

## **Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and a Post-Pastoral Theory of Fiction [1]**

**Terry Gifford**

Bath Spa University, UK, and University of Alicante, Spain

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### **The need for an ecocritical post-pastoral theory of fiction**

Fiction has thus far been poorly served by ecocriticism which has failed to develop a body of widely deployed ecocritical theory of fiction. Some ecocritics, including Lawrence Buell (2001) and Patrick Murphy (2000) in the US, together with Dominic Head (2002) and Richard Kerridge (2002) in the UK, have made some short-lived attempts, but compared to work on ecopoetics, fiction has been neglected through the historic early focus of ecocriticism on non-fiction prose and on poetry.

In his *Cambridge Introduction to British Fiction 1950-2000* (2002), Dominic Head says of my notion of 'post-pastoral' literature, which was originally developed in relation to poetry (1994), that 'its applicability to fiction remains to be tested' (2002: 194). Although my work on Rick Bass's *Fibre* (2001), Charles Frazier's *Cold Mountain* (2002), Brian Clarke's *The Stream*

(2008) and ecofeminist readings of D. H. Lawrence's Australian novels (2005 and 2013) implied a post-pastoral theoretical framework, these essays did not attempt a definition of a post-pastoral narrative. The challenge of Timothy Morton's *Ecology Without Nature* (2007), considered in relation to Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), described by the English environmental commentator George Monbiot as "the most important environmental book ever written" (*The Guardian*, 30 Oct 2007), provides an opportunity to attempt a definition of post-pastoral theory of fictional narrative.

To be clear, a claim is not being made for a theory that would include all forms of narrative. Fictional narratives obviously have a different symbolic order of relationship with a reader from, say, documentary journeys of mountaineering, or reflective nature writing that narrates the internal impact of experiential observations. Assumptions of authenticity, however selective the evidence, or rhetorically presented, or framed by a constructed context, are nevertheless normative expectations in these modes of narrative. The reader's assumption is that "this actually happened." This is different from potential attacks on fictions such as *The Road* that, say, the ending is "unconvincing," or in some way "does not ring true," because in fictional narratives this is a *symbolic* failure rather than one of *factual* authenticity.

George Guillemin argues that the symbolic nature of fiction functions as allegory in McCarthy's first novel of his Border Trilogy *All the Pretty Horses*

(1992). Guillemin traces an allegorical shift from “classic pastoralism” to what he calls “ecopastoral” – a shift from dominating horses and land, for example, to “having reduced the man-nature hierarchy to a zero level of shared materiality” (119). Guillemin sees himself as exemplifying the view shared by Leo Marx and Lawrence Buell of the ability of American pastoral to continually adapt to the changing needs of American literature as it engages with contemporary American culture’s changing conceptions of nature and environment (110-112). [2] When Barclay Owens argues that McCarthy’s second Border Trilogy novel *The Crossing* (1994) enacts a “primitive-pastoral” myth of an American Adam deluded by an unobtainable Edenic pastoral dream, he is describing an anti-pastoral narrative (66). Billy Parham’s failure to learn from his pastoral journeys of retreat condemns him ultimately to cry the tears of loss. At the end of the novel Billy witnesses the test explosion of an atomic bomb in the desert of the West. In an ecocritical essay on McCarthy’s Border Trilogy Jacqueline Scoones draws attention to the novelist’s “profound correlations between the ways in which humans construct their relationships with the natural world and the manner in which they construct their relationships to each other” (136-7). Scoones develops an argument that leads from McCarthy’s concern for the loss of species and civilizations in *All the Pretty Horses*, to a fear of the atomic bomb that carries over from *The Crossing* into the final novel of the trilogy, *Cities of the Plain* (1998). When Scoones writes that “the impact of the atomic bomb is suggested not only in human

terms but also in terms of nature,” she is perhaps identifying a need for a post-pastoral theory of fiction that goes beyond the closed circle of classic pastoral and anti-pastoral (139). But when Scoones writes that “McCarthy’s invocation of the silent, still, darkness of the world is a potent omen” (150), she is anticipating *The Road*.

### **The Global West**

It might appear that in *The Road* McCarthy has stepped away from his demythologising of “primitive-pastoral” myth in the historic American Southwest as father and son walk east and south in the denatured abstract landscape of the post-apocalyptic future. But this would be to misunderstand both the allegorical and physical roles of the West in his earlier fiction. It would also underestimate the dimensions of significance that the landscape and nature of the Southwest have played in the complex play of challenges and failures by which McCarthy has defined his values. Indeed, it was a presumption of absence that first drew McCarthy’s interest in the Southwest as a writer: “I ended up in the Southwest because I knew that nobody had ever written about it” (Jurgensen). The perception of a blank page on which the Rhode Island-born writer might create his own mythic narratives invites the ironic observation that *The Road* brings the writer’s career full circle. Aitor Ibarrola-Armendariz has pointed out that it could be argued that *The Road* “is a ‘reversed story’ of the conquest of the American West since, like the earlier pioneers, these two

characters face an inhospitable land and all kinds of cruel enemies” (2). Such a “reversal”, Ibarrola-Armendariz suggests, may well have arisen from a response to 9/11 and the war on terror by a writer who had a son in his seventies. But it does not follow that the writer’s anxiety about the global tensions between America and what President Bush, in cowboy parody mode, called “the axis of evil” leads him to initiate his narrative with a nuclear war, as Ibarrola-Armendariz believes.

It may be that nature itself is the cause of the apocalypse of *The Road* and that it originated in the West. McCarthy is a longstanding fellow of the Sante Fe Institute, a theoretical science foundation, and in an interview with the *Wall Street Journal* in 2009, McCarthy responded to a question about the cause of the disaster that stopped all the clocks by saying that was “open” about it himself:

At the Santa Fe Institute I'm with scientists of all disciplines, and some of them in geology said it looked like a meteor to them. But it could be anything—volcanic activity or it could be nuclear war. It is not really important. The whole thing now is, what do you do? The last time the caldera in Yellowstone blew, the entire North American continent was under about a foot of ash. People who've gone diving in Yellowstone Lake say that there is a bulge in the floor that is now about 100 feet high and the whole thing is just sort of pulsing. From different people you get

different answers, but it could go in another three to four thousand years or it could go on Thursday. No one knows. (Jurgensen)

McCarthy's drawing attention to the West's potential for a natural disaster that would provide global survival challenges is interesting in a Western writer who is responding to global anxieties through a survival narrative. For McCarthy, of course, the West has always had global significance. The moral tensions and challenges in his narratives of the American Southwest have always had a deep significance beyond locality. Embedded in the materiality of locality, McCarthy's allegorical mode and biblically inflected language have always transcended the landscape against which values are tested in his narratives. There is thus more deep continuity with his earlier work than the absence of detailed descriptions of Western landscapes and nature might suggest. Indeed, what appears to be a discontinuity with his previously detailed descriptions of nature, is, in fact, the very point of *The Road* – a point made with the continuity of moral provocation that has characterised his earlier fiction. Narratives that concluded in loss reflexively challenged the reader to consider what is of value. The loss of nature, Southwestern or otherwise, and its resultant testing questions about human nature, is, I shall argue, the ultimate challenge to the reader, right up to the novel's final paragraph.

### ***Ecology Without Nature***

“They set out through the dark woods. There was a moon somewhere beyond the ashen overcast and they could just make out the trees. They staggered on like drunks. If they find us they’ll kill us, wont they Papa.” (97)

*The Road* is a novel “without Nature” in the sense that is used by Timothy Morton in his book *Ecology Without Nature* (2007). These woods are without the aesthetic of Nature; they are a denatured environment in a narrative driven by a focus upon the survival of the human protagonists. The only significance of the moon in this passage is as a function of survival: “they could just make out the trees.” The prior narrative of the events that led to this denaturing in the novel is only hinted at by its consequences: “the ashen overcast” provides the existential conditions in which a father and son seek to survive. Following the road south is the vague quest that the father believes will provide their best chance of survival following some apocalyptic environmental catastrophe years before: “The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions” (45). A large part of the shock of this novel is the reader’s growing realisation of what is absent from the narrative. First the aesthetic of Nature and second any firm evidence of causality. But in several respects what the novel does represent reveals elements essential to fictional narrative that Morton overlooks.

In a sense, it is only in the current social conditions, which foreground environmental concerns, that McCarthy can assume the reader will not only notice the absence of Nature, but will be shocked by its absence. In his earlier novels responses to land and to animals have been a powerful element of narration and of character identity. Indeed, non-human place has largely functioned to define the human in the deeply moral dimension of McCarthy's previous novels. Character is tested against the nature of land and judged in relation to degrees of adjustment to it. [3] So here is the first post-pastoral feature of the *The Road*: that McCarthy can assume a knowingness in readers to the degree that what is absent is actually imaginatively present and that this dissonance can produce shock in the reader. Lack of information produces concern in the reader. Against the drive of the survival narrative, the reader quite reasonably seeks clues for causality. It is interesting that critics such as James Wood want to believe that this is a novel about climate change (*Guardian*, 5 July 2008). Since the clocks all stopped at 1:17, this seems unlikely. A single event has taken place associated with a long blinding flash of light and subsequent distant explosions. It seems likely that we are being encouraged to think of this as having a human cause, despite the author's stated "openness" on the issue referred to above. Kenneth Lincoln is representative of the majority of critics in assuming that the novel is set in a post-war nuclear winter (172). It is tempting to think that it is against a self-destructive sense of the death of

nature, poignantly endorsed by the suicide of the wife and mother of the protagonists (49), that this survival narrative takes its starting point. But a denatured aesthetic confronts other priorities in survival mode. The ultimate effect of this narrative strategy is, of course, to prove the need for that which is absent. But the need for a return to the Nature aesthetic is not what Morton has in mind when he desires its redundancy.

Of course, the aesthetic of Nature that Morton has in mind is actually the pastoral. He writes, “The ‘thing’ we call nature becomes, in the Romantic period and afterward, a way of healing what modern society has damaged” (22). It is the idealised that is no longer ideal, but compromised and polluted by human intervention in the making of modern society. Morton admits, “Appealing to nature still has some rhetorical effect. In the short term, relatively speaking, nature still has some force. But environmentalism cannot be in the game just for the short term. And that nature remains an effective slogan is a symptom of how far we have *not* come, not of how far we have” (24). Morton calls for an ecology without the concept of Nature. To be clear, he is not calling for a “post-nature,” just as he is not calling for a “post-pastoral”; he is proposing a way of perceiving the world in which the concept of Nature is redundant – an ecology that is a-nature, as it is a-pastoral. My argument here will be that this is neither possible nor desirable. Indeed, what *The Road* demonstrates is that a post-pastoral theory of fiction is not only needed to account for certain narratives that engage with our current environmental anxieties, but that a post-pastoral narrative is being enacted by the storytellers who respond to the deepest anxieties of our age. Specifically *The Road* deploys a narrative form that asks questions about fundamental survival in an apocalyptic context – a form exemplified earlier by British novelist Maggie Gee’s *The Ice People* (1998) and later by Canadian Margaret Atwood’s *The Year of the Flood* (2009).

Any theory that might be offered for post-pastoral fiction would need to draw upon the theoretical assumptions of a combination of at least three elements. First would be Stanley Fish's notion of "interpretive communities," now foregrounding environmental concerns. The community of contemporary readers of *The Road* share an awareness of environmental crisis, a strong sense of the possible death of nature and an appreciation of the importance to ask, not so much how we got here, but what are going to be the keys to the survival of our species. Will our humanity survive under what might be the final pressure? Interpretive communities share the same questions that enable a novelist to focus with certain assumptions as to the key uncertainties concerning readers. Second, because of this, a Derridian notion of the presence of nature even in its absence from the text is made possible. It is the horror of absence that underpins the anticipated grief which drives the conservation movement. That this can become an indulgence in inactive fatalistic nostalgia has led to the debate about the image of the brooktrout at the end of *The Road*: is this narrative functioning as a warning, or a prediction – a call to action, or a fatalistic complacency? Third, it follows that any theory of post-pastoral fiction would require an ecofeminist/postcolonial/environmental justice notion of debating what "responsibility" would mean in relation to both people and planet. Is the reader being asked what the moral implications of this narrative might be for behaviour towards powerless people and aspects of nature, as much as for powerful people and aspects of nature? A post-pastoral theory of fiction ought to engage with the

question: what issues of environmental justice are implicitly raised by *The Road*?

### **What are the features of post-pastoral fictional narratives?**

Such post-pastoral novels would include Rick Bass's *Fiber*, Brian Clarke's *The Stream* and Charles Frazier's *Cold Mountain*, as I have argued elsewhere (Gifford 2001, 2008, and 2002 respectively). But, as well as other obvious examples, such as Julia Leigh's *The Hunter* and Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer*, some novels which might be expected to fall into this category, such as Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, might be used to define post-pastoral fiction by exclusion. Richard Kerridge has pointed out that, although Ghosh's novel is about tiger conservation as its subject, the writer seems to be unaware of the threat to the Indian delta habitat of both tigers and humans from the consequences of global warming (2014). In this case an awareness of environmental crisis is not only absent from the text, but apparently also for the writer of the text who does not assume its presence in the concerns of his readers. So the first feature of a theory of post-pastoral fiction would be the writer's assumption and manipulation of the reader's sense of a global environmental crisis, even by its absence as a subject of the text, as in the case of *The Road*. [4]

Second, is the shock of discovering that if we can abandon an idealised aesthetic of nature we cannot live without one altogether. So what would be its necessary features? Consider the effect upon the reader of the father in the narrative hearing the last birds passing overhead, “their half-muted crankings miles above where they circled the earth as senselessly as insects trooping the rim of a bowl” (45). A world without birds, evoked here by their last human sighting and hearing, calls forth a need for a world *with* birds, for two reasons. The first is a necessary fundamental awe at the presence of another species – that is a primitive need for an aesthetic of nature, as resistant to idealisation as we can make it. Some people are uncomfortable with the word “awe,” believing that it must inevitably lead to idealisation, or that it is associated with New Age spirituality. The sense of wonder that drives field biologists led Edward O. Wilson from his study of the world of ants to propose his theory of “biophilia” – the human need to not only wonder at organic life forms, but to be close to them, to “bond” with them in Wilson’s terms (1984). As a dog-owner, Donna Harraway (2007) is still theorising what such a need for bonding means for the “human” and the “animal.” I am not suggesting that awe is what is being evoked by this passage about the last birds, but that their absence reminds readers of their fundamental “biophilia.” The humility implicit in “awe” can lead to the need to know more scientifically, but it can also lead to the need to know more about what “bonding” means through representation. Again, *pace* Morton, an aesthetics of nature is inescapable.

The second reason why we need a world with birds may be linked to the first by a kind of survivalist psychology: our living with birds, whether with awe or with a less heightened sense of their presence, reinforces our sense of the necessity for images of biological thriving. If other species are not thriving, we know instinctively that our own species will not long be thriving too. Listen to this description of an ecology and its chill logic for the human observer in this passage early in *The Road*:

He lay listening to the water drip in the woods. Bedrock, this. The cold and the silence. The ashes of the late world carried on the black and temporal winds to and fro in the void. Carried forth and scattered and carried forth. Everything uncoupled from its shoring. Unsupported in the ashen air. Sustained by a breath, trembling and brief. If only my heart were stone. (9-10)

If individual organic things in nature are “uncoupled” and “unsupported,” we are reminded that it is precisely the integrated mutual support systems in nature that call forth an aesthetics of awe. They may be “coupled” in conflict for territory or “supported” by parasitic species, for example, but eliciting our awe nevertheless. Thus simple awe may be linked to our survivalist instincts and an

aesthetic of nature is our evolved monitoring system of the state of the ecology upon which we depend. Precisely because the human heart is not stone this image of a world “uncoupled from its shoring” produces an anguished alarm for the reader as well as the father speaking his thoughts in this passage. An aesthetic alarm may well signal an ecological alarm as well. So the second feature of a theory of post-pastoral fiction would be the necessity for an aesthetic of nature that is founded on unidealised awe.

The third feature follows from the second. It adds a moral imperative of responsibility to that quality of unidealised awe. In *The Road* it is too late for an environmental responsibility. For the father, “the perfect day of his childhood” was rowing on a lake with his uncle to tow home a tree stump for firewood in a fall of yellow birch leaves that, together with the dead perch floating belly up, anticipates the “ashen” world through which he is to journey with his son. In this novel moral responsibility has shrunk to the “bedrock” – that of a father for his son. McCarthy’s biblical language, with its archaic formulations, renders this narrative as an allegory for the reader. It is an allegory of biological responsibility, an ancient narrative form used to ask fundamental questions for our times through a discourse charged with moral weight. The moral tone of the novel is carried, as elsewhere in McCarthy’s work, by his carefully chosen vocabulary. When the father rises in the blackness of the night, “his arms outheld for balance, [...] the vestibular calculations of his skull cranked out

their reckonings,” the following two short sentences carry the weight of allegory lent them by the discourse of “outheld,” “vestibular,” and “reckonings”: “An old chronicle. To seek out the upright” (13). In “a creation perfectly evolved to meet its own end” (50), there remains, nevertheless, what the father thinks of as “a warrant” to care for his son, itself an archaic concept that suggests a long-reaching biological imperative for the preservation of the human species.

There is a danger of this sounding sentimental, which would misrepresent the tone of the narrative. The clipped conversation between father and son under the pressure of survival allows for no indulgence in sentiment and the distance McCarthy characteristically keeps from his characters contributes to the allegorical charge of the narrative. Barclay Owens calls this kind of minimalism “a close-to-the-bone cinematic clarity” in his argument for the mythic quality of McCarthy’s Western novels (64). There are no authorial descriptions of emotions, just actions and minimal speech in a context of existential contingency. At the narrative’s most extreme moment of emotional intensity, when the boy goes back into the woods to “say goodbye” to his father’s body, it is the three “ands” that carry the intensity and flow of grief: “He was wrapped in a blanket as the man had promised and the boy didn’t uncover him but sat beside him and he was crying and he couldn’t stop” (240).

Embedded within the moral responsibility of McCarthy’s narrative is a complex notion that comes close to the idea that is now called “environmental

justice.” Caring for the Other must include both humans and the more-than-human if it is to be effective in the long-term because both are inextricably interdependent. (In using the term “more-than-human” one is, in part, seeking to avoid the idealised term “nature” in the manner Morton commends.) A spirit of not caring for the more-than-human has turned the world to ash, without birds or brooktrout, that has in turn led to the novel’s focus on this desperate reductive interdependency between father and son to the exclusion of all other possible concerns. Again, the point is made by its negative: absence, denial, negation, can provide shocking endorsements of that which is absent or denied for the reader of the narrative. When the boy wishes to care for Others on the road, his father has to teach him that their own survival now depends upon suspending the caring impulse that has given him his more-than-animal moral responsibility. As other humans are eating each other all around them, we know that this father and son cannot survive themselves if they retain a former morality of caring for Others. And yet the narrative ends with just such an act of caring as the boy is taken in, following his father’s death, by a group who supposedly have retained this quality. It is not being suggested that in the novel paternal care is extended to all life forms, except perhaps through the implicit challenge of the novel’s final paragraph, but that caring for the Other is a prior requirement, as it were, in a novel that explores the minimal and fundamental nature of humanity in survival conditions. The necessary restraint of the boy’s

concern for others is another example of the point being asserted by its denial in this narrative.

Ecofeminism first exposed the evolutionary need for a morality that would suggest that exploitation of the more-than-human is equally self-destructive as the exploitation of human groups. That is, the exploitation of water resources can equate to the exploitation of women, the one not only emanating from the same mind-set as the other, but the one ultimately leading to the other. Sandilands (1999) indicates the complexity and range of the evolution of branches of ecofeminism itself. Postcolonial ecocriticism has latterly reminded us that it was non-western ecofeminists who laid the foundation for this perception from colonial contexts of survival experiences (Huggan and Tiffin 14). But the reverse is also true. A caring for the environment makes no sense without an equal caring for the human species - that is, for the author of this narrative, for boy, birds and brooktrout. This might be identified as the fourth premise of a post-pastoral theory of fiction. For the fifth we need to return to the moral dimension of interdependency.

Narrative forms chart relationships in dimensions that are as much spatial as they are temporal. It is perhaps because narrative has been thought of as more temporal than spatial that ecocriticism has tended to neglect fiction (see Friedman 2005). In a narrative of contingency, such as a road novel, the spatial is foregrounded. Foraging and avoiding dangers on the road demand an alert

reading of spatial challenges by the protagonists. A waterfall is “a good place” as the boy says and his spirit is lifted by both awe and direct experience of its water. But it is also “an attraction,” unsafe, as his father points out, because others approaching cannot be heard, “and we don’t know who they will be” (32-6). Reading place, like reading their ethical choices on the road, is an evolving skill in which father and son look out for each other. It might appear that all has been reduced to a narrow focus on self-preservation – indeed, on a necessary selfishness - but McCarthy’s narrative is at pains to draw attention again and again to the mutual responsibility for each other within this reduced organic pairing. “I have to watch you all the time, the boy said” (29). The dialogue continually demonstrates the mutual caring of father and son for their joint survival. (In his Oprah Winfrey interview McCarthy said that his young son “practically co-wrote” the book (Lincoln 164)). Again, the suggestion is that fundamental humanity, reduced as it is to its core features by this denatured environment, has at its centre a mutual responsibility that is symbiotic. Even, or perhaps especially, in the darkest of times, as Brecht, Solzhenitsyn and others have also revealed, human nature is like more-than-human nature in the complexity of its ecological make-up. In the imaginative narratives of survival by Brecht and Solzhenitsyn, two great survivors themselves, counter-intuitive small acts of generosity or simple kindness directed at others provide a dignity and self-respect that enhances the chances of survival for the giver with almost nothing to give. Surely, this is what is demonstrated by the group who take in

the boy at the end of the novel. So the fifth feature of a post-pastoral narrative theory would reflect a dynamic of mutual responsibility that is symbiotic. In the case of a human and more-than-human interaction one would call this a dialogic relationship in the sense used by Patrick Murphy (1995). Fashions in ecocriticism, as in other branches of theory, move on quickly and useful concepts can get left behind. Nothing has bettered Murphy's distinction, adapting Bakhtin's dialogics, between caring for the Other and, going to the next stage, being in dialogue with Another (41). The qualities of mutual questioning and listening that characterise McCarthy's dialogue between father and son, might represent what Murphy has in mind when he conceives of being Another for each other. Of course, Murphy extends this notion to both human/nature relations and to the classroom. But there is a sense in which this is what McCarthy is also calling for in the human/nature relationship through the challenge of his final paragraph.

One might say that it is this matrix of five qualities that McCarthy allegorises as "the fire" when he has the boy and his father develop a dialogue that concludes "nothing bad is going to happen to us [...] because we're carrying the fire" (70). On the other hand such a complacent idealisation invites scepticism in the face of all the evidence in the narrative. Indeed, it might seem that what I have been outlining as a post-pastoral theory of fiction has reinvented nature as ecology, with the distance between human and more-than-

human nature collapsed. If this is so, I may have achieved precisely what Morton advocates:

The only firm ethical option in the current catastrophe is admitting to the ecologically catastrophic in all its meaningless contingency, accepting responsibility groundlessly, whether or not “we ourselves” can be proved to have been responsible. But this too is more a leap of doubt than a leap of faith. Can we be environmentalists, and environmental writers, without a haemorrhage of irony, sense of humour, and sensitivity to the illusory play of language? As long as there is environmental passion, there also lives more faith in honest doubt about the environment, and environmental arts and aesthetics, then in the outworn creeds of nature [...] Ironically, to contemplate deep green ideas deeply is to let go of the idea of Nature, the one thing that maintains an aesthetic distance between us and them, us and it, us and “over there” (*Ecology* 204).

### **Nostalgia or neglect?**

The final paragraph of *The Road* enacts a letting go of Nature and of distance, accepting responsibility for the ecological catastrophe in all its mysterious meaningless contingency. But it lets go, it seems to me, in order for

the reader to contemplate the possibility of reinventing a relationship with nature differently this time around. For the reader there may still be time left for such a reconfiguration leading to a different narrative from the one McCarthy has given us.

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 (241).

Now this passage raises questions which go to heart not only of McCarthy's purpose in this novel, but to the issue of what responsibility means in a post-pastoral theory of fiction. First, is this a nostalgic return to a pastoral vision of nature before the apocalyptic Fall when the clocks stopped? Or is it a warning to readers, for whom this vision is still available now, to act to prevent the Fall? Or is it an anti-Darwinian, Creationist vision of an original moral

dimension from which we have already fallen? The poetry of “fins wimpled softly in the flow” suggests a surprising evocation of the pastoral at the end of a bleak narrative that has nevertheless held out, in the father and son relationship, the most strained possibility of a redemptive conclusion. At the moment of the father’s death his caring qualities are apparently transferred to the group who take care of the son. (That they have a little boy and a little girl might suggest some sense of possible continuity at the narrative’s end.) In classical pastoral texts the lessons learned by raw contact with nature are taken back into the polis, the court, the urban readership. But whilst an element of doubt remains about the character of the group who take in the son, this final paragraph cannot carry the weight of such an optimistic pastoral return. The brook trout are dead and their ecological conditions cannot be remade. It is too late to regret neglect of that former world. This is, indeed, a quintessential post-pastoral text.

There has been a persistent religious quality to the novels of Cormac McCarthy in which the biblical language has served to endorse a moral code as ancient and eternal, indeed, perhaps “older than man and humming with mystery.” This is a world in which a natural order, once broken, is “Not [to] be made right again.” If the “becoming” of the world is already mapped in the patterns of the brook trout’s back to produce the “mazes” of mystery celebrated by an aesthetic of nature, this does sound like a Creationist determinism in which the apocalypse is already inscribed. In this reading the novel’s ending

would suggest that any environmentalist ameliorating action is simply too late. The novel would be evoking the last moments of caring kinship in the face of inevitable human self-destruction. It is not just civilization, but the ancient natural order that “cannot be put back” once a tipping point has been passed by human neglect and abuse of nature.

But this is not a nostalgic backward look, like the memory of the last birds earlier in the narrative. Its placing at this point in the narrative structure gives this passage the function of a more nuanced link with “the world and its becoming.” As the narrative’s final paragraph it offers a more challenging moment of reflection on “all things older than man” so that this bleakest of novels about the last of our species actually ends with an invitation for readers to consider with awe the humming with mystery of that which, for the reader, is not yet lost, not yet “uncoupled from its shoring.” Because 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. [5] For the reader, the brook trout are still there, whether “wimpling” healthily, or ailing in polluted water. For the reader, caring kinship is still presumably valued and its reduction to the barest survival in the conditions of this novel is surely a horror to be avoided by action whilst there is still presumably time. In this reading, *The Road* is not a fatalistic narrative, although it must share the danger of being seen in this way with other

apocalyptic novels. [6] It is at this point that the issue of what is responsibly “right” action in response to the novel arises.

A narrative theory that calls for “responsibility” on behalf of writers and readers in the face of our environmental crisis cannot but invite the reader to take a position in the ongoing debate about praxis. So it is interesting to see that *The Road* has been cited in this debate in the UK by both sides of a correspondence conducted through *The Guardian* newspaper (18 Aug 2009). Having previously described *The Road* as “the most important environmental book ever written” (*The Guardian*, 30 Oct 2007), George Monbiot argues that environmental protest and alternative energy sources are our only current options. Paul Kingsnorth argues that avoiding what he calls a “McCarthy world” can only be achieved at this late stage by “a managed retreat to a saner world” through what Kingsnorth, referring to a term of John Michael Greer’s, the “long descent,” describes as “a series of ongoing crises that will bring an end to the all-consuming culture we have imposed upon the Earth.” This debate reflects the division between those who see *The Road* as one of deep despair or one of remnant hope. I have been arguing that it is the narrative’s post-pastoral qualities that have provoked readers into debating its meaning for our times.

## **Summary**

### **Features of a Post-Pastoral Theory of Fiction**

1. The writer's assumption and manipulation of the reader's sense of a global environmental crisis, even in its absence.
2. The necessity for an aesthetic of nature that is founded in unidealised awe.
3. Adds a moral imperative of responsibility to that quality of unidealised awe.
4. An assumption that caring for the Other must include both humans and the more-than-human if it is to be effective in the long-term.
5. Recognises a dynamic of mutual responsibility, or a dialogic relationship with Another, that is symbiotic.

## Notes

1. An earlier version of this essay was presented at the 3<sup>rd</sup> biennial conference of the European Association for the Study of Literature, Culture and Environment University of Alcalá, Spain, October 2008. It has benefitted from subsequent conversations with Greg Garrard, Richard Kerridge and

Astrid Bracke.

2. See Marx 222 and Buell 1995: 51.
3. Jacqueline Scoones writes of Billy Parham's tracking ability in *The Crossing*, "his success depends upon his sensitivity to the environment, his physical proximity and mental attentiveness to his surroundings" (149).
4. Of course, an awareness of our global environmental crisis can only refer to contemporary fiction. Since the "post" of post-pastoral means not "after" but "beyond," that is, not temporal but conceptual, about earlier fiction one would need to observe an anxiety about the treatment or representation of environment in general for it be post-pastoral. For example, D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928) might be characterised as post-pastoral for its critique of the negative effects of industrialism on both landscapes and the lives lived in them; for its aesthetic of nature as essence and as metaphor; and for its attempt to imaginatively forge a new kind of human relationship embedded in and sensitive to the processes of nature.
5. Jacqueline Scoones points out that the Dedication for *Cities of the Plain*, unusually placed on the final page and ending "The story's told/ Turn the page," "put[s] each reader in an unsited place of multiple, fluid relations: to this book and its author, to other readers and their stories, and to the world in which all dwell" (134).
6. See Garrard 85-107.

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