

John Armstrong

National Formosa University, Taiwan

Gothic Matters of De-Composition: The Pastoral Dead in Contemporary American Fiction

ABSTRACT

In Alice Walker's vignette "The Flowers," a young black girl's walk in the woods is interrupted when she treads "smack" into the skull of a lynched man. As her name predicates, Myop's age and innocence obstruct her from seeing deeply into the full implications of the scene, while the more worldly reader is jarred and confronted with a whole history of racial violence and slavery. The skeleton, its teeth cracked and broken, is a temporal irruption, a Gothic "smack" that shatters the transience of the pastoral scene with the intrusion of a deeper past from which dead matter/material de-composes (disturbs, unsettles, undoes) the story's present with the violent matter/issue of racism. Walker's story is representative of an important trope in fiction, where the pastoral dead speak through the details of their remains, and the temporal fabric of text is disrupted by the very substance of death.

Against the backdrops of Terry Gifford's post-pastoral and Fred Botting's Gothic understanding of the literary corpse as "negative[ly] sublime," this essay explores the fictional dead as matter unfettered by genre, consistently signifying beyond their own inanimate silences, revealing suppressed and unpalatable themes of racial and sexual violence, child abuse and cannibalistic consumerism. Along with Walker's story, this study considers these ideas through new readings of Stephen King's novella *The Body*, Raymond Carver's story "So Much Water So Close to Home," and *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy. While these writers may form an unlikely grouping in terms of style, each uses pastoral remains as significant material, deploying the dead as Gothic entities that force the reader to confront America's darkest social and historical matters.

In the second of his six elements of the post-pastoral, Terry Gifford prescribes “the recognition of a creative-destructive universe equally in balance in a continuous momentum of birth and death, death and rebirth, growth and decay, ecstasy and dissolution” (*Pastoral* 153). The theory allows for an ecocritical understanding of the bleaker aspects of nature, registering the same “awe” (*Pastoral* 151) and “humility” (153) shown to its sublimity. But what happens when the pastoral is the site of unnatural death outside of the creation-destruction cycle? Can the post-pastoral (with its eventual need to read inter-connectedness between individuals and their environment), absorb the human horrors of abuse, neglect, rape and murder? Just as Gifford finds “awe” in nature’s deathly forces, so Fred Botting, in his tracking of the Gothic through its myriad incarnations, posits a “negative sublime” in the encounter with corpses and the dead, “a moment of freezing, contraction and horror which signals a temporality that cannot be recuperated by the mortal subject” (69). Both natural death process and corpses themselves, it seems, share sublimity as a property, albeit in different forms. Yet while the dead in fiction can be ephemerally sublime, they may also be dually temporal, offering moments of sudden horror in their discovery, then exposing history in their propensity to remain. The dead explored here, discovered in pastoral and post-pastoral settings, are difficult to incorporate into the optimistic idea of an interdependent ecology. In this sense, they are aberrations, Gothic matters which communicate both the localized brutality of their own demise and the human horrors evident in their remains.

One such historical matter is that of America’s history of racial violence and murder. In Alice Walker’s vignette “The Flowers,” a ten-year-old African American girl, Myop, wanders a mile or so from her family’s cabin into the woods and treads “smack” (36) into a skull. The reader at first has no idea who the man was (“He had been a tall man” [36]) or how long he has been there. The story’s lack of any clear sign of modernity or antiquity (aside from a “sharecropper cabin” [35]) means this could be the early post-bellum American South or the 1960s or any time in between. The vague time setting of the story is crucial, of course, as America’s history of lynching black men stretches from the time of slavery, through post-Civil War Reconstruction all the way up to the late twentieth century. In fact, re-reading a story like Walker’s now, in light of the spate of recent murders of black men by American police, it seems questionable as to whether lynching has really ended or whether summary executions without due process have rather mutated into an equally disturbing contemporary form. For the identity of the skeleton in “The Flowers,” Walker relies on the reader’s understanding of history. We know Myop is black and poor from “her dark brown hand” (35) and “the rusty boards of her sharecropper cabin”

(35) respectively. The skeleton itself, while never once clearly described as that of a black man, is littered with evidence which plays on our complicit knowledge and draws our assumptions: the “blue denim” (36) of “overalls,” “the rotted remains of a noose,” “cracked” and “broken” (36) teeth—a farm worker beaten, hung and left unburied. While Myop, as her name suggests, is too short-sighted, naïve and innocent to see the import of her discovery, the adult reader’s awareness is activated, and the initial, climactic “smack” of unfamiliar horror, the “moment of freezing” (as Botting might call it), when the pastoral scene of flower-picking is shattered by the sudden appearance of the dead, is replaced with a slower, more lasting sense of America’s all too familiar past and present of racial violence and murder. The skeleton in Walker’s story, then, functions within both sensory and cerebral temporalities, a momentary physical shock or “smack” followed by deeper historical consideration.

The story’s shift from pastoral to Gothic is important to our understanding of the significance of the skeleton, as Walker uses subverted literary modes and allusions to emphasize the true temporal depth of horror beneath the surface of the discovery. The story begins in the pastoral mode, full of fecund nature and bucolic innocence:

It seemed to Myop as she skipped lightly from hen house to pigpen to smokehouse that the days had never been as beautiful as these. The air held a keenness that made her nose twitch. The harvesting of the corn and cotton, peanuts and squash, made each day a golden surprise that caused excited little tremors to run up her jaws. (35)

Yet the pastoral idyll (with its long history of romanticizing the feudal status quo) is undercut from the outset with the words “It seemed.” Indeed, the whole story takes place around this fragile membrane/hymen of *seems* and *is*, and the movement from pastoral to Gothic is a transition from façade/veneer/surface to the revelation of a more permanent material truth in the form of skull, broken teeth and bones. The ripe and transient harvest of the first paragraph (above) is a cruel prefiguring of the *strange fruit* rotting for years in the woods. The lyrics of Billy Holiday’s blues song “Strange Fruit” are themselves pertinent to Walker’s story, also making that same shift from *seems* to *is*: “Pastoral scene of the gallant South / The bulging eyes, the twisted mouth” (Meeropol). The childish lightness of Myop’s absentminded play at the beginning of the story makes it hard not to feel a sense of rape (at least violation) when she is later suddenly surrounded by remnants of male mob violence, her ignorance of which accentuates the dramatic irony of the reader’s

complicity and knowledge that, even though *she* may not understand it now, her innocence has been irreversibly bloodstained. Walker deploys an interesting paradox, then, with the replacing of a pastoral *seems* with a Gothic *is*. While the Gothic is often associated with what seems, ethereal ghosts, the supernatural, strange creatures and monsters which inhabit the dark, the skeleton in this story is a Gothic signifier of material truth and history, revealing racial violence and murder beneath America's pastoral image of itself. Walker's use of the pastoral here is itself a dual conceit, at once parodying the white nostalgic mode seeking to show rural harmony between master and tenant/slave, and continuing a tradition of black pastoral which "celebrates the kinship that African Americans felt with the southern land while reconciling the oppression that their forbears suffered on that land" (Stave 45–46). Gifford might argue here that Walker's introduction of the Gothic into the idyllic rural setting is contiguous with his sixth property of post-pastoral, where "the exploitation of the planet is of the same mindset as the exploitation of women and minorities" (*Pastoral* 164). But we have to assume that what Myop returns with is an unprocessed knowledge of the historical aberration of racial violence, signified in the Gothic matter of the long-remaining, unburied bones, whose discovery override concern for the natural environment in the story.

The gothicizing of pastoral in the story actually begins before the "smack" of the grim discovery, as earlier, when she is collecting flowers, Myop worries about the presence of "snakes" (36) and the keenness of the air at the beginning is replaced by a more claustrophobic atmosphere of "damp" and "silence close and deep" (36). The mention of "snakes" foreshadows "the coiled and rotted remains of a noose," "a ring around the rose's root" "blending benignly" (36) into the soil, phonically mimicking the old nursery rhyme of the plague, here representing a *black death* of an altogether different nature. Yet the "snakes" also inform an Edenic reading of the story, in which the skeleton is the tasted fruit and the knowledge gained as Myop is "initiated" (to use Harold Bloom's word [464]) into the reality of America in her own doubly subjugated position within it as female and black. When Myop steps "smack" into the skull's eyes, then, her own cultural and historical myopia are paradoxically counterbalanced by the blind sockets, through which the reader sees with clarity both Myop's situation and the history of America itself as a nation built on racial enslavement and violence. The skeleton is thus a Gothic matter of truth, activating and subverting literary modes of pastoral and old imaginings of America as Eden, cutting through the abstractions of *seems* with the Gothic/historical material of *is*.

While Walker's story is a dually temporal Gothic irruption signifying a suppressed history through literary and cultural allusion, the dead body of a raped and murdered young woman in Raymond Carver's "So Much Water So Close to Home" is at the centre of rife misogyny and sexual violence which permeates the story's representation of American suburban and rural society. As with "The Flowers," the corpse in Carver's story also works as a Gothic intrusion of truth, revealing a pervading pastoralism as a mythic veil barely concealing a much uglier primitive masculinity. The story centres on the collapse of Claire's and Stuart's marriage after Stuart and his friends have found the dead body of a young woman floating in the Naches River. The crux of Claire's sense of horror regarding her husband is the fact that he and his three friends, rather than reporting the body immediately, continue to fish for a further day after tying the dead girl to branches so that she will not float away. Further to this, we learn that Stuart initiated sex with Claire immediately upon his return from the trip, before telling her about the body. While Carver's story is not expressly Gothic in content or form, the woman's corpse communicates with the other elements of the story from a *post mortem* Gothic position as material or matter which illuminates the central horrors of the story, the marriage itself and the surrounding ubiquity of male sexual violence towards women.

Carver's title is almost meaningless until it is placed within the full context of the question Claire asks after she knows what has happened: "So much water so close to home, why did they have to go so many miles away to fish?" (191). Innocuous at first, the question, however, is pivotal as the answer reveals Stuart's pastoral impulse as a facet of his overt masculinity. G. P. Lainsbury has argued that "the wilderness idyll in the story functions as a period of respite" (45) for Stuart and his friends. But while this contention does reveal the trope of retreat and return within the text, it does not explore the true horror this pastoralism conceals and its correlation with male violence in the story. Described by Claire, Stuart is seen as grotesque and even monstrous. The first sentence of the story—"My husband eats with good appetite"—introduces a male menace accentuated by the primitive omission of the article *a*, and this continues into further physical descriptions: "his hands, the broad fingers, knuckles covered with hair" (189), "his hairy legs and thick sleeping fingers" (192). In her discussion of "hypermasculine monsters," Dana Oswald argues that "they are monsters who exceed the boundaries of civilised masculinity in appetites for food, sex, and violence" (347). Claire Renzetti and Jeffrey Edleson list the characteristics of hypermasculinity as "body hair, strength, aggression and outward appearance" (qtd. in Oswald 347). Interestingly,

Oswald's analysis is focused primarily on "giants, vampires, and werewolves" (347), yet through the female narrator's observations in "So Much Water So Close to Home," and alerted by the horror of the sexually murdered woman on the Gothic periphery of the story, Carver's reader sees also the quotidian male monster, the husband living inside the house.

This masculine monstrosity and menace within the domestic space of the story is continually mirrored and highlighted by the extreme sexual violence configured in the corpse, which is raped symbolically even after death. The first and actual rape prior to death has already been committed, but in the group of men finding the woman "floating face down in the river, nude," (187) Carver alerts us to a further figurative gang rape. His use of "nude" instead of *naked* alludes, in one word, to Western culture's long history of sexual consumption of the female body, from the high art of Classical and Renaissance sculpture and painting to the twentieth and twenty-first century's proliferation of pornography (recently reported as a chronic internet addiction among teenage boys [Sanghani]), and this male gaze or visual rape is continued in the story:

they all came to look at her. . . . They took flashlights and stumbled down to the river. The wind was up, a cold wind, and waves from the river lapped the sandy bank. One of the men, I don't know who, it might have been Stuart, he could have done it, waded into the water and took the girl by the fingers and pulled her, still face down, closer to shore, into shallow water, and then took a piece of nylon cord and tied it around her wrist and then secured the cord to the tree roots, all the while the flashlights of the other men played over the girl's body. (Carver 187)

Within the male need for the wilderness and the acting out of American frontierism through boyish pursuits (Carver seems to be saying), exist the much darker impulses of sexual domination and violence. Stuart's and his friends' need for pastoral "respite" from their respective lives and marriages is essentially punished or at least tested by the dead woman, and it is a test they fail abysmally by continuing to play instead of helping her; as Claire says to Stuart at one stage, "she needed help" (186). The nostalgia underlying the men's pastoral impulses evidently does not extend to the chivalry of helping a woman in need. The corpse, therefore, is again a Gothic reminder of pastoral as myth, and Carver's situating of the raped, dead woman within the desired virgin landscape of the men's primitive fantasies mocks idealistic constructions of nature with their own tired metaphors of land as essentially female. America's "single dominating metaphor," according to Annette Kolodny, "regression from the cares of adult

life and a return to the primal warmth of womb or breast in a feminine landscape” (6), is brutally undermined here by the female corpse, whose suffered violations (*ante* and *post mortem*) reflect violence against women and the ongoing destruction of the land. In *Jindabyne* (Ray Lawrence’s 2006 Australian film version of the story), as the men reach their remote destination, Stuart says “this place is not for women.” Carver’s riposte to the metaphor of the “feminine landscape” is here doubly extended. Firstly, Stuart directly reveals the outright sexism of his pastoral desires; and secondly, the dead woman in the film is aboriginal, and her murder and *post mortem* mistreatment by white men are reconfigurations in microcosm of a whole history of colonial subjugation, violence against women, and land grabbing.

The repetitions of rape in the story, real and figurative, reflect Claire’s and Stuart’s marriage, so that domestic, suburban, and rural spaces are all permeated with an overpowering sense of male sexual violence. Stuart’s sexual advances upon Claire throughout the story grow increasingly inappropriate and are continued in spite of Claire’s shock and anger once she knows of his mistreatment of the dead woman’s body. These advances range from minimal—“He gets to his feet and touches me on the hip as he goes past” (Carver 190)—to more forceful and uncomfortable—“He stands in front of me with a little grin, trying to catch my eyes, and then puts his arm around my waist. With his other hand he takes my free hand and puts it on the front of his pants” (195)—to verbal abuse and sexual assault:

He drains his glass and stands up, not taking his eyes from me. “I think I know what you need, honey. Let me play doctor, okay. Just take it easy now.” He reaches an arm around my waist and with his other hand begins to unbutton my jacket, then my blouse. “First things first,” he says, trying to joke.

“Not now, please,” I say.

“Not now, please,” he says, teasing. “Please nothing.” Then he steps behind me and locks an arm around my waist. One of his hands slips beneath my brassiere.

“Stop, stop, stop,” I say. I stamp on his toes.

And then I am lifted up and then falling. I sit on the floor looking up at him and my neck hurts and my skirt is over my knees. He leans down and says, “You go to hell then, do you hear, bitch? I hope your cunt drops off before I touch it again.” (203)

The increase of violence in Stuart’s sexual bullying of Claire is made more disturbing by the reader’s knowledge of the raped and murdered female body, that most extreme symbol/object/matter of male sexual

violence, signifying from the margins of the story where their marriage may eventually lead. Claire even remembers Stuart saying five years after they were married, “someday this affair (his words; ‘this affair’) will end in violence” (193). Earlier in the story, Claire recounts a brief tale from her youth about Arlene Hubly, who was decapitated and dumped in a river by two brothers. “It happened when I was a girl” (191), she says. Carver surrounds his central character/narrator (Claire) with extreme sexualized horror—rape, murder, mutilation—present and past, and the women’s corpses in the story mirror simultaneously the burgeoning violence in her own marriage and home and the ever-present endgame of an endemically misogynistic society in which men act out primitive pastoralist fantasies based on masculine myths. In Stuart’s finding of the dead woman and his failing to help her (or rather his abusing her), the corpse’s essential Gothicism reflects his own monstrous masculinity as an abusive husband and potential rapist. This is confirmed when Claire tries to sleep in the spare room, only to have Stuart break the lock and “stand there in his underwear” (203–04). The woman’s corpse in Carver’s story acts as a Gothic, post-pastoral extremity, revealing not just the dark history of her own demise within a culture that has failed her, but also the ubiquitous, ongoing, everyday horrors of violence against women and domestic abuse.

Similar dynamics are present in Stephen King’s novella *The Body*, in which a group of young boys (ages twelve to thirteen) set out to find the dead body of Ray Brower, a boy of their age who has gone missing while apparently out picking blueberries alone in the woods. The similarities of premise among King’s, Walker’s and Carver’s stories reach far beyond the simple fact of finding skeletons and corpses in rural settings, although this in itself is important. Again, I want to contend here that the eponymous body in King’s story acts as an extremity reflecting the horrors of the everyday. The corpse itself, given extra significance as being that of a child, is again readable as a Gothic material/matter of truth, contaminating tropes of pastoral idyll and retreat as it decays in the woods and haunts the boys’ imaginations as a screaming ghost. The idea of pastoral in King’s story is there to be countered, much like the myths of American frontierism and masculinity informing the boys’ quest. The story possesses a pastoral shape of retreat and return, with the boys heading out of town on their mission to return two days later. But King precludes any notions of an idyllic, virgin land with Gordie’s description of the scene as they set off:

Behind us was Castle Rock spread out on the long hill that was known as Castle View, surrounding its green and shady common. Further down Castle River you could see the stacks of the woolen mill spewing smoke

into a sky the colour gunmetal and spewing waste into the water. The Jolly Furniture Barn was on our left. And straight ahead of us the railroad tracks, bright and heliographing in the sun. They paralleled the Castle River, which was on our left. (438)

The factory chimneys spoil the view and highlight the pollution of the air and water, and in the railway tracks which give the boys their route to heroism and Ray Brower's body, King invokes the full spectrum of Leo Marx's *Machine in the Garden* metaphor, from "machine technology . . . [as] a proper part of the landscape" (220) as he sees it in George Inness's *Lackawanna Valley* painting to "the machine represent[ing] the forces working against the dream of pastoral fulfillment" (358) in *The Great Gatsby's* "valley of ashes." The train appears later in *The Body* as a mechanical monster/murderer (like Gatsby's car), chasing the boys across the trestle, having already killed Ray Brower. Further on in the journey, the boys come across "great pit" in a junkyard:

It was maybe eighty feet deep and filled with all the American things that get empty, wear out, or just don't work anymore. . . . A little girl's dolly looking amazedly between her thighs as she gave birth to stuffing. An overturned Studebaker automobile with its chrome bullet nose glittering in the sun like some Buck Rogers missile. One of those giant water bottles they have in office buildings, transformed by the summer sun into a hot, blazing sapphire. (444)

The potentially idyllic town of Castle Rock, Maine, then, has a surrounding countryside of progress and decline, and the disregarded objects of boom-time postwar consumerism—toys, cars, office equipment—undermine the metaphorical harmony of America's machines in the garden with a sense of waste and decay, given its fullest expression in the body of the dead child who, when finally found, is also a rotting old piece of junk with "ants and bugs all over his face and neck" (544). Much like in Carver's and Walker's stories, then, the corpse in King's signifies and transmits meaning from a Gothic, post-pastoral location among a complex system of symbols which simultaneously communicate American history, literature, and myth.

In many ways, King's novella is a classic rites of passage tale in which the protagonists—Gordie (the narrator), Chris, Teddy, and Vern—all on the verge of adolescence, view Ray Brower's dead body as their chance to become local heroes. Early in the story, King creates a connection between the corpse and this sense of initiation when Gordie tells us in

the first chapter, “I was twelve going on thirteen when I first saw a dead human being” (385). The implied meaning of this, beyond being an excellent hook for King’s ghoulish readership, is that death (or at least the acknowledgement of our mortality) is part of growing up, something that everyone has to confront sooner or later. Part of a collection of novellas entitled *Different Seasons*, *The Body* makes up the “Autumn” section, “Fall from Innocence,” further suggesting its identity as a coming-of-age tale. But there is a dark irony to all this, in that what the boys seem so desperate to achieve—hero status, local fame and manhood—King represents as empty, violent, grotesque and miserable. This is best shown by surveying the male adults in the story, all of whom are failed and desperate characters. Teddy constantly emulates his father who “stormed the beach at Normandy” (390) but is now in “the loony bin up at Togus,” “crazier’n a shithouse rat” (459), according to Milo Pressman, himself a sad, obese junkyard owner who seems to live for setting his dog Chopper on trespassers. Chris’s father is an alcoholic who beats him and leaves loaded guns around the house. Ace Merrill, the local tough guy the boys confront at the climax of the story, is shown later as a sad drunk who never left Castle Rock. George Dusset is a local shopkeeper who nostalgically moons over Gordie’s dead brother Denny’s football skills whilst trying to rip Gordie off for small change. And Gordie’s father, who is already sixty-three and old enough to be a grandfather, is a shattered figure, unable to move on from the death of his eldest son, ignoring and neglecting his youngest boy, constantly watering the dead soil of his garden. Odd, then, perverse even (or perhaps not), that the boys should mimic the adult masculine world, playing cards, smoking, obsessing over guns, and “calling each other pussies” (447) when their role models are such broken men. At every opportunity, King undermines American myths of masculinity, of soldiers, cowboys, and rock’n’roll rebels, by showing the men in this story as weak, abusive, and hapless, and the boys’ aping of manhood is thus shown as eventually empty.

While the corpse of the dead boy is a sad reminder of a life unfulfilled, of adulthood and manhood unreached, perhaps its most significant function is as an indicator of neglect and abuse within and throughout the community. This is a common expression of King’s work, where children are often at the mercy of adults who are violent, predatory, or simply unworthy of their roles as parents or guardians—Jack Torrance in *The Shining* is perhaps King’s most famous example. Although Ray Brower is not murdered by an adult but rather “knocked . . . out of his keds” (408) by a train, when placed within the context of the other children in the story he becomes a facet of this wholesale mistreatment. The very fact of his

death is suggestive of an American failure, as his own attempt at pastoral retreat (picking blueberries) meets with death at the hands (or wheels) of industrialized America, in which space for children to roam unmolested in solitary adventure has been compromised by the gain of land development, factories and railways. It is apt then that the boys who come to find/rescue him are all abused and neglected themselves. Gordie describes himself as “the Invisible Boy” (392), his talent for writing having been overlooked and ignored by his parents in the shadow of his brother’s more masculine football prowess. At the outset of their adventure, Chris says “[m]y dad will hide me anyway,” because “[h]e’s on a really mean streak this time” (402). Vern is bullied by his older brother and abused by just about everyone for being overweight and half-witted. Teddy idolizes his father’s war heroics in spite of the fact he held both of Teddy’s ears to a stove, deforming him for life and damaging his hearing. In Gordie’s story of the pie-eating competition, Davie “Lard-Ass” Hogan is ridiculed for his obesity by the whole town, including the adults and even his own school principal. And in Chris’s story of the stolen milk money, the reader learns that he gave it back only to have the teacher Old Lady Simons spend it on a new skirt and let Chris take the blame. To some extent, *The Body* is one of King’s least Gothic stories; there are no vampires, ghosts, or child-murdering clowns. Yet Ray Brower is there to remind us of the “adult monsters” (509) within the community, dealing out horror on a more banal and daily basis, and the corpse is a Gothic matter symbolic of the everyday neglect and abuse of children, consciously and unconsciously put aside (“abjected” as Julia Kristeva might say) in order for society to function. John Sears argues that “[i]n King’s Gothic death is monstrous, an unrepresentable, faceless otherness constantly threatening the teeming, contemporaneous living world of his fictions” (183). This is only partly accurate. When Gordie and his friends finally find Ray Brower their initial reaction would seem to support Sears’s argument and Botting’s “negative sublime”: “Did any of us breathe?” asks Gordie. “I didn’t” (543). But this moment of frozen horror is followed by understanding and realization. “That finally rammed it all the way home for me. The kid was dead” (543). In *The Body*, while death does at times convey this “faceless otherness,” its material matter in the form of the child’s corpse is also a fully-faced reflection of what is “threatening” and “monstrous” in life itself, a warning and reminder of the myriad adult horrors hiding around children at all times, far more real and frightening than any ghost or vampire.

All of the stories discussed so far deal with skeletons and corpses in rural settings signifying the horrors of history and the everyday, Gothic intrusions disrupting the last vestiges of redundant pastoral imaginings. In

Cormac McCarthy's 2005 novel *The Road*, both of these elements, pastoral and corpse, are given perhaps one of their most extreme literary encounters. The body in question, that of an infant child, is seen only for the briefest of moments and given little description beyond matter of fact, yet it stays with the reader, causing feelings of shock and even anger at being drawn toward this horror of horrors:

They walked into the little clearing, the boy clutching his hand. They'd taken everything with them except whatever black thing was skewered over the coals. He was standing there checking the perimeter when the boy turned and buried his face against him. He looked quickly to see what had happened. What is it? he said. What is it? The boy shook his head. Oh Papa, he said. He turned and looked again. What the boy had seen was a charred human infant headless and gutted and blackening on the spit. He bent and picked the boy up and started for the road with him, holding him close. I'm sorry, he whispered. I'm sorry. (198)

The apologies at the end of this episode could almost be to the reader, and while some might be tempted to charge McCarthy with gratuitousness here, the scene needs to be addressed in context with the post-apocalyptic world of the novel quite literally de-composing itself around the two central protagonists, a man and a boy on the road, heading south in a hopeless quest for some kind of safety, shelter, or salvation. The reader is never told exactly what has befallen the earth, something globally catastrophic is all we know—a solar flare, a nuclear war, some environmental firestorm. Essentially, it does not matter, as McCarthy is more interested in the human reaction to apocalypse than its causes. The incident above, whilst shocking, is merely part of an array of dreadful moments and episodes including trees uprooting themselves and a cellar full of emaciated and mutilated people waiting for their turn to be killed, cooked and eaten. John Hillcote's film version (2009) does not include the incident in question, the director feeling, presumably, that “a charred human infant headless and gutted and blackening on the spit” would be too much for audiences to stomach. Yet for McCarthy, I would argue, the image is almost essential as a scene of Gothic horror completely in keeping with this unravelling world, shedding a dark light on just how far humanity can fall on its descent into oblivion.

At a conference called *Fear, Horror and Terror* in 2011, a presenter gave a spirited defence of mothers as a rebuke to McCarthy's novel, accusing the author of misogyny in his portrayal of the mother's abandonment of her husband and child and her choice of death over the struggle to stay alive with her family. The presenter, however (herself a new mother she told the

audience), had missed the crucial point that (in McCarthy's apocalyptic novel) the world in which her argument was based—with all of its socially determined practices and assumptions, including gender roles—has ended. The mother's choice of death in the novel (which leaves the father and the boy alone) is in keeping with the same process of Gothic de-composition to which the baby's corpse is central. *The Road's* post-apocalyptic world is in reverse. As the narrator muses at one point, "perhaps in the world's destruction it would be possible at last to see how it was made. The ponderous counterspectacle of things ceasing to be" (277). While the consolation of some theological or scientific revelation of the Earth's making in the process of its destruction is never given, the "ponderous counterspectacle" of human civilization "ceasing to be" is indeed revealed. And although we are at the end of times, there is an unmistakable, historical familiarity to McCarthy's hellish vision of the near or not so distant future. Hiding in the woods, the man and the boy watch a band of roving cannibals passing along the road:

An army in tennis shoes, tramping. Carrying three-foot lengths of pipe with leather wrappings. Lanyards at the wrist. 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. Shh, he said. Shh. The phalanx following carried spears or lances tassled with ribbons, the long blades hammered out of trucksprings in some crude forge upcountry . . . behind them came the wagons drawn by slaves in harness and piled with goods of war and after that the women, perhaps a dozen in number, some pregnant, and lastly a supplementary consort of catamites illclothed against the cold and fitted and yoked with dogcollars and yoked to each other. (92)

While this ragged gang is clothed and armed with remnants of the present, "tennis shoes" and "trucksprings," the "Lanyards," "wagons," "slaves," "catamites," and "lances tassled with ribbons" are reminiscent of some medieval crusade or army of Goths. The "wagons" and "slaves" also speak of American history—the frontier, the West, slavery—as this ugly representation of humanity marches simultaneously toward global end and national past.

The novel itself plays out this reversal in form. It has no chapters, and the dialogue is clipped. Sometimes it is difficult to decipher who is talking, the boy or the father, as their relationship loses its sense of pre-apocalyptic, traditional patriarchal shape. And language itself is fading with a landscape that no longer needs it:

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 one 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. (88)

Without being didactic, McCarthy's words are pregnant with warning when read with knowledge of current crises of climate change, global warming, extinction rates, overpopulation and garbage-filled seas. Viewed alongside and among these examples of culture, civilization and the planet itself in fast regression, the shocking image of the charred baby corpse, conceived and gestated purely for its meat, we have to presume, is perhaps the ultimate symbol of hopeless reversal, parents eating their children, a Gothic matter to evoke the West's cultural and mythological past (Cronus/Saturn) and represent the end in its awful denial of any sense of future.

In the film version, when they come across another corpse decomposing in an upstairs bedroom of a derelict house, the father says to the boy, "nothing we haven't seen before." He is talking about their experience together on the road, of course, but he is also talking directly to the audience. Erik Hage claims that

The Road presents a world that, in the wake of some unnamed apocalyptic catastrophe, has dissolved into a primordial condition devoid of nature, culture, law, personal identity, government, economics, territorial borders, agriculture, literature, commerce, art—or any recognizable feature of the world in which we live. (140)

While Hage's list of things "dissolved" is correct, his failure to recognize "feature[s] of the world in which we live" is surprising as, taken separately, the elements of McCarthy's world-in-reverse are indeed "nothing we haven't seen before": environmental catastrophe and devastation, murderous gangs who rape, kill, and steal children, hellish scenes of burnt bodies strewn post-explosion, people trafficked, tortured and kept as slaves, and cannibalism, even, recurrent throughout Western history at times of apocalyptic deprivation. In one of the very few lighter moments of the novel, the father finds a can of Coca-Cola in an old vending machine. The boy drinks from it and belches. "What is it, Papa?" he asks (23). He was born during the apocalypse and knows almost nothing of the world before. There is of course a horrible irony undercutting even this gentle moment

of relief, as this symbol of mass consumerism is almost all that is left in a world where people are now consuming each other. The narrator makes reference to this when he says, “No more balefires on the distant ridges. He thought the bloodcults must have all consumed one another” (16). Commenting on the cannibalism at the end of his film *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover* (1989), Peter Greenaway says “once we’ve stuffed the whole world into our mouths, ultimately we’ll end up eating ourselves” (Bartolovic 205). Again, the baby’s corpse, discovered as it is about to be eaten, is at the centre of this dreadful prophecy, that when there is nothing left to live for or consume, society will turn upon and consume itself. As with the other stories discussed here, this most disturbing of ideas and most shocking of corpses is an extremity in a network of signification which, as well as engulfing the reader in a moment of “negative sublime,” serves as a Gothic reminder to heed the past and present in order to avoid the cannibalistic apocalypse of the novel’s future. In his discussion of *The Road* as an exemplary post-pastoral text, Gifford argues that “[b]ecause the novel is set in the future it can be read as a warning of the possible outcomes if we do not do ‘right’ whilst there is still time to act” (“Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*” 24). But it is only the novel’s post-apocalyptic setting which connotes “the future,” as all the other elements in the story are reflective of the world today.

Like Hillcote’s film, Gifford’s post-pastoral reading of *The Road* avoids discussion of the infant corpse, as do many other critical studies of McCarthy’s novel. Gifford says that there is a debate “between those who see *The Road* as one of deep despair or one of remnant hope” (“Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*” 25). His post-pastoral reading falls into the category of the latter. But this seems a rather pointless debate, because the novel’s strength lies precisely in its plurality. It contains hope—the relationship of father and son and the boy’s survival and new family—and despair, the infant corpse on a spit about to be eaten, the cannibalism into which humanity has descended, and the wholesale destruction of the natural environment. In good fiction, as in life, surely hope and despair coexist. It seems odd to me that someone would analyze or film *The Road* and avoid its most disturbing image, but as Kristeva says, corpses are often seen as “the utmost in abjection,” “death infecting life” (4). Perhaps this partly explains why they are often avoided in academic critiques seeking an optimistic conclusion. But recent news has given us images of drowned children’s corpses washed up on pristine Mediterranean beaches, mass graves unearthed in the jungles of southern Thailand, a woman’s body in a suitcase in a London canal, and countless unfortunate victims of terrible crimes and catastrophes. Are these also matters to be glossed over

and avoided? In “The Contemporary Gothic: Why We Need It,” Stephen Bruhm observes that

life constantly reminds us that we are moving toward death, or at least obsolescence, and that life we must continually strive to hold together. Paradoxically, we need the consistent consciousness of death provided by the gothic in order to understand and want life. (274)

This seems a worthy role for the Gothic, as a constant shocking reminder through death that we are alive. But in the contemporary fiction explored here in the work of Walker, Carver, King and McCarthy we could extend Bruhm’s argument even further, as the dead bodies therein speak of not just the nightmares of our own unconscious minds as we move irresistibly toward death, but of the cruelties and injustices of the historical and global world we inhabit, cruelties and injustices we regularly put aside in order to live, prosper and consume. While the pastoral dead in contemporary fiction may symbolize the “utmost in abjection,” they are also materials of the utmost significance to our social awareness, Gothic matters which reflect, delineate and de-compose the horrors of the everyday.

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