“The World He’d Lost”: Geography and “Green” Memory in Cormac McCarthy’s The Road

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ABSTRACT: In Cormac McCarthy’s 2006 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, The Road, a father and his son travel the blasted, ruined landscape of a postapocalyptic America. The father remembers the logic, beauty, and order of America’s old topography, but he must now confront a new landscape where old signs mean nothing, where old signals are removed of meaning, and where formerly safe, understood, and beautiful places are instead sites of sheer horror. The son, in contrast, born after the event that caused the ruin, knows nothing of the former world and relies only on his father’s stories and memories of that world’s landscapes. As the pair moves across the barren spaces of this “new” America, these memories create (for the father, the son, and for the reader) both a decipherable and an unknowable terrain simultaneously.

My essay focuses on this composite geography within McCarthy’s novel, examining the ways in which the world’s geographical and emotional meaning has been broken in the text. Disaster and ruin have scraped the landscape of The Road nearly bare of any former codes or meanings, and the old geography is written over with a new and horrific “narrative.” In this alien world, the father’s geographical memories are like those faint lines of text in a palimpsest that show through beneath the newer inscriptions. McCarthy carefully and deliberately inserts the father’s place-memories throughout the narrative, and it is these memories—in combination with McCarthy’s own culturally weighted landscape details—that help create a layered and complex geography out of postapocalyptic nothingness.
The representation of natural places as spaces “overwritten with stories and histories” of the humans who have lived in them (Saglia 124) occurs often throughout literature, in varied texts, from varied times, and in varied forms. In Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*, for example, the characters who possess a real, textured understanding of the Yorkshire moors as spaces are the people who cannot separate the human stories from the landscape. Similarly, in *The Grapes of Wrath*, the character Muley serves as the voice of cultural and geographical historian: in surveying scenes where events of his life took place, he concludes that the “[p]lace where folks live is them folks” (Steinbeck 52). And in Ernest Hemingway’s short story, “The End of Something,” the death of the two primary characters’ relationship is paralleled by the decaying ruin of a lumber mill that sits behind them in the scene: “[…] there was nothing of the mill left except the broken white limestone of its foundations showing through the swampy second growth as Nick and Marjorie rowed along the shore […] ‘There’s our old ruin, Nick,’ Marjorie said” (Hemingway 79). More intricate than the well-worn term “sense of place” allows, such geographical depictions in literature convey great emotional significance and allow readers to understand that these places are “aswarm with stories” and to see that “[t]here is an invisible life in the landscape[s]” of these narratives (Nelson 17). Diego Saglia reminds us that “if geography may be literally interpreted as ‘earth writing,’” cultural geography “reconceive[s] spaces as places, literally the sites of an infiltration of historical and cultural intimations into a specific geographical terrain” (129, 125).

What happens, however, when the “earth writing” is erased—when the markers of the familiar physical landscape within a fictional work have been destroyed? The investigation of any literary cultural geography becomes more complex when we apply such analysis to a postapocalyptic world where nearly all of the “life in the landscape” has been erased and made almost wholly invisible. Such is the case in Cormac McCarthy’s 2006 novel *The Road*, where a father and his son travel the blasted, ruined landscape of a postapocalyptic America. For the father, responsible for leading himself and his son to the sea with only a fragmented map to guide them, the geography of this world is both alien and familiar at once.

The following essay examines the ways in which the world’s geographical and emotional meaning has been broken in McCarthy’s text. Disaster and ruin have scraped the landscape of *The Road* nearly bare of any former codes or meanings, and the old geography is written over with a new and horrific “narrative.” In this alien world, the father’s geographical memories are like those faint lines of text in a palimpsest that show through beneath the newer inscriptions. McCarthy carefully and deliberately inserts the father’s place-memories throughout...
the narrative, and it is these memories—in combination with McCarthy’s own culturally weighted landscape details—that help create a layered and complex geography out of postapocalyptic nothingness. In carrying the memories of a vanished landscape, the father becomes in effect what the historian Pierre Nora calls a “memory individual.” “[W]hen memory is no longer everywhere,” writes Nora, “it will not be anywhere unless one takes the responsibility to recapture it through individual means. The less memory is experienced collectively, the more it will require individuals to undertake to become themselves memory-individuals [. . .]” (16). In The Road, memory of greener landscapes and of once familiar topographies is thus experienced only from the inside: the “exterior scaffolding and outward signs” that once marked the old geography have been partially or totally destroyed (Nora 13).

Much of McCarthy’s work, in terms of both style and content, is often likened to Ernest Hemingway’s, and for good reason; it will be useful to begin by comparing McCarthy’s representation of landscape and memory in The Road to one of Hemingway’s Nick Adams stories, specifically “Big Two-Hearted River,” which David Cremean argues “casts a long shadow over [The Road] in numerous ways” (85). Both Hemingway and McCarthy use geography as a mechanism for conveying emotional despair. Consider the geographical ruin that opens Hemingway’s story:

There was no town, nothing but the rails and the burned-over country. The thirteen saloons that had lined the one street of Seney had not left a trace. The foundations of the Mansion House hotel stuck up above the ground. The stone was chipped and split by the fire. It was all that was left of the town of Seney. Even the surface had been burned off the ground. (163)

Of this passage, George Slusser rightly notes that the “narrative [. . .] resonates with apocalyptic symbolism” (125). Confronted with the burned waste and the scarred landscape (and in this story, the landscape Nick sees and the “landscape” inside him are both fire-scarred), Hemingway’s character is struck by the immensity of the loss and the ruin of this geography: we know, from Hemingway’s descriptions, that Nick must have known Seney somewhat intimately as a town (he knows that it had thirteen saloons; he knows the town’s hotel by name) and those memories of the former world combined with the new, burnt-over world, are what help illuminate his alienation and isolation here. Memory is a crucial component of any cultural geography; the juxtaposition between remembered landscape and new geographical reality is what infuses Hemingway’s opening paragraphs with the sense of devastation and despair that become so crucial to the success of “Big Two-Hearted River.” In forcing Nick to confront old geographies that have been nearly destroyed, Hemingway forces his character—and his readers—to confront the enormity of Nick’s wartime transformation.

McCarthy uses a similar narrative technique; the forced recognition of what were once familiar landscapes (or at least were once familiar types of land-
scape) begins shortly after the opening scene of *The Road*. McCarthy depicts an environment well past the point of ecological crisis, utterly removed of most of the former rhythms of the natural world. The father, “[w]ith the first gray light [. . . ] walked out to the road and squatted and studied the country to the south. Barren, silent, godless. He thought the month was October but he wasn’t sure” (McCarthy 4). With no discernible seasons, no sunshine, and no color to the land or sky other than gray, the world McCarthy depicts seems, at times, utterly unreadable and unknowable. All that the man can see as he scans the topography is “[e]verything paling away into the murk. The soft ash blowing in loose swirls over the blacktop [. . . ] The segments of road down there among the dead trees. Looking for anything of color” (4). Because the ash makes it impossible to recognize changing seasons or the tracks of enemy cannibals, the man is rendered helpless, completely unable to read the landscape since there is almost nothing here left to read. The father has difficulty perceiving this world and the new truths of the landscape—which include its endless grayness, and the ash that covers everything—but this difficulty in perception is more emotionally draining because he still retains his inner perceptions and memories of the “truths” of the old world (he remembers the month October, for example, and looks for “anything of color”).

The landscape in *The Road*, then, is in some ways distinct precisely because of its lack of visual distinctness. McCarthy’s method of framing the natural world in this scene is similar to the technique found in Samuel Beckett’s short prose piece, “The Cliff,” where a disembodied narrative voice describes a landscape utterly lacking contrast, luminosity, or depth:

Window between sky and earth nowhere known. Opening on a colourless cliff. The crest escapes the eye wherever set. The base as well. Framed by two sections of sky forever white. Any hint in the sky at a land’s end? The yonder ether? Of sea birds no trace. Or too pale to show. And then what proof of a face? None that the eye can find wherever set. It gives up and the bedlam head takes over. At long last first looms the shadow of a ledge. Patience it will be enlivened with mortal remains [. . . ] One alone from amongst those such residua evince. Still attempting to sink back its coronal into the rock. The old stare half showing within the orbits. (257)

It is all but impossible to situate Beckett’s landscape within a recognizable or mimetically consistent world (was there ever such a view or viewer anywhere on earth?) even though the piece as a whole depends for its effect on the apparent memory of that world by the narrating consciousness. That is to say, all the necessary pictorial components of a conventional landscape portrait are present only as absences, as linguistic traces that invoke a natural world remembered but no longer recognizable or even visible: cliff, sky, land’s end, sea birds. The viewer of Beckett’s scene, like McCarthy’s father, lacks any way to orient him or herself within the context of the view seen through the window—there is nothing to demarcate horizon from earth, land from sky, or figures from background. It
is only when the “bedlam head” (which may be Beckett’s term for representing the human imagination or perhaps simply human consciousness) takes over that the scene begins to take on depth, activity, and meaning.

Novelist David Lodge, writing about another one of Beckett’s pieces of later short fiction, “Ping,” comments that the story expresses the “struggles” of what he labels an “expiring consciousness” to “find some meaning in a situation which offers no purchase to the mind or to sensation. The consciousness makes repeated, feeble efforts to assert the possibility of colour, movement, sound, memory, another person’s presence, only to fall back hopelessly into the recognition of colourlessness, paralysis, silence, oblivion, solitude” (qtd. in Gontarski xxviii). Such precisely is the paralyzing, lonely predicament faced by McCarthy’s father in *The Road*, who, like the perceiving consciousnesses dramatized in “Ping” and “The Cliff,” struggles to make sense of an enigmatic and alien space. The landscapes he is forced to navigate each day are, for the most part, torturously indistinct. Yet because he retains his memory, they are consistent reminders of the vanished greener world he once knew.

*The Road* in its opening scene forces readers to confront a postapocalyptic world where there is, quite simply, no comprehensible or understandable “natural” world left. John C. Hampsey has written that “McCarthy’s novel […] de-romanticize[s] the individual’s relationship with nature” (497), but I think McCarthy pushes the text past “de-romanticization” and into utter annihilation of the natural world as it was once known, except in memory. This total absence of greenery or of hope for regeneration or salvation in the natural world is particularly striking; as I first read the novel I remember unconsciously assuming that the father and son would at some point discover a small island of unblemished terrain within the devastation, or that the seacoast they reached would still contain some semblance of life as the father formerly knew. *The Road*, however, almost seems to provide the fictional answer to a long-standing, anxious question within American culture about what might happen if we “lose” the beauty of the natural world to the carelessness and greed of humans. In 1836, writes Roderick Nash, Hudson River school painter Thomas Cole “pleaded with his countrymen to remember ‘we are still in Eden; the wall that shuts us out of the garden is our own ignorance and folly […] Our doom is near: behold from east to west the skies are darkened by ascending smoke […]’” (97). *The Road* seems almost to affirm Cole’s dire predictions, especially if we take McCarthy’s textual allusions to the apocalyptic event (“a long shear of light and then a series of low concussions”) to mean the explosion of a nuclear bomb (52).

Set against the wasteland are the father’s memories of a lost and, at times, seemingly pastoral world. Many of these “green” memories are intricately woven into what is, in part, an archetypal frontier journey; though *The Road* is not set in the West (despite some comments from confused reviewers that the man and the boy are traveling to the Pacific), McCarthy is still using western tropes to move his narrative forward. But instead of a conventional frontier narrative of discovery
and exploration of bountiful new territory, McCarthy constantly reminds us of what has been lost: in one scene the man “stood on a stone bridge where the waters slurried into a pool and turned slowly in a gray foam. Where once he’d watched trout swaying in the current, tracking their perfect shadows on the stones beneath” (30). In another scene, the father deliberately leads himself and the boy back to his own childhood home, and the result is a collision of memory with facticity (“[t]his is where we used to have Christmas,” “[t]his is where I used to sleep”) that, too much for the man to bear, causes him to admit to the boy that “[w]e shouldn’t have come” (26–27). Although what is now visible at his old homesite—“[t]he floor buckled from rainwater [...: : : : ] bones of a small animal dismembered [...: : : ] cones of damp plaster standing in the floor”—tells none of these old childhood stories (26–27), the father is able to weave together the old geography out of the ruins. This act of memory seems to disturb the boy as much as any of the terrors they encounter. Witnessing his father’s old memories come to life traumatizes the boy, arguably, because those memories are invisible, and also because their content in no way meshes with the current ominous ruin of the homestead; how could a boy whose entire life has been spent on the run in an ashen wilderness comprehend sleeping in the same house each night? How would he comprehend the comforting, ordinary sameness of repeated childhood Christmas rituals? How would he even comprehend Christmas itself? The boy watches “shapes claiming [his father that] he could not see,” and punctuating each of the father’s memories is the boy’s nervous comment, “[w]e should go, Papa” (26–27). The father’s memories are too much for the boy to bear precisely because these memories reveal that the geographies of their childhoods have absolutely nothing in common. The father seems to recognize the anxiety this causes the boy in a later passage, “[understanding] 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” (154).

Even simple topographical descriptions, read closely, reveal how McCarthy has layered this horrific new world over the incomplete erasure of the old. Hampsey notes of The Road’s landscapes that “beyond all other considerations, McCarthy’s book is a supreme act of aestheticizing a setting that inherently denies aestheticization. It is a heroic achievement, making a stark and lifeless landscape lyrically beautiful, and it is redemptive” (495). The “aestheticization” of the landscape that Hampsey describes is, I believe, achieved by McCarthy because of the way he ingrains old “codes” and familiar rhythms of landscape description into the blasted new geography of the apocalypse. “On the far side of the river valley,” the narrator notes in one scene, “the road passed through a stark black burn” (McCarthy 8). The scene opens with standard and well-worn geographical observations about the vista of the river valley, seeming almost to evoke “the serenity of the pastoral landscape” as discussed by Robert Sickels and Marc Oxoby (348). But then McCarthy carefully combines that peaceful place-
marker with the jarring “black burn” on the new landscape. “On the far side of the river valley,” as a geographical descriptor, has a familiar and comforting rhythm to it: it is a landscape phrase that suggests a scenic and sweeping view, one that feels timeless and hauntingly recognizable. As the father scans the landscape, though, he is forced to take in the old geography with the new, and his observations create immediate narrative tension between the two geographies, which continues throughout the passage:

Charred and limbless trunks of trees 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 a roadworks lay abandoned. Farther along were billboards advertising motels. Everything as it once had been save faded and weathered. (8)

The old topography—the house in the clearing, the meadowlands, billboards and lightpoles—is achingly identifiable here, and McCarthy forces his characters and his readers alike to confront that old world in the scene. “Everything,” he writes, is “as it once had been,” and yet nothing is as it once had been. The horrific afterburn of the cataclysm marks the entire landscape, we are reminded, with such descriptors as “charred,” “blackened,” and “burned.” And yet centrally embedded in the scene is a curving road, a house “in a clearing,” and “beyond that a reach of meadowlands.” The geographical definition for meadow, according to the reference text Home Ground: Language for an American Landscape, is one with what we might call pastoral, even soothing connotations: “Land covered with grasses, or a grassy field [. . . ] The etymology of meadow is directly related to mead, the alcoholic beverage made by fermenting honey and water. And mead, in turn, may have been a noun-form of the adjective meaning ‘sweet’ in many old forms of languages as diverse as Frisian, Dutch, Icelandic, Swedish, and Gothic [. . . ]” (Hampl 223–24). In this scene, then, McCarthy creates a composite geography, one made up of markers of the former world where a meadow was still a meadow, as well as one filled with undeniable signs of the new, blackened world (the meadowlands are now “stark and gray”). He simultaneously creates both an intimate and decipherable landscape and a picture of terrifyingly unknowable terrain.

There are other passages where the father’s memories of the old geography and landscape are hopelessly mixed into the topography of ruin, as is evident in the scene where the boy and his father make camp near a large waterfall. At first, however, as the pair traipses through the ashen woods McCarthy makes it clear that only the father can remember the way the land once looked: “They walked out through the woods. The light was failing. They followed the flats along the upper river among huge dead trees. A rich southern wood that once held mayapple and pipsissewa. Ginseng” (39). In constructing the father’s land-memories, McCarthy chooses some of the most evocative markers
of the southern mountains that he can: mayapple, striking for its umbrella-like deep green leaves, pipsissewa, a delicate pink summer-flowering perennial, and ginseng, whose bright red berries and green leaves make it not only a remarkably beautiful plant, but also one that holds enormous cultural and historical significance to settlers in the Appalachian woodlands of the American south, where its harvest was often a secretive ritual passed down from generation to generation. The rift between the landscape of his memory and what the father currently sees, however, is a wide one. Visible in his mind is the lush, flowering greenery of an Appalachian forest; visible now in reality are “the raw dead limbs of the rhododendron twisted and knotted and black” (39–40). McCarthy, with this image, has chosen another iconic and striking plant of southern Appalachia to evoke the landscape (the wild rhododendron that blooms in these southern mountains brings out hikers and admirers in droves), but in depicting a destroyed, blackened rhododendron, he deliberately ruins one of this landscape’s most cherished and revered symbols. Thus, the landscape here is almost entirely removed of its former beauty or cultural significance: these things exist only in the father’s mind, creating a scene before him that is indeed a haunting topographical palimpsest. The hopelessness of this position is palpable. How can the father communicate with his son when so many of the meanings of the physical and emotional world he knew have been erased? Alex Hunt and Martin Jacobsen note that “[i]n attempting to create a system of meaning to sustain his son and himself [...] the man recognizes in the loss of language the fragility of meaning: ‘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?’” (qtd. on 157). Even the most basic colloquial phrases, related to geography, have lost their meaning and divide the father and the son; in another scene, before the father leaves to gather more firewood, he says to his boy, “I’ll be in the neighborhood. Okay?” (McCarthy 95). The son’s confused reply of “[w]here’s the neighborhood?” demonstrates how utterly meaningless the father’s old geographies are in this world (95).

There is weight and significance to McCarthy’s postapocalyptic geography: the landscape and the places in which he chooses to locate certain scenes contain markers that should not be read only in a literal way. Take, for instance, a scene later in the novel where the father and the boy are forced to hide from a passing band of cannibals. The father wakes and once again “stood looking over the country-side,” seeing “[t]he dead fields” and “[a] barn in the distance” (89). Soon after breaking camp,

[t]hey followed a stone wall past the remains of an orchard. The trees in their ordered rows gnarled and black and the fallen limbs thick on the ground. He stopped and looked across the fields. Wind in the east. The soft ash moving in the furrows. Stopping. Moving again. He’d seen it all before. Shapes of dried blood in the stubble grass and gray coils of viscera where the slain
McCarthy chooses to locate the horrific scene in, of all places, an abandoned orchard, in a place that once could have easily (in the former world) been read as a symbolic, ordered landscape of fertility, abundance, harvest, and pastoral peace. We can choose any number of literary depictions of the “abundant” orchard to support this assertion: I think in particular of the beginning of Walt Whitman’s “Give Me the Splendid Silent Sun,” where he calls out “[g]ive me juicy autumnal fruit ripe and red from the orchard, / Give me a field where the unmow’d grass grows, / Give me an arbor, give me the trellis’d grape, / Give me fresh corn and wheat, give me serene-moving animals/ teaching content . . .” (312). The beginning invocation of the orchard leads Whitman into other depictions of harvest and abundance, creating a series of landscapes that combines the beauty of cultivation (the orchard, arbor, corn, and wheat all connote careful nurturing of a landscape) and wildness (“the unmow’d grass”) to elicit a sense of serenity, richness, and fulfillment. In choosing an orchard for one of the father’s encounters with undeniable signs of the cannibals’ murder, McCarthy juxtaposes a landscape of fertility, hope, and repose with one of sheer terror. The result of this geographical choice is far more horrifying than it might have been had McCarthy chosen a different context. Horror, says Wendy Griswold, “achieves its impact by violating what is regarded as natural by mixing cultural categories that are customarily separate” (78). So, for readers it is horrific when we hear of Tamora’s baby being baked in a pie in Shakespeare’s Titus Andronicus, or when we read in the local newspaper that a small puppy has been tortured by a group of teenagers: these acts mix together cultural categories that most of us certainly are not comfortable with (we don’t eat people, we can’t imagine hurting a small puppy). McCarthy’s orchard/cannibal scene in The Road builds exactly the same kind of horror that Griswold speaks about. He is carefully mixing together those “cultural categories that are customarily separate” in his blending of acts of cannibalism into the landscape of the American orchard, in doing so creating a terrifying geography of this apocalyptic world. But aside from the horror that the scene elicits, McCarthy is also evoking a startling sense of loss of the former world. Georg Guillemin discusses McCarthy’s use of the apple orchard as a setting in All the Pretty Horses in a similar way, quoting a passage from that novel (“‘apple trees gone wild. . . . a strange air to the place. As of some site where life had not succeeded’”) and then noting that “the former beauty of the garden [. . .] implies the presence of the pastoral dream as a notion always already subjected to erasure [. . .]” (137).

There is no mistaking that the old geography of the lost, greener world is revered and mourned in the novel. McCarthy is not ambiguous or subtle in
setting up a dichotomy between “then” and “now.” When the father and son arrive in a “cedar wood” shortly after the scene in the orchard, the “trees [are] dead and black but still full enough to hold the snow. Beneath each one a precious circle of dark earth and cedar duff” (95). And, the father’s memories of his former life often interrupt the landscapes he currently sees, once again providing examples of how his geographical memory haunts the narrative:

He walked out in the morning and took the river path downstream [. . . ] He stood watching the river where it swung loping into a pool and curled and eddied. He dropped a white stone into the water but it vanished as suddenly as if it had been eaten. He’d stood at such a river once and watched the flash of trout deep in a pool, invisible to see in the teacolored water except as they turned on their sides to feed. Reflecting back the sun deep in the darkness like a flash of knives in a cave. (41–42)

The water of the river is now dull and dead, perhaps even deadly, as McCarthy makes a point to note that the “white stone [. . . ] vanished as suddenly as if it had been eaten.” No fish live in this water, a fact McCarthy returns to throughout the novel to further illuminate the opaque lifelessness of this new geography. A world where trout exist, McCarthy seems to suggest, is a good and peaceful world; a world where even the waters have died is a world devoid of hope. This fact is affirmed in yet another scene when the young boy asks his father, “Do you think there could be any fish in the lake?”, and the father flatly replies, “No. There’s nothing in the lake” (20). It is hard to resist the temptation here to mention Hemingway’s “Big Two-Hearted River” again, itself a narrative that also parallels the survival of trout—and the natural world—to the ability for humans to regenerate after intense loss and suffering. The difference between the two narratives, however, is obvious: Hemingway’s story allows Nick Adams to once again connect to the sustained, comforting rhythms of the natural world, thus providing him hope for his own regeneration and survival. McCarthy denies his characters any such satisfaction, giving the father that green world only in memory.

McCarthy’s portrait of ecological crisis and loss in _The Road_ is further supported by the enigmatic and beautiful final paragraph of the novel, where trout again become the focus of the imagery. He writes,

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. (286–87)

The trout, in this final passage, not only evoke the green world that has been lost, but they are the very symbols of the creation of that lush, full world; the imagery
McCarthy chooses here evokes their purity and their place in the natural beauty of the landscape (with its streams, mountains, amber current, smells of moss), especially in conjunction with the blackened and dead contemporary geography of the novel itself. It is the trout that contain the “patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming,” that same world which, we can assume, has been lost and “could not be put back. Not be made right again.” This final passage is haunting in the way McCarthy evokes the natural beauty of the former world even as he is telling us we can never have that world back again, a juxtaposition that has been his narrative strategy throughout the entire novel.

Reading this closing passage, it becomes useful to return to a discussion of whether, in the end, we can view McCarthy’s *Road* as yet another example of the literary longing for the lost American pastoral ideal. Is the narrative part of that longstanding tradition where, as Leo Marx famously describes in *The Machine in the Garden*, some “machine [invades] the peace of […] a world […] whatever the specific details, certain general features of the pattern recur too often to be fortuitous. Most important is the sense of the machine as a sudden, shocking intruder upon a fantasy of idyllic satisfaction” (29). Can we read McCarthy’s allusions to a sudden, violent event as that “intrusion” that irrevocably destroys the greener, pastoral world? Perhaps we could, if we knew with certainty that the “long shear of light” and the “series of low concussions” referred specifically to something man-made, like a nuclear bomb (McCarthy 52): but we do not know this with certainty. A number of reviewers of the novel have guessed that the event behind the destruction is either a bomb or an asteroid; if we assume the latter, then the narrative fails to fit into Marx’s description of man’s mechanical intrusion into the pastoral, and is instead evidence of McCarthy’s faithfulness to literary naturalism. And can we, with any certainty, describe all the father’s memories in *The Road* as “[fantasies] of idyllic satisfaction”? In one of the father’s memories of his former world, recalled early in the narrative, he remembers—again—fishing at a lake near his uncle’s farm. The narrative of the memory is filled with natural imagery: mentioned are “birchtrees” and “evergreens” and “[y]ellow leaves” and a lake resembling “dark glass” (13). But I would categorize none of these memories as idyllic or even pastoral, since McCarthy makes the remembered landscape here more complex, perhaps reflective of the man’s innately somber personality:

The edge of the lake a riprap of twisted stumps, gray and weathered, the windfall trees of a hurricane years past. The trees themselves had long been sawed for firewood and carried away […] A dead perch lolling belly up in the clear water […] This was the perfect day of his childhood. This was the day to shape the days upon. (13)

In keeping with his past novels, then, McCarthy’s *Road* dispenses with standard or simplistic longing for, or romanticization of, lost landscapes. Trenton
Hickman has observed this avoidance on McCarthy’s part, noting that “[o]n the final page of Cities of the Plain [. . . .] McCarthy] defeats a sense of nostalgia and sentimentalism that would tempt readers to see [this novel] as an elegiac treatment of the ‘vanishing’ West” (143). McCarthy’s father character in The Road mourns nothing as abstract or theoretical as “nature” or “the pastoral” when he quietly, desperately lets his geographical memories unfold within each scene. What he mourns is the loss of the world he himself once knew: a place populated by familiar rituals, people, plants, codes, meanings, and landscapes. He mourns the loss of intimate knowledge of a landscape and a place; yet he simultaneously mourns the fact that he alone (as best he can tell) carries such knowledge: that he has become one of the last “memory individuals” when it comes to the former geography of this world.

Giorgio de Chirico, in a 1919 essay titled “On Metaphysical Art,” wrote that “the madman [is] a person who has lost his memory. It is an apt definition,” he continues,

because, in fact, that which constitutes the logic of our normal acts and our normal life is a continuous rosary of recollections of relationships between things and ourselves and vice versa.

We can cite an example: I enter a room, I see a man sitting in an armchair, I note a bird cage with a canary hanging from the ceiling; I notice paintings on the wall and a bookcase with books. None of this startles nor astonishes me because a series of memories which are connected one to the other explains to me the logic of what I see. But let us suppose that for a moment, for reasons that remain unexplainable and quite beyond my will, the thread of this series is broken. Who knows how I might see the seated man, the cage, the paintings, the bookcase! Who knows with what astonishment, what terror and possibly also with what pleasure and consolation I might view the scene. (450)

Like the madman described by de Chirico, the father in McCarthy’s The Road is burdened by the “astonishment and terror” of a landscape where memory no longer explains the logic of what he sees. He is burdened, however, not by the loss of memory but precisely because of it. There is satisfaction and security in knowing how to read a place, in saying to oneself, “yes, the apples in that orchard are harvested each September” or “the Flame Azalea rhododendron blooms in May in these mountains” or “this is a fast-moving, clear stream: there are likely trout here.” But this “rosary” of geographical knowledge has been damaged in McCarthy’s novel; what remains for the father, as for the reader (again, borrowing terms from de Chirico’s essay) is only a “chronic sadness” and the absolute solitude of signs (450).

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