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Southern Wastelands: *Alas, Babylon, The Road*, and the A-Bomb in the Garden

Symbolical representations of space in American literature have always gravitated towards utopian and dystopian extremes. When it comes to the southern United States, whose first appearance in American English-language literature we owe to the notoriously prone-to-embellishment John Smith, the imagination often veers towards utopia. In *The Generall Historie of Virginia, New England & the Summer Isles* he writes: Virginia “is a country that may haue the prerogatiue over the most pleasant places knowne, for large and pleasant navigable Rivers, heaven & earth never agreed better to frame a place for mans habitation” (21-22). Commenting on the tendency to depict the South as an earthly paradise, Lewis P. Simpson writes how the literary image of the region coincided with “an open, prelapsarian, self-yielding paradise, where [one] would be made regenerate by entering into a redemptive relationship with a new and abounding earth” (15).

That “abounding earth” was to exert its influence on the southern mind for a long time, and as a matter of fact the Edenic image of the South became an enduring symbolical construction deeply ingrained in the imagery of the place.¹ Thomas Jefferson literally sowed his political ideals in its terrain, attributing to the landscape’s power to inspire paradisiacal reveries also the power to function symbolically as a very material signifier and as a metonymy for democracy. As John M. Grammer affirms, the region was literally written into existence through its identification with an ecological model: pastoral republicanism (11). Joined together by the sheer force of faith, images of the Garden of Eden and pastoral democracy have played a pivotal role in the multilayered set of symbols that constructed southern space, and the centrality of such space in the region’s collective unconscious has been rhetorically maintained up to contemporary times.

The southern literary mind is thus reluctant to get rid of its archetypal

eco-ideological pillars. This is probably because it had to surrender its dreams of Arcady at least once in the past (together with the Army of Northern Virginia) after Robert E. Lee's surrender to Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox on April 9, 1865. If the dimension in which southern literature was born is the prelapsarian garden of Genesis, what kind of southern literature is situated at the opposite end of the teleological spectrum, that of the Apocalypse? What if a catastrophic event, not unlike the Civil War, were to bring utter destruction to the South's eco-mythical grounds again, turning the southern garden into a barren wasteland? The literature of the southern United States, steeped in Biblical rhetoric, is of course replete with eschatological images. What is remarkable for its absence in this tradition is a conscious concern for the far more concrete nightmare of a nuclear Armageddon.

In this essay, I will compare two post-apocalyptic southern novels, Pat Frank's *Alas, Babylon* (1959), and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006). Using a geo-centered critical approach, I will map these texts' relationship with, and their response to, the Atomic Age in connection with the mythical complex of the pastoral, intended here as an inversion of the atomic-apocalyptic mode. In *By the Bomb's Early Light*, Paul Boyer comments on American literature's initial failure to address the A-Bomb. When it comes to the literature of the South, that first "muted" response becomes a protracted silence. Frank and McCarthy's novels are about the only examples of southern literature openly influenced by the Atomic Age, and because of that they possess intrinsic exemplary value: they can help fill a small but puzzling gap in the study of the American literary representations of the bomb.

It is a remarkable coincidence that Boyer's chapter on the relationship between the A-Bomb and the American literary imagination opens with a southerner's failure to translate on the page "that unsettling new cultural factor" (xix). Writing about James Agee's project for a screenplay titled *Dedication Day*, "a tantalizingly incomplete work," Boyer mentions how the writer from Knoxville considered the atomic bomb "the only thing much worth writing or thinking about" (243). In spite of that, the manuscript was abandoned after only five thousand words. This fragment, according to Boyer, exemplifies the "partially hidden" American intellectual response

to the bomb, and “Agee’s difficulty in translating anguish and dread into literature” (244).

It is also remarkable that, among the first “allusive and tentative” appearances of the A-Bomb in American literature, Boyer mentions another example from a southerner: Carson McCullers’s novella *The Member of the Wedding* (1946), in which the devastating aftermath of Hiroshima and Nagasaki’s bombing is quickly but meaningfully dismissed as being simply too much for the protagonist’s mind to bear. Southern literature was quick to respond, but ultimately failed to fully grasp and articulate the threat of annihilation embodied by the bomb. Clearly, this particular machine could not be allowed in the garden.

From Prelapsarian to Post-apocalyptic and Back

In point of fact, the symbolic space of the southern garden has been constantly under threat of the possibility of its dissolution, and the apocalyptic implications that possibility carries with it for the individual, southern society at large, and for the spaces they inhabit. Simpson defines this mode “apostatic imagination” (14). Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia’s* query XVIII (173-76) is a perfect example of that attitude, and Grammer is right when, after observing how pastoral (and generally Anglo-American) republicanism characterizes itself as perpetually threatened by corruption, he describes it as possessing “what amount[s] to a theory of entropy” (15). In other words, the southern eco-political imagination contains in potency its own demise. It is an apocalypse in the making.

In spite of that, apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic narratives characterized as distinctively southern are surprisingly quite scarce, and, when it comes to nuclear scenarios, downright rare.² Zombies and viruses have roamed about below the Mason-Dixon line, but, as mentioned before, Frank’s *Alas, Babylon* and McCarthy’s *The Road* seem to be the only post-atomic novels set in the South.

The common ground between McCarthy and Frank is survivalism: neither of the two pays much attention to other historical-political details. Frank gives his story a clearer historical context, but McCarthy’s

minimalist chronotope (almost) puts the novel in a vacuum. *Alas, Babylon* is chiefly focused on sociological speculation, outlining a social theory that shows some derivation from southern republicanism. *The Road*, in all its Beckettian barrenness, delineates a far more complex and radical picture that encompasses quintessentially southern societal, mythical, and ecological aspects. Frank, a pragmatic government consultant as well as a writer, is most of all interested in depicting his fellow Americans' reaction to the sudden fall of the nation's social and political order, an event compared to a biblical catastrophe – "Alas, alas, that great city, Babylon, that mighty city! For in one hour is thy judgment come," reads the verse from which he took inspiration for the title (*The Holy Bible*, Rev. 18.10).

As a novel devoted to now-classic Cold War apocalyptic anxieties, *Alas, Babylon* seems quite banal trite today: the nuclear WWII scenario in which the Soviet Union abruptly discharges its nuclear weapons on a stereotypically serene 1950s American community is so ingrained in the popular imagination as to be almost reassuringly familiar. The novel itself reveals its acritical adherence to the popular narrative of the times. When protagonist Randy Bragg tries to warn Malachai, the ever-present southern family's African American hand, of the impending war, the man doesn't look surprised at all: "I read all the news magazines... I know things ain't good, and the way I figure is that if people keep piling up bombs and rockets, higher and higher and higher, someday somebody's going to set one off. Then blooey!" (Frank 49). This apparently superfluous exchange leads to some considerations on the novel's implicit political assumptions. Malachai is a descendant of the slaves that the Braggs owned before the Civil War. The way in which he is depicted – faithful, self-sacrificing and, ultimately, simple – is a barely veiled refiguring of thankful Old South slaves such as Uncle Remus. Bragg's house, a "big house, ungainly and monolithic, with tall Victorian windows and belling bays and broad brick chimneys" (4) doesn't even try to conceal its plantation mansion past.

Through the eyes of a nosy neighbor, Florence, Frank also clearly connotes the property as a pastoral haven with all the romantic overabundance of an antebellum dream: "its grove, at this season like a full green cloak flecked with gold, trailed all the way from back yard to river bank, a quarter mile. And she would say this for Randy, his grounds were

well kept, bright with poinsettias and bougainvillea, hibiscus, camellias, gardenias, and flame vine” (4). This is a typical rhetorical move on the threshold of the apocalypse, as maintained also by James Berger, who in *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse*, writes how “the apocalyptic event, in order to be properly apocalyptic, must in its destructive moment clarify and illuminate what has been brought to an end” (5). Given the introduction of its protagonist and his spaces, *Alas, Babylon* is, consciously or not, another work of literature that mourns the passing of the Old South. By doing so, and in force of the consistent Edenic symbols associated with the southern pastoral, the novel is ambiguously positioned with respect to Cold War nuclear anxieties. Karl Jaspers defined the atomic apocalypse as “not an apocalypse at all, but rather the killing of all life on the whole surface of the earth” (21): the ultimate catastrophic event devoid of an actual eschatological dimension. Instead, Frank’s novel, in its subterranean but coherent relationship with the traditional myth of the southern mind-in-place, carries with it a consistent biblical magnitude – the fall of man, the loss of the garden – lying beneath the pragmatic, factual layer of the plot. Speculative political fiction and foundational myths subtly mingle in *Alas, Babylon*. On the other hand, and in spite of its strongly scriptural tone, *The Road* is paradoxically closer to Jasper’s definition in showing a progressive, total biological holocaust.

Alas, Babylon’s connections with southern pastoralism go deeper than that. As posited by Eva Horn, Cold War post-apocalyptic fictions often took the shape of a cautiously optimistic “futurology” that imagined the nuclear threat as a possible trigger for positive personal and social change, picturing not “the end of the world [...] but its prevention” (35). In the foreword to the novel’s 2005 edition, author David Brin, whose *The Postman* also falls into the category of post-apocalyptic narratives dedicated to the rebirth of civilization, notes that Frank “downplayed some of the horrors that would have attended any nuclear spasm” (xii). But Brin too is minimizing Frank’s soft-pedaling approach to the nuclear holocaust. Apart from the catastrophic death count and some threatening “unnatural” suns, “much larger and infinitely fiercer than the sun in the east” (Frank 94), almost nothing realistic (acute radiation syndrome, for example) happens to the Florida community of Fort Repose. The novel’s only interest is

showing how, under Bragg's guide, the small southern town braves the aftermath of the apocalypse and rebuilds civilization from scratch. A distinctively pastoral-republican civilization, of course. As reported by H. Bruce Franklin, President Harry Truman thought about the bomb as "the most terrible thing ever discovered," but also believed that it could prove to be "the most useful" (153), because of its supposed ability to bring peace to the world. Judging from his overtly optimistic approach, Frank would have enthusiastically agreed – or better, he most probably did agree. In his novel, the world is not destroyed, but ultimately reborn thanks to the bombs. The flourishing garden of American democracy is not turned into a post-atomic desert, and the long-sought dream of a "perpetual peace under the global hegemony of the United States of America" is reached (Franklin 154). But again, Frank's scenario is less a dream than a chauvinistic delusion in line with Truman's administration, because, as Gregg Herken writes, the idea that American nuclear hegemony could grant everlasting world peace was nothing but a "most deadly illusion" (7).

Unlike *The Road*, *Alas, Babylon* doesn't depict a grim, ruthless wasteland. Perils exist, and dog-eat-dog social dynamics occasionally appear, but, generally speaking, Frank's post-apocalyptic landscape is far from a Hobbesian state of nature. Instead, the novel shows the attributes, as observed also by Claire P. Curtis, of "a Lockean world of free men out to protect their bodies and their properties" (67). In accordance with John Locke's *Second Treatise*, Frank depicts a state of nature mostly ruled by reason and industriousness, dedicated to the re-creation of a purposeful society. The novel symbolical act belongs to that foundational Anglo-American republican discourse influenced by Lockean political theory: it is a post-apocalyptic account that "seek[s] to affirm the very story that [Americans] use to justify the legitimacy of [their] own state" (Curtis 67). The derivation from Locke is all the more significant when we consider the philosopher's influence on Jefferson's thought, and on the South's pastoral-plantation world in general – as Nancy Isenberg writes in *White Trash*, Locke's *Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina* is "a manifesto promoting a semi-feudalistic and wholly aristocratic society" (44). A description that perfectly fits the antebellum South. Read in this light Frank's wasteland

is not so much post-atomic as Anglo-colonial: idle land that needs to be put to use.

Randy Bragg, post-apocalyptic heir of the southern pastoral-republican tradition, starts rebuilding his symbolical garden from the exact moment in which he understands that the old order has fallen. Appomattox, which deprived his family of the aristocratic status that planters enjoyed in the Old Dominion, comes again under the form of a storm of nuclear bombs, and just as the Braggs never fully abandoned their antebellum realm, Randy too decides to hold onto the past. Early on in the novel, he refuses to embrace the barbaric ethos of the atomic aftermath: "Randy knew he would have to play by the old rules. He could not shuck his code, or sneak out of his era" (Frank 98). The question as to whether his era is actually the era of his ancestors doesn't matter much at this point. Given the chance, Randy Bragg (a true Cold War Scarlett O'Hara), would rebuild his Tara over and over. As a hard-working representative of the South's genteel republican tradition, not even the end of the world can stop him. For Bragg, tomorrow is always another day.

At the end of *Alas, Babylon*, the southern pastoral realm, "a secure retreat from the destructive processes of history" (Grammer 21) is restored. The protagonists' lives are even improved by the hardships that they invariably face with steadfast rationality. As Curtis writes, "Fort Repose succeeds [...] because it is possessed with a Lockean idea [...]: let me work hard to create what I can and then leave me alone" (73), an approach to freedom and private property distinctively connected to southern pastoral republicanism, and apparently untouched by the falling hydrogen bombs. The restoration of the southern garden also becomes a synecdochic restoration of the Old South as a whole. When an Air Force helicopter reaches Fort Repose a year after the nuclear attack and offers to evacuate its residents, Randy Bragg and his people decline to go. In a rather corny rhetorical climax, each inhabitant of this new Old South declares their loyalty to the reborn Dixie: it took an apocalypse to secede, but they eventually did it.

Dixie's Wasteland

If *Alas, Babylon* is a story of the resilience of the southern pastoral through the most dreaded event imaginable at the time, it is McCarthy, distinctly less restrained than Frank, who plunges the whole complex of the South's eco-ideological beliefs into serious crisis, with the most unsparing post-apocalyptic southern novel ever written, *The Road*.

Before analyzing the novel's construction of space and ideology, it is worth mentioning that, although a large majority of critics interpreted *The Road's* setting as a nuclear aftermath (see Edwards; Lincoln; Snyder), the novel is deliberately ambiguous about it.³ Still, there are some clear hints as to the possibility of an atomic bombardment, as in the following passage:

The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions. He got up and went to the window. What is it? she said. He didn't answer. He went into the bathroom and threw the lightswitch but the power was already gone. A dull rose glow in the windowglass. He dropped to one knee and rose the lever to stop the tub and then turned on both taps as far as they would go... What is it? she said. What is happening?

I don't know.

Why are you taking a bath?

I'm not. (McCarthy, *The Road* 52-53)

The lights, the glow and the concussions seem to suggest some kind of unexpected nuclear attack. At least one of the details, filling the tub, clearly derives from the kind of Cold War first-response procedures that were surely drummed into McCarthy's mind as a boy. As a demonstration of how that reaction was common knowledge in the 1950s, we can find a bathtub scene also in *Alas, Babylon*: "I'm going to fill up all the pails and sinks and tubs with water," says Helen, Randy's sister-in-law, "that's what you're supposed to do, you know" (Frank 95). Other elements from the excerpt above and from the novel at large are mysterious or not entirely coherent with a post-atomic scenario (the clocks stopping, the progressive death of all the biosphere except for human beings), leaving the interpretation of *The Road* as a clear post-atomic narrative in suspension.

McCarthy had already showed his preoccupation with nuclear power before: in the final paragraph of *The Crossing*, Billy Parham witnesses the Manhattan Project's Trinity test from afar. Again, the text is ambiguous about the event. The protagonist himself does not understand what he has seen, but the intuitive violence of the act makes him burst into tears. "There was no sun and there was no dawn and when he looked again toward the north the light was drawing away faster and that noon in which he'd woke was now become an alien dusk and now an alien dark [...] a cold wind was coming down off the mountains" (McCarthy, *The Crossing* 437). Through the young boy's bewilderment, McCarthy echoes James Agee's inability to properly articulate the kind of unsettling emotions evoked by the atomic bomb. It belongs to an "alien," almost unspeakable world, its wickedness the only comprehensible trait when compared with the "right and godmade sun" that rises shortly after the artificial one (437). There is maybe another occasion in which McCarthy makes an oblique reference to the A-Bomb. According to Wade Hall, Natalie Grant, and Christopher Walsh, the puzzling "government tank" in *The Orchard Keeper* is similarly connected to the Atomic Bomb and to the Manhattan Project in particular, since it would contain nuclear waste from the Oak Ridge nuclear laboratory.⁴ Even if there is no way to prove this interpretation, the way in which the tank is described, "a great silver ikon, fat and bald and sinister [...] clean and coldly gleaming and capable of infinite contempt" (McCarthy, *Orchard* 93) seems again to point in the direction of an almost metaphysical, barely contained evil. These surreptitious references stand as good examples of what Boyer defined as the "partially hidden" literary response to the bomb. Although the novels are only set in the 1940s, being published in 1993 and 1965 respectively, their reticence or inability to openly address the bomb mirrors the one that Boyer identifies in the literature of the time.

The Road similarly presents ambiguous connections with the bomb. John Cant considers that the interpretation of the novel as a post-nuclear work is "not unreasonable," but also that it is important to remember that we are presented with "another of McCarthy's allegorical worlds" (268-69), probably inspired by the kind of wasteland scenarios and fears that the author grew up with. The scared little boy, on whom McCarthy projects

his childhood anxieties, is a plausible evidence of the novel's conjuring up of a post-WWII end-of-the-world atmosphere. Author Michael Chabon has declared *The Road* as belonging to the large number of novels inspired by *Robinson Crusoe's* pattern of imposing "a bourgeois social order on an irrational empty wilderness after the bomb or virus strikes". However, although Chabon is right in classifying the novel's spatial dimension as an "irrational empty wilderness," there is no such thing as a *Crusoe* pattern in it, apart from the man-versus-nature narrative minimum – so superficial to be almost negligible. There is no drive towards the creation of a stable order in *The Road*. Even if one were to accept the potential presence of an ordering force for the sake of the argument, it could be in no way classified as bourgeois.

With a plethora of clear references to classic bomb imagery, like underground bunkers, ghostly metropolitan ruins, ashen landscapes, and charred human bodies, *The Road* seems to symbolically belong to the Cold War zeitgeist as much as *Alas, Babylon* does. But, unlike Frank's all-around chauvinist optimism, a demonstration that his novel is chiefly a "futurology" extending the myth of American exceptionalism through a post-atomic quasi-utopia, McCarthy's story is way bleaker, and, in its pessimism, realistic. The first and most important difference between the two is the post-atomic landscape itself. Frank has a damaged but revivable (redeemable, even) garden. It is symbolically relevant that Bragg's orchard is virtually untouched during the catastrophic event. McCarthy presents us with a *tabula rasa* that, far from embodying Lockean possibilities for improvement, is the worst Hobbesian state of nature imaginable, an accurate reproduction of Jaspers' conception of the nuclear post-apocalypse as "the killing of all life on the whole surface of the earth" (21). Upon such terrain, providing no symbolical basis for pastoral-political speculations nor fuel for jingoist-escapist narratives, and in such conditions, American republican-bourgeois society doesn't stand a chance of being brought back to life. McCarthy's vision is atavistic, brutal, uncivilized.

In her analysis of contemporary post-apocalyptic novels, Heather J. Hicks frames such narratives into a "taut" dialectic: "either survivors should move beyond salvaging mere scraps of modernity and rebuild dimensions of it in earnest or they should concede that modernity is beyond salvage and attempt to devise something that transcends its historical form"

(3). *The Road* doesn't take either path, but, like *Alas, Babylon*, chooses rather to reconnect with a pre-modern era, and even with an ahistorical mythical time. Or better: it tries to do so, but it ultimately fails because the apocalypse deprives the protagonists of a fundamental regenerative element in American mythology at large: nature.

From a mythical-symbolic standpoint, the journey of the man and the boy is clearly the recreation of a frontier-era epic, its direction recalibrated southward instead of westward. Even in the ruthless nuclear winter the image of the South as paradise seems to have its appeal, or at least it does for the father, a true-born southerner.⁵ But the couple's errand into the post-apocalyptic wilderness is marred from the beginning, because the abundance of the southern prelapsarian garden is fundamentally absent from the scene, being either a memory (for the father), or a tale (for the boy). The return back home, to the ideal wholeness of the southern pastoral realm, is impossible simply because home is not there anymore. In an early scene, the man goes back to the house where he grew up only to find it both empty and haunted by memories, while his son finds it unbearably scary (McCarthy, *The Road* 25-26). The place is a quite literal representation of the uncanny as Sigmund Freud defined it: something both strangely familiar and eerily not homely. Uncanniness characterizes every depiction of place in the novel thanks to the father's mediation: he is possessed by a strong desire to rejoin the archetypal home, but suffers a perpetual cognitive dissonance. His mind is chronically divided between the Arcady of memories, represented by his childhood, as it is often the case with the pastoral mode, and the "dark beyond darkness" (3) of the post-apocalyptic world. Projected onto the barren landscape, his psyche adds an additional unsettling touch to the already ghastly setting.

Joseph Masco adopts a very interesting take on the nuclear imagination and its connection with the uncanny, declaring that the nuclear age has witnessed an apotheosis of the latter. He defines the nuclear uncanny as a "perceptual space caught between apocalyptic expectation and sensory fulfillment, a psychic effect produced... by living within the temporal ellipsis separating a nuclear attack and the actual end of the world" (28) – precisely the time-space in which *The Road* moves. Masco also adds that the uncanny atmosphere of the nuclear age evokes fear because "it is an instant

when modernist psychic and cultural structures become momentarily undone or out of joint, thus revealing the dangerous vulnerability of the human sensorium to an uncertain and uncertainly haunted universe” (29). The modernist failure in making sense of an actual post-apocalyptic world is quite strong in McCarthy. *The Road*, unlike *Alas, Babylon*, doesn’t believe in the resurrection of modernity. The wasteland represents one of McCarthy’s “unifying themes” (Cant 6), and, more specifically, the novel’s wasteland is a clear and direct derivation of T.S. Eliot’s. But the dull world of *The Road* lacks the potential for meaning presented by the poem. In obedience to Masco’s observations on the nuclear uncanny space, modernist structures don’t hold here, and everything is simply “carried on the bleak and temporal winds to and fro in the void” (McCarthy, *The Road* 11). There is no salvific “Shantih shantih shantih” at the end of *The Road* (Eliot 433).

Conclusion

Comparing Eliot and McCarthy is also useful to understand the relationship that the novel establishes between nuclear apocalypse and ecological holocaust. As mentioned before, *The Road*’s biosphere is slowly withering away: there are no more wild animals of any kind in the grey forests that the protagonists cross to reach the southern shore, and, as the father informs us, “all the trees in the world are going to fall sooner or later” (McCarthy, *The Road* 35). The southern eco-pastoral realm is completely reversed into a gothic wilderness, a setting that, as highlighted by Megan Riley McGilchrist among others, is McCarthy’s preferred narrative space (120). The post-apocalyptic twist added to that traditional southern setting gives the usual feeling of danger and entrapment connected to gothic spaces a heightened feeling of doom. In this respect, *The Road* stands as a great example of eco-gothicism, an ecological representation in which nature (or what is left of it) “demonstrates a crisis of representation,” standing as a “semiotic problem” and a “space of crisis” (Smith and Hughes 2, 3). In *Alas, Babylon* the protagonist is still able to read his shattered environment to find in it a vision of an understandable order, the pastoral’s primary function in moments of rapid and often disastrous change. In a similar

way, Eliot is still able to extrapolate some kind of meaning from the ruins of the world by means of the fragments he collects and re-arranges into an understandable order. McCarthy doesn't give his protagonists this possibility – his wasteland is unredeemable.

It could be objected that the man and the boy, like Randy Bragg, are standing by a righteous moral code in a fallen world. After all, they are “carrying the fire” of civilization represented by the “old stories of courage and justice” (McCarthy, *The Road* 41) that the father tells his son. The man still has some connection with old values, with civilization as it was before the apocalypse, and he actually lives up to his ideals. He actively shapes his days on “the perfect day of his childhood” (13), a day that, unsurprisingly, is also a perfect pastoral (and hence democratic) picture. But, in spite of the protagonists self-identifying as the “good guys,” and although McCarthy ends his novel with at least a hint of hope for the young boy, it is impossible to forget that, apart from the vividness of its mythical dimension, the actual world is still lost. It is a “thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again” (287). Between the pastoral wish and its possible realization there is a sterile planet of ashes. *The Road's* last image is one of hopelessness and loss, and an enigma that, in its recollection of a time lost forever, mourns the total disconnection of man and environment after the catastrophe.

Whether or not McCarthy intended the novel to be (at least partially) a representation of an atomic aftermath, his depiction is strongly reminiscent of what Spencer R. Weart defined “the new blasphemy”. The progressive death of the biosphere depicted in *The Road* may be perplexing, but, back in the early 1950s when the author was a young man, nuclear power itself was still unfathomable for common people. As Weart demonstrates, pretty much every possible perversion of the laws of nature was ascribed to A-bombs, a general anxiety connected with humankind's archetypal fear of contamination. The fabled effects of the bombs, Weart writes, “strengthened the association between nuclear energy and uncanny pollution” (189). The tribal logic underlying this rhetoric implies that they who defy the order of things bring damage to the community and to nature itself: with a cannibalistic society roaming an endless deathscape, *The Road* could also be interpreted as the image of an ultimate biblical punishment brought about by the invention of the bomb.

One last comparison between McCarthy's and Frank's endings is useful in showing the novels' diametric involvement with post-atomic scenarios. Right before the survivors are reached by the rescue helicopter, Randy's niece Peyton performs a literal exhumation of the pre-apocalyptic era. Hidden behind a secret door in the attic, she finds some "old seventy-eights" that belonged to her grandfather (Frank 303). Randy is ecstatic as they play some classic jazz standards on an old phonograph: not only the old society is brought back to life, it is also given back its voice through the records. The songs (all sung by white performers) establish a vital, direct connection between the world before and the world after the bomb. It is almost as if the apocalypse had been nothing but a transitory annoyance. The irreversible detachment presented by McCarthy, on the other hand, is also highlighted by the failed communication between the past and the present. "Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains," he writes, "on their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes" (*The Road* 287). In lieu of the actual voices of the past breaking into the here-and-now, McCarthy translates the times of yore into a cipher. It is also interesting to notice that Frank, always the empiricist, entrusts a machine with the vestiges of the past, while McCarthy, whose metaphysical faith in the natural world is well-documented, relies once more on the biosphere. A decision that looks like a conscious act of sabotage towards the few survivors, because no living thing apart from humans survives the apocalypse. As a result, *The Road* negates the very possibility of transmitting and interpreting the past, and it does so by negating any kind of communication between humankind and the natural world.

The disconnection from the environment also carries with it a deeper symbolical disconnection that slowly pushes the older protagonist towards a total vacuum of significance. The forlorn condition of the father, maybe the last representative of the southern mind in the desolation of the post-apocalyptic world, has its roots in the fact that the very possibility of language is being erased together with the ecosphere:

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 name of things one believed to be true. More fragile

than he would have thought. How much of it was gone already? The sacred idioms shorn of its referents and so of its reality. (88-89)

The aim of writing in an ecological dimension is to inscribe man and nature into a common realm or semiotic space in which signification is possible and meaning can be generated and communicated. It is necessary to establish a common space between man and the environment in which language creates a stable, understandable, and meaningful connection between the two. As a symbolical equivalent of Adam's first task to name the world, this possibility can only exist in a pastoral-Edenic space, or in its various symbolical surrogates that the history of the European colonization projected onto the North American continent.

Read in this light, *The Road's* post-environmental space is the total negation of a meaningful, empowering connection with space, and thus it represents the impossibility of using its symbolic dimensions as a palimpsest to rebuild civilization, to react against the devouring nothingness brought about by the end of the world. The nuclear uncanny fundamentally represents a "disorientation of self and environment," and since "experiences of self and environment are culturally specific" (Masco 34), given the pivotal importance that the eco-mythical complex of the pastoral has in the South's identity, social, and political definition, McCarthy's wasteland stands as the ultimate (and probably the only) southern literary apocalypse.

To reiterate, *Alas, Babylon* and *The Road* stand as diametrically opposed responses to the bomb: Boyer would define the former as an optimistic "prescription" of how American society should react in the case of such an event, and the latter as an ominous prophecy. And pessimists, he writes, often make the best predictions (150). Frank, an example of the Cold War patriot, aspires to empowerment and reaffirmation. McCarthy, on the other hand, nihilistically describes the definitive eradication of the southern garden with all its cultural layers. If "All things of grace and beauty ... have a common provenance in [...] grief and ashes" (McCarthy, *The Road* 54), they will also have a common end in (radioactive) dust.

Notes

¹ There is no such thing as a single, monolithic southern mind, of course. Throughout the essay, “southern” is to be understood as “white genteel southern”, as the two novels examined focus exclusively on that tradition.

² The most well-known contemporary southern post-apocalyptic narrative is without any doubt Robert Kirkman, Tony Moore, and Charlie Adlard’s comic series *The Walking Dead*, but the actual importance of the southern milieu in its symbolical dynamics could be argued. Other works, exhibiting different degrees of recognizable southernness, are Sara Taylor’s *The Shore*, Omar El Akkad’s *American War*, and Frank Owen’s *South*. When it comes to post-atomic scenarios, the only existing titles that I have been able to locate are Frank; and McCarthy, *The Road*. The former is a post-apocalyptic novel set in the South: Frank was born in Chicago, but he spent large portions of his life in Florida. Because of that, *Alas, Babylon* shows a strikingly deep connection with some symbolical tenets of southern culture, making it an interesting case study. On the other hand, *The Road*’s southernness is quite clear, but its belonging to the post-atomic subgenre is ambiguous.

³ Among the various critics that interpreted *The Road* as a post-atomic narrative, there are Edwards; Lincoln; and Snyder. Cant adopts a perspective similar to the one I use in this essay, recognizing post-atomic symbols in the novel, but also accepting its intentional vagueness.

⁴ The essays I refer to are Grant; Hall; and Walsh.

⁵ There has been some debate about it, but *The Road* is firmly set in the south-east of the US. The hints are numerous, and they have been collected by Morgan.

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