traumatic intertextuality” (85)—her ultimate dissolution into contingent textuality and her failure “to navigate the physical world” (Lee 160). From the experience of the protagonist, we learn that the isolation of language equals the isolation, and subsequent destruction, of the self. A Wittgensteinian critic, Stanley Cavell, summarizes the limits and perils of an isolated idiom as follows: “Without criteria, conditions under which things may be called thus and so, there is no possibility of making sense of the world. They enable our conceptualization of experience, our comparing of things to one another” (qtd. in Lee 160). Kate’s growing obsession with madness in the course of the novel reveals her own anxiety and fears concerning the control over her life and the stability of the truths of her own making:

Once, when Friedrich Nietzsche was mad, he started to cry because somebody was hitting a horse.

But then went home and played the piano.

On my honor, Friedrich Nietzsche used to play the piano for hours and hours, when he was mad.

Making up every single piece of music that he played, too.

Whereas Spinoza often used to go looking for spiders, and then make them fight with each other.

Not being mad in the least. (Markson 232)

The deeper we go into the loops of Kate's mind and idiom, the darker it becomes—from initial trivia we move to issues such as exile, poverty, loss, madness, blindness, death, and suicide. The sympathetic communities of illustrious madmen and loners created by Kate show her urge to sustain, even if only in language and signs, an intersubjective fabric of relationships for the cathartic *out-pouring* of her thoughts, deprivations, and longings.

“Apocalyptic literature,” as Elizabeth K. Rosen argues, “has traditionally been written to comfort people whose lives are, or who perceive their lives to be, overwhelmed by historical or social disruption” (xii). The apocalyptic temper, Dewey observes on a similar note, “offers a counter-reality, one hidden in the present chaos, a positive presence that counters the evidence of absence and gives heart to those still living within history's experience” (12). As I suggested in the introduction, one of the questions which both texts pose is the problem of language as a vehicle of human values and moral strength. In that respect McCarthy comes to the fore, as he reveals a deep religious sensibility residing in countless metaphors of light and darkness, references to the Bible, biblical names, as well as ethical or even messianic rhetoric. The flame is “a fire-breathing dragon of God” (McCarthy 33); the child is a golden chalice (64), the word of God, God's breath, or even God himself (266). Their mutual mission is to “carry the light” (62). The only properly named character, as Kunsza notes, is the old man who introduces himself as Ely (63). Washing off the remnants of a dead enemy from the boy's hair, the father says:

This is my child, he said. I wash a dead man's brains out of his hair. That is my job. Then he wrapped him in the blanket and carried him to the fire. . . . All of this like some ancient anointing. So be it. Evoke the forms. Where you've nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them. (McCarthy 77–78)

The ceremonial, ritualistic nature of those simple activities is reinforced by rhetoric—the incantatory, prayer-like recurrence of the phrase “we are the good guys” who “carry the fire” (Kunsza 60). In agony, the father asks his son to continue their mission; and, as argued by Frye, it is this messianic hope for a trace of God, his breath and a stubborn dream of his existence, that is the force of the novel. In the critic's apt word, “[t]he trace of God's presence is the very fact of the heroes' survival and their capacity to dream and think” (56); their faith endures thanks to their relentless search for God and his waning breath in the cinders of language and human gestures, rather than seeking to confirm his existence.

The last paragraph of *The Road* evokes a memory from before the catastrophe:

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. (McCarthy 306–07)

The “maps and mazes” suggest

something essential at the centre of their journey, and tellingly, the novel closes not with the intersection of arbitrary and nonsensical lines, but with the patterns on the back of the trout . . . forms suggesting an inherent order and underlying purpose yet undiscovered. (Kunsa 68)

It is certainly true that the trout in the stream symbolize a world which is no longer possible and which cannot be repaired. And yet, the last word of the novel is “mystery.” When combined with the image of the fish, it suggests the beginning of the world as much as the beginning of redemption. Thus, the “mystery” in the conclusion suspends the novel between hope and its lack; between the presence and absence of metaphysical order. The etymology of the word “mystery,” from the Latin word *misterium*, also suggests a hidden religious truth revealed in mystical revelation. McCarthy’s mystery, sheltered deep in the valleys of memory, and covered with the thick cinders of the vanishing world—just like the novel’s language—simultaneously reveals and conceals the transcendental dimension of post-apocalyptic existence.

In his novel, McCarthy offers his readers a story of a mythical quest for the Holy Grail, which here becomes his faith in humanity, illustrated by the exemplary love between the father and the son, and their messianic hope against all doubt; hope whose essence is nevertheless unfulfilment. For Markson, as Sherrill Grace argues, the Grail is the heroine herself, and more specifically, her identity, constructed in the process of “writing” history (215) which intertwines private and public realities. The boy in McCarthy’s novel survives thanks to the faith instilled in him by his father that something good will happen at the next turn of the road—this prophecy is in fact fulfilled after his father’s death, for the boy finds another family of

“good guys” who accept him as one of their own. The limits of the language in the post-apocalyptic world of this novel are best summarized by the figure of the omnipresent cinders—at once a reality and a metaphor. “Pure is the word. It calls for fire,” says Derrida of cinders, adding that “there are cinders only insofar as there is the hearth of its own burning” (*Cinders* 37, 41). In their fragility, ashen greyness and ghostly dispersal, cinders suggest both the disappearance and vulnerability of the world and its language; however, they also point to fire, at once destructive and warming, which still burns at their heart, rekindling memory and hope.

Markson’s text can be interpreted twofold: either as an account of life after an actual apocalypse or else as a reflection of the protagonist’s descent into madness, her apocalyptic melancholia in which language, deprived of intersubjective community, becomes a Derridean *pharmakon*—at once remedy and poison. In a truly postmodernist gesture, the author has his heroine survive by solipsistically gathering elusive signs and leaving messages which in the post-apocalyptic world-text no longer attach themselves to phenomena or reality. Therefore, Kate’s house is language itself, and her survival is guaranteed by her storytelling, thanks to her imperfect writing of the world, in a hope that she can thus confirm and affirm its existence, and escape the depths of her sorrow and solipsism.

In her study of trauma in the post-apocalyptic novel, Katherine V. Snyder observes:

the post-apocalyptic at once allegorizes and literalizes the psychic mechanisms of trauma, both everyday, systemic, “quiet” traumas and unimaginable yet inescapably real historical traumas. By portraying such cataclysmic endings and new beginnings, post-apocalyptic fictions . . . enable us to witness the unwitnessable and to survive the unsurvivable. Such fictions allow us imaginatively to rehearse the end, a rehearsal that itself stands as both traumatic symptom and potential cure, as acting out and working through, as repetition and repetition-with-a-difference. (486)

In their desire to confront us with the unwitnessable in post-apocalyptic reality, both Markson and McCarthy create discourses that work at once as traumatic symptoms and as potential cures. They probe the broken “postal economies” of communication and seek both the limits and potency of words vis-à-vis the trauma of absolute solitude, vanishing realities and disappearing human bonds, thus pointing to the ultimate unreceivability and ambiguity of the apocalyptic message. In both novels, language can be seen in its “ghosting” mode, i.e., suspending the reader between presence and absence, life and death, despair of finality and its continuously undertaken

refusals. The modern sense of the word *apocalupsis*, as Derrida makes clear, signals also acts “of a specifically apocalyptic unveiling, of the disclosure that lets be seen what until then remained enveloped, withdrawn, held back, reserved” (“Apocalyptic Tone” 121). Markson’s verbal excesses, maddening repetitions and loops of language “veil” the unmournable losses in the ruins of the solitary mind, while McCarthy’s messianic discourse of suspended delivery discloses moments of light and order in the overwhelmingly disordered and darkly post-human world.

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