

## ABSTRACT

SMITH, CHRISTINA JEAN. What Disappears and What Remains: Representations of Social Fluidity in the Post-Apocalypse. (Under the direction of Jon Thompson.)

Humanity has long been enamored by the notion of our own demise. Recent events, however have altered our end-of-the-world imaginings. Suddenly we have the ability to split an atom and destroy whole cities, whole countries - making us gods capable of bringing about our own end. With this knowledge, a new breed of apocalyptic tale has emerged, the post-apocalyptic novel. This study aims to look at three such works and examine the ways in which various authors have, in the past sixty years, envisioned humanity's fate after the end of the world - focusing specifically on the concepts of social fluidity and change as they play out in these landscapes that are both sterile and living at the same time. Chapter one of this thesis deals with Walter Miller's A Canticle for Leibowitz and examines the deterministic techno-primitive social cycle that Miller, a mere decade removed from the dropping of the A-bomb, saw playing out in a post-apocalyptic world. Chapter two looks at Cormac McCarthy's The Road and shows the "society of two", a father and son, who manage to maintain notions of family and society by carefully incorporating fragments of the old, rotting society into their schema of feral domesticity. Chapter three examines a short story, "Speech Sounds" by Octavia Butler, and discusses the paradoxically moving but stunted social landscape of Butler's silent, post-apocalyptic realm.

What Disappears and What Remains: Representations  
of Social Fluidity in the Post-Apocalypse

by  
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## **Dedication**

To my mom and sister who keep me rooted in the red-country clay.

To my many talented and creative friends  
who inspire me with their art, music and words.

To my professors who have so much enviable information in their heads.

Thank you.

## Biography

Christina Jean Smith was born somewhere near the NC/VA border of mysterious origins. Four months later, a nice couple took her in and loved her and bought her Wonderwoman Under-Roos, which she wore with red boots and a cape. She grew up in Nash Co., NC and attended Campbell University where her brain fed and grew on the wonderful books and conversations that were offered there. She moved to Raleigh, NC in 2001 to attend graduate school at NCSU. She took the circuitous route - but discovered many beautiful, new things along the way, like: electric guitars, France and licorice tea.

She is slightly obsessed with the interstitial spaces of her city. The unused portions, the back alleyways littered with beer cans, beds of flattened cardboard and the bones of some half-decayed possum. She sometimes seeks out these spaces and memorizes their contours - so grave, so very *apocalyptic*. So telling of something she can't quite articulate. They remind her, she thinks, that life is still beautifully unpredictable and wild - even in the most seemingly ordered of places.

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## Introduction

Accounts of the Apocalypse stretch far back into literary history and were, in their earliest forms, stories of Divine retribution being visited on a world filled with sin and ungodliness - the most obvious of these being the Apocalypse of John. And, while scholars and critics point out the influences of Apocalypticism or Millenarianism on many of the great literary works of the last several hundred years<sup>1</sup>, Richard Emmerson - in his meta-critique of scholarly Apocalypticism - warns that scholars of Apocalypticism must:

define as carefully as possible the historical sense of apocalypticism and then distinguish between it and simple allusions to the Book of Revelation and Christian eschatology, pessimistic proclamations of catastrophe, and dreams of a utopian future (430)

Emmerson called for this narrowing of "the historical sense of Apocalypticism", in 1985, in response to what he saw as a new tendency to "define the notion of apocalypticism so broadly that its influence appears to be at work everywhere"(430). However, the categories which Emmerson described and then decried as justifiable products of Apocalypticism or Millenarianism (proclamations of catastrophe, dreams of a utopian future) left an interesting gap in the literary dialogue. If modern tales of catastrophic ruin and utopian visions<sup>2</sup> were *not* Apocalyptic (in the traditional sense of the term), what were they? Emmerson did not attempt to address this gap, sticking closely to a meta-critique of apocalyptic criticism as it relates to Medieval, Renaissance and Victorian works of literature.

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<sup>1</sup> In *The Apocalypse in English Renaissance Thought and Literature: Patterns, Antecedents and Repercussions*, Partrides and Wittreich compile essays by several scholars which point to Apocalypticism in the works of Dante (*The Inferno*), Milton (*Paradise Lost*), Shakespeare (*King Lear*), Spencer (*The Faerie Queene*) and George Eliot (*Romola*).

<sup>2</sup> Though Emmerson does not explicitly cite or name any of the end-of-the-world works of literature or film that were cropping up at the time of or preceding his article's publication in 1985 (Philip K. Dick's "Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?" and the 1982 film, *Bladrunner*, based on this story; *Mad Max* which was released in 1979) - the reader certainly imagines that science-fiction literature and film of this ilk were being referred to as "Apocalyptic" in their scope. A categorization which Emmerson's argument would have opposed.

Ten years later, however - this gap between religious Apocalypticism and modern visions of "catastrophe or utopia" was getting more pointed attention by critics. Thus, in the introduction to his 1999 book, After the End, in which he considers a myriad of contemporary doomsday books and films<sup>3</sup>, James Berger is careful to draw the distinction between works of religious Apocalypticism and the texts and films he will discuss:

I will not be writing about...millennialist phenomena...(but) I will show how (modern) apocalyptic thinking is almost always, at the same time, *post-apocalyptic*. My focus will be on what I consider a pervasive post-apocalyptic sensibility in recent American culture....visions of the End...have increasingly given way to visions of after the end, and the apocalyptic sensibilities both of religion and modernism have shifted toward a sense of post-apocalypse (XIII, emphasis mine).

Berger's need to define the post-apocalyptic works he discusses in this way, by first defining them as being *not* Apocalyptic in the religious or Millenarian sense of the term, seems to point to a genre that was, and perhaps is, still emerging: the modern Post-Apocalyptic text.

What are these new visions of the end that do not involve fire and brimstone from heaven but, instead, see nuclear bombs, radiation fallout, asteroids, bioagents, waves of water or even aliens destroying modern society and throwing humanity into a chaotic utopia? What are their defining traits? What societal purpose do they serve?

Once tales of a man-made doomsday began to crop up in the early 1950s - precipitated largely by the dropping of the Atom bomb - it became clear that this new breed of Apocalyptic fiction and film was not "Apocalyptic" in the traditional, religious sense of the word. Thus the parameters of a new literary category - post-apocalyptic fiction - began to emerge. And much of the criticism and discussion about post-apocalyptic literature and film

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<sup>3</sup> Berger's discussion touches on the films *Terminator*, *Die Hard*, *Rambo*, *Mad Max*, *A Boy and His Dog*, *Twelve Monkeys* and *Independence Day* as well as on older, literary works like A Canticle for Leibowitz.

in the fifty or so years since it emerged has been concerned with *defining* it, rather broadly, as a genre (its themes and tropes) with more refined, ideological studies only emerging in the past ten to fifteen years.

Thus when Walker Percy reviewed Miller's A Canticle for Leibowitz in 1971, he observed that the narrative hints at a "secret longing in the reader either for the greening of America, vines sprouting on 42nd Street, or for the falling into desert ruins of such cities as Phoenix. Phoenix should revert to the lizards" (575). Percy never defines Canticle as being post-apocalyptic; he refers to it only as "science-fiction" or an "end-of-the-world novel". But in his observations about the American agrarian or neo-Luddite fantasies that Miller highlights in his text, Percy begins to define one of the driving forces of the Post-Apocalyptic novel which many critics will examine in the years to follow - the desire to see some transformation of American society and its landscapes through an imagined, collective end.

More various interpretations followed Percy's. Gary Wolfe, in his 1979 study of science fiction - The Known and Unknown: The Iconography of Science Fiction, sees the emerging post-apocalyptic narrative as pointing to the inevitable triumph of technology in human civilization: "Most of these novels, explicitly or implicitly, tend to validate technology by creating new environments of the unknown that force man to battle against nature", he posited (147). Much later, in 1994, Edward James sees post-apocalyptic fiction as reinstating the Wild West (an old frontier) or depicting a disintegration of society and a return to a simpler time. While Thomas Disch, in 1998, in The Dreams our Stuff is Made Of interprets post-apocalyptic fiction as serving to relieve nuclear anxieties through thought experiments (by allowing readers to imagine the doomsday scenario but then also see life on



the other side of such a scenario) and through humor (such as in the film *Dr. Strangelove*). These narratives, he puts forth, "(quiet) nuclear dread by turning it into the tropes of a new gothicism" (90).

And Berger, in 1999 (three decades after Walker Percy first began to define the parameters of post-apocalyptic fiction), was still ruminating over that same sense of "pleasurable catastrophe" that Percy attempted to define - though his descriptions reflect the more gruesome, filmic "pleasurable Apocalypses" of the last twenty years:

Why (does) nearly every popular film have to contain some mini-apocalypse?...I was disgusted, yet, at the same time, I felt the appeal. I loved seeing civilization, as we know it burst open in flaming centrifugal ecstasy. And I loved seeing those stories of aftermaths...in which every gesture seemed pure, somber, and meaningful when performed in a garish wasteland (XIII).

Berger goes on to posit that these oddly satisfying representations of societal destruction serve to work through the collective, historical traumas that America has endured (i.e. the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, etc.).

Apocalyptic writing itself is a remainder, a symptom, an aftermath of some disorienting catastrophe....the initial disaster which distorts and disorients (ie. the Holocaust, the A-bomb)...requires imagining a second disaster that *is* an apocalypse and thereby gives the first disaster retrospective apocalyptic status," he explains (133).

Thus Berger sees the purpose of post-apocalyptic writing as defining our own human tragedies (the wars and genocides that play out around us) as being apocalyptic. We need the imagined post-apocalyptic terrains, he says, to understand and make sense of our own charred, modern landscape and to see this landscape for what it really is - a world that has, perhaps, already suffered the Apocalypse, already arrived there, one that *is* post-apocalyptic.

Matthew Wolf-Meyer takes a similarly socio-psychological bent in his article, "Apocalypse, Ideology, America: Science Fiction and the Myth of the Post-Apocalyptic Everyday". In it, Wolf-Meyer proposes that the purpose of post-apocalyptic fiction is to explore the dominant ideologies of American culture (i.e. Capitalism) in an effort to "understand America", so that we might see ourselves more clearly (the ideologies that drive us) and make corrections to avoid these disaster scenarios (30). In this same article Wolf-Meyer also observes:

Critics...tend to see the imagined post-apocalyptic world as a static entity...Readers should, however, see these alternate histories...as glimpses of new progressions...for while we may assume that these are narratives of being "bombed into the Stone Age", they are, rather, stories of the post-Atomic Age, and histories of a future yet to come (6).

And this observation speaks to what I will discuss in the chapters that follow: a study of the fluidity of society, community and historical cycles as they are represented in three post-apocalyptic narratives that span the sixty years since the A-bomb was dropped on Hiroshima.<sup>4</sup> The dropping of the Atom Bomb and the subsequent technological boom (with all the issues of pollution, over-population and climate change that go with these advances) - created a new type of apocalyptic scenario. This modern scenario was not one that may be visited upon us by an angry God (if we displeased him) or one that would usher in a religious Golden Age; it was, and is, a scenario that presses down upon us, all around us, every day. And so, what do we see when we look past the man-made apocalypse? With no pre-ordained order of events, no Anti-Christ or Armageddon and no divine power to decide our fates - what becomes of us? What few of us remain are left to look around the charred landscape

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<sup>4</sup> And, thus, the sixty years during which post-apocalyptic fiction was being defined and validated as a new genre of literature apart from the Apocalypticism that preceded it.

and ask "What now?". And the logical answer is that humanity almost always attempts to keep going. First on an individual, survivalist level and then on a larger, societal level - humanity attempts to right itself and to work toward some reclamation of society as it was before the apocalypse.

I look at this fluidity or social evolution as it is represented and examined in Walter Miller's A Canticle for Leibowitz, Cormac McCarthy's The Road and Octavia Butler's "Speech Sounds" and examine what remnants of society, community or family have remained, in what ways those remainders are evolving and what ultimate vision the author has for the future of "community" and thus of human history.

In the 1959 novel A Canticle for Leibowitz, Miller envisions the large-scale evolution of society over an 1800-year period following the "Flame Deluge". In his treatment of the main characters (Francis, Paulo and Zerchi) and in his dealings with the post-apocalyptic accoutrements of this terrain - Miller hints towards an inevitable "techno-primitive" cycle, which must be played out by this society again and again. The determinism of this vision fits with the era in which Miller wrote Canticle (a mere decade removed from the dropping of the bomb) - a time when Americans were experiencing the fresh horror of seeing the Atom bomb deployed over Japan while retreating into a false sense of control over this new technology, propagated by the American government's propagandistic push that the A-bomb was a positive asset for America and a threat that, if properly prepared for, could be survived.<sup>5</sup>

Thus Miller's ending, though damning and deterministic, is less disquieting, on some levels,

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<sup>5</sup> i.e. Nuclear drills were common in the 1950s - wherein schoolchildren practiced getting under their desks to avoid debris and radiation from a possible nuclear attack. The government also encouraged the building of fallout shelters, and many American families in this era followed their advice - building small bunkers in their backyards.

than the possibilities for "social survival" which followed - as America (and American writers) became more inundated with possible apocalyptic scenarios (and thus, less certain of how those apocalyptic scenarios might play out) and less trusting of a government which, they felt, had lied to their parents and grandparents about the gravity of nuclear technology.

Thus in The Road (2006), Cormac McCarthy envisions a human society that is embodied in the smallest of family units, a father and son. This community treads slowly across the post-apocalyptic terrain utilizing or ingesting the remnants of the old world - its neighborhoods and marketplaces - and moving towards an eventual progression of "community" since the boy joins, at the end of the novel, a new family that incorporates the spiritual and communal values he has longed for and the survivalist mentality that his father fought to impart to him.

And in "Speech Sounds", Octavia Butler envisions an apocalyptic landscape that is mired in a pre-linguistic present. Because the inhabitants of her world cannot read, write or speak - "history" has ceased to exist and seems poised to be extinguished altogether. The post-apocalyptic community, therefore, is both stuck in the present (since the animalistic inhabitants of the terrain cannot "engage" with history) and in motion since Butler shows the semi-linguistic humans struggling against atavistic definitions of community by playing out their old roles (as busdriver, policeman, teacher)

In each of the stories, there is no guarantee these evolving communities will survive or graduate to a new, more positive social model. However, there is - in each story - evidence of the fluidity of society as it strains against the blighted landscape and the

dizzying, deconstructing effects of its apocalyptic scenario. "The study of the post-apocalypse," Berger says "is a study of what disappears and what remains, and of how the remainder has been transformed" (133). And so this analysis aims to look at that transformation as it is represented by these three authors as a way of underscoring the fluidity of society and family that pervades our imagined, post-apocalyptic landscapes and points to our hopes that the human desire to congregate and form positive societies will outlive the post-apocalyptic terrain.

## Chapter One

### The Deterministic Techno-Primitive Landscape of

#### Walter Miller's A Canticle for Leibowitz

Walter Miller's 1959 A Canticle for Leibowitz was published at a time when America found itself both horrified and enchanted with the possibilities of mass destruction via the atom bomb. Technological advancements made our everyday lives easier but also enhanced the weaponry of governments around the world. Inherent in these advances, in this growing arsenal of ever-larger bombs, was a threat that haunted us: the threat of reciprocal action, "mutually assured destruction." Indeed, Miller himself, Amanda Cockrell says, "returned from World War II to a world that now contained a weapon and a technology so fearsome it could melt the ground and remake the human body into something that could only be speculated about" (21).

Thus, in his science-fiction masterpiece, Miller speaks to the fears of this America that is just beginning to grapple with its own hypothetical demise. Just fifteen years removed from the atrocities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, A Canticle for Leibowitz speaks for a society that is struggling to incorporate the realities of atomic technology into its collective consciousness and to work through the guilt and sense of fatalism that any nation, which has destroyed a vast number of people, must face.

The novel is broken into three main sections: *Fiat Homo* ("Let there be man"), *Fiat Lux* ("Let there be light") and *Fiat Voluntas Tua* ("Let thy will be done"). *Fiat Homo* is set 600 years after the "Flame Deluge" - a catastrophic nuclear war that destroys modern

civilization - and is told mainly from the point of view of Francis, a young monk in the Order of Leibowitz who discovers a Leibowitzian blueprint while on a Lenten Vigil. The blueprint eventually leads to the canonization of Saint Leibowitz and becomes a part of the abbey's well-guarded cache of scientific documents. *Fiat Lux* occurs 600 years later, in the year 3174. Brother Kornhoer, from the Order of Liebowitz, is just finishing his work on an arc lamp that will usher in a new technological Renaissance while Hannegan, one of the leaders of the plains tribes, neutralizes the nomads and the people of Laredo to unite the entire region under his rule. Finally, *Fiat Voluntas Tua* (set in the year 3178) shows a society that has once again achieved technological and nuclear prowess and one that inevitably collapses when nuclear war erupts between the Atlantic Confederacy and the Asian Coalition. The novel ends with Brother Joshua of the Leibowitzian Order and his Quo Peregrinatur crew boarding a starship to find some other, habitable planet, a "new Eden" which - Miller suggests - they will certainly "kick apart" (200).

The narrative structure of Canticle is overtly cyclical and Miller uses it to show a people who are trapped in a deterministic techno-primitive cycle - one in which their society must forever oscillate between a technological zenith point (the point at which they are capable of and do destroy themselves) and a primitive starting point (when this technology is buried, literally and figuratively, beneath the wreckage of the old society). Miller uses his story as an examination of and warning against what might happen to a society that is run by hungry superpowers with bombs in their pockets. And, while he certainly hopes that his warnings might be heeded, Miller sees little hope that this or any future society will be able to overcome its propensity toward self-destruction - a point that he reiterates again and again

throughout the novel. He reiterates this techno-primitive cycle and, thus, his pessimistic view of the post-atomic possibilities in: 1) the deaths of the main characters in each section (Francis in "Fiat Homo", Paulo in "Fiat Lux" and Zerchi in "Fiat Voluntas Tua" - whom he uses as bodily representations of the time periods in which they are found and as markers of this society's inevitable separation from the natural order as they move ever closer to a technological "endgame" in section three) 2) the collapse of time as the narrative progresses which underscores Miller's own beliefs that proximity to technology means a harried and fast-paced existence with little room for rest or natural modes of living and 3) the androcentric landscape of Canticle that is largely devoid of women and children - suggesting little hope for procreation or a fertile, natural life in a post-apocalyptic world and little chance of escape from the techno-primitive cycle that always leads to an apocalyptic end.

There is also a fourth point of interest to this discussion and that is Miller's treatment of post-apocalypse objects (those that are left over from the fallen modern society). In the way that Miller has his characters interact with these unearthed accoutrements, he presents a more open-ended picture of humanity and its fate. Miller uses Francis' illumination of the Leibowitzian blueprint to suggest, not that humanity will necessarily ever escape its destructive infatuation with technology and invention, but that these destructive tendencies are tempered somewhat by innocence and a genuine love of beauty. This is Miller's stance in *Fiat Homo*, but the positive outlook does not extend to the other two sections of Canticle. As the society becomes more technologically savvy, so Miller's descriptions of the post-apocalypse objects and the bricolaged technology become more ominous - suggesting that



humanity is only capable of a brief stage of childlike goodness in the techno-primitive cycle before their clean slate becomes dirtied once more.

### **Cycle of Destruction**

One tool Miller uses to establish the pessimism of the techno-primitive cycle is the deaths of the main characters in each section (Francis, Paulo and Zerchi). These serve as a tableau of the overarching truths he hopes to convey about this society's devolving place in the natural order as their technological prowess evolves and his belief that a society in the grips of a deterministic obsession to uncover the inner workings of the physical universe (through the sciences) and use these findings to manipulate the physical world is doomed on both an individual and collective level. What happens to one happens to all and vice versa. Each of the characters is, in some way, a participant in the race towards the technological zenith point. Their deaths, then, are meted out by Miller in accordance with their involvement in this race and are reflective of their era's place in the techno-primitive cycle. They show a self-reflexive movement away from the post-apocalypse, atavistic ways of life (and death) towards the more refined ways of living and dying that are the hallmark of advanced societies - only to swing again towards the gruesome and grisly when Miller's society reaches its peak of technological achievement.

For example, Francis' death at the hands of the "children of the Pope", in section one, is violent and swift. The blood and barbarism of an arrow to the head would not have been so uncommon an occurrence at this point in Canticle's history, only 600 years removed from

the "Flame Deluge". The manner in which his murderers (or predators) kill him illuminates the desperation, hunger and lack of sentimentality, which Miller believes is the hallmark of any primitive, simple life. Brother Francis' death stands in stark contrast to his cloistered life in the abbey, a relatively protected haven where he spent countless and, arguably, dull days in the service of the relics. Once he completes his illuminated copy of the Leibowitz blueprint and ventures into the primitive landscape, his death at the hands of the malformed, beastly innocent "children of the Pope" is swift and relatively merciful. And after his death, as one "child's" eager exclamations ("Eat! Eat! Eat!" p. 96) lead us to believe, Miller indicates that Francis' body is ingested and digested by the bodies of his simpleton killers. His body, post-mortem, serves as a metaphor for the overarching cycle of this era in which he lives - one that is simple in its understanding of the world around it, but one that is beginning to grasp small fragments of knowledge and use those fragments to build towards a Scientific Renaissance. And Miller uses his death to underscore this phase of the techno-primitive cycle.

Miller assigns a slower, less merciful death to Dom Paulo in *Fiat Lux*; he dies of more modern ailments: old age and worry - ulcers that eat slowly at his health and his hold on the church. And, as with Francis' abrupt death at the hands of his predators, Miller uses Paulo's sedate, acidic unraveling to denote the next phase in the techno-primitive machinations of this post-apocalyptic society - a society that is making the transition between

primitivism (lack of or rudimentary understanding of technology and science) and the Scientific Renaissance.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, Dom Paulo's death at the hands of modernity (ulcers and old age - two ailments that Francis did not live long enough to suffer from) serves as Miller's metaphorical marker to alert us to the inevitable shift that is occurring in the cycle - in the deaths of the characters and in the preoccupations and achievements of the society.

Zerchi's death is the last and farthest removed from any natural, primitive order. If Paulo's death is representative of *Canticle's* technological tipping point, Zerchi's death and the other characters in *Fiat Voluntas Tua* who are victims of the nuclear fallout, are its "technological nightmares". Zerchi dies painfully and slowly when the church collapses on him during a nuclear blast suggesting that, from Miller's point of view, the church's complicated involvement in the rise of the deadly technologies has come to a fitting end. Miller implicates the church all along in Canticle, showing its steady involvement in each phase of the recovery of technological and scientific relics. And while he never completely convicts or absolves them of bringing about this next apocalypse, we can certainly say with safety that, in Miller's world, this apocalypse could not have occurred without the Church's involvement.<sup>7</sup>

For while the abbots and monks were more neutral in their stance than either the Simpletons who advocate total destruction of books and literature/knowledge or the

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<sup>6</sup> Concurrent with Dom Paulo's slow demise, Brother Kornhoer is conducting experiments in the basement of the abbey that "jump across about twenty years of preliminary experimentation" (163). His arc lamp hints at the tidal wave of modern advancements that are certain to follow the close of *Fiat Lux*.

<sup>7</sup> This elided view of the Church's involvement points, in some ways, to Miller's own complex relationship to the Catholic church; he was not born into the church but became a Catholic in his adult life due, in part (he has said), to his involvement in the bombing of the Monte Cassino monastery in Italy during WWII.

Scientists who chase invention and advancement and seldom question the moral/ethical ramifications -- they certainly still played their part in the creation of this new apocalypse. Thus, Miller has Zerchi die a fitting death under the weight of the very church that harbored those first remnants of scientific knowledge. We can only assume that his body will rot slowly in the open air and that he will certainly not receive a proper burial like Dom Paulo or even a cursory funeral in the gut of some wild dog or coyote - since the radioactive fallout will make short work of them as well. His death is representative both of the period in which he dies (one filled with the manipulation of natural orders and physical laws and one filled with equally unnatural ways of living and dying) and the cycle as a whole. He dies primarily from the crushing weight of the church and secondarily from the radioactive fallout that will ensure his demise if internal injuries or thirst don't kill him first.<sup>8</sup>

Another way in which Miller reiterates the hopelessness and determinism of the techno-primitive cycle of history, as well as the doleful hurriedness that accompanies technological advancement, is shown in his usage and compression of time as the three sections progress. In section one, time is, from the modern readers point of view, agonizingly slow. It takes place over a 30-year period and the story opens with Francis in the

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<sup>8</sup> Zerchi's fate is not as bleak as those of the horribly burned mother and child who seek out his advice earlier in Section Three. Zerchi attempts to dissuade the desperate mother from going to the mercy tents that have been set up to euthanize the "red ticket", terminally injured citizens. In showing this interaction, Miller further implicates the Church's complicated place in the techno-primitive cycle. Zerchi serves as gaoler to the woman and child in more ways than one, Miller shows us, since the Church contributed to the creation of the nuclear technology that has so badly burned her but Zerchi himself tells her that she should not seek relief through euthanasia lest she damn her soul. Zerchi does finally give her a ride to the Mercy Camps when he sees her attempting to hobble down the highway, toward the camp, with her burned child. Amanda Cockrell noted of this complicated interplay: "The will of the Church to serve as preserver, even of that which will ultimately be its downfall, is a thread which runs through all three sections of the novel, ending with 'Fiat Voluntas Tua', Part Three, in which mankind has rediscovered nuclear weapons and is obliterating itself with them once more. In the chaos the Church clings to this imperative: urging the terminally radiation poisoned to go to the Mercy Camps for euthanasia and launching a handful of novices and sisters and a group of children on a spaceship away from the doomed earth. With them travel the 'Memorabilia'...and (thus) the possibility that the...destruction will begin again on another world" (25-26). Cockrell's analysis seems a bit far-fetched since she seems to interpret Miller as damning the church without reservation; the text, however, shows Miller straddling the line between damnation and absolution of the Church.

desert on a Lenten vigil. He must stay in the desert for forty days and nights. When he finally completes his vigil, however, he is denied the right to profess his final vows. And because of his refusal to denounce the Pilgrim, he returns to the desert seven times, seven vigils and remains a novice far into his twenties. Time, in this section, is stretched to Biblically thin proportions. Like Jacob, the son of Isaac, who labored for Rachel's hand for fourteen years without complaint (Genesis 29:18) - so Francis labors patiently in the desert for the right to profess his final vows.

Also in this section, Brother Sarl invents a "mathematical method for...restoring missing words and phrases to some of the old fragments of original text in the Memorabilia." (60). He manages to restore four pages of an Algebra text in "only forty years", before dying over the fifth page.

Miller shows these men, inhabitants of the primitive era of *Fiat Homo*, moving at a slow pace. One that might seem bogged down or painfully slow to the modern reader. But, as Miller shows us as the novel progresses, this slow-paced life is possible because of its separation from the technological achievements that will follow and blessed because of its proximity to the natural order of life and death. Though there is barbarism and violence in the deserts that surround the abbey - the violence is carried out with fists and arrows and not with nuclear reactions. *Fiat Lux* takes place over significantly less time, perhaps three to five years and, in this time period, life has become more harried and weapons have advanced (the Poet dies of a gunshot wound at the end of *Fiat Lux*). And, finally, *Fiat Voluntas Tua* unfolds in only three weeks as the superpowers of the world spy on one another from their space stations and plot nuclear war.

By collapsing time in inverse proportion to the rise of technological weaponry, Miller creates a feeling of the inevitable and ever-faster build up towards technological prowess and collapse. The relatively innocent and technologically naïve inhabitants of *Fiat Homo* live a slow-paced life, one in which a journey from one geographical location to the next extracts the actual price of its miles; there are no "self-moving carts" or "flying machines" to ease the burdens of travel and so the world is an enormously large place, one that is fractured into many and various territories with as many systems of law and order. But by the time we reach *Fiat Voluntas Tua*, the world is moving at high speed. Continents of people are able to communicate with one another, disagree with one another and mount destructive attacks on one another. By compressing the timeline as the novel progresses, Miller mirrors the angst and "busyness" ("business" being a distinctly modern activity) that is the engine behind the society's demise. In each section, the main characters (Francis, Paulo and Zerchi) have smaller and smaller allowances of time in which to grapple with the technology that is presented to them in their era. Francis has the leisure of fifteen years to illuminate the Leibowitzian blueprint; Paulo gets a few weeks to absorb the importance of Kornhoer's arc lamp before he dies from ulcers, while Zerchi has mere days to organize the Quo Peregrinatur crew's escape from the nuclear apocalypse (thus ensuring that the Order of Leibowitz will continue on some new planet) before he is crushed under the weight of the fallen church.

For Miller, technology collapses time, reduces it to claustrophobic proportions, fills it with increasingly dangerous weapons and with little or no means of escape from these

weapons (since space compresses along with time and the world becomes a smaller and smaller place with bigger and bigger guns).

In addition to these reiterations of the cycle, Miller shows a largely mono-gendered landscape that is not capable of procreation but only of the incessant re-creation of the "destroy and rebuild" scenario - suggesting that Miller, himself, is unable to envision the possibility of a fertile post-apocalyptic world. Women are almost completely absent from the post-apocalyptic deserts and monasteries in which the majority of the story takes place. The few women who do make an appearance are usually disfigured or marred by catastrophe (the two-headed Rachel and the badly burned mother and child - both in section three). The only semi-positive portrayal of a male/female interaction comes in the form of the robber and his hinted-at wife. We know that he, at least, thinks of her enough to know that she would enjoy the illuminated blueprint:

Francis untied the package and unwrapped the original blueprint and the illuminated commemoration thereof. The gold-leaf inlay and the colorful design flashed brilliantly in the sunlight that filtered through the foliage. The robber's craggy jaw dropped an inch. He whistled softly.  
"What a pretty! Now wouldn't the woman like *that* to hang on the cabin wall!"  
(82)

However, we never actually see the robber's wife. She is present by proxy only. Miller is careful to keep the one (we presume) healthy and unmarred woman (as well as the one positive portrayal of marriage or male and female partnership) hidden, marginalized - as a way of showing us that no society which destroys itself will ever truly recover from that destruction or be able to attain healthy models of family or love.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Or, Miller suggests, even stable DNA models - as is evidenced by the malformed victims of radiation-mutation who wander the desert six centuries after the "Flame Deluge".

This androcentric and largely fruitless landscape (for there are very few children as well) is reflective of Miller's and his generation's pessimism in regards to the post-apocalyptic possibilities, their fears about what a post-apocalyptic landscape would look like (mutants, aberrations of nature) and of the marginal place that women would occupy in this world. By hiding but not *completely* hiding the women in his world and by striking those we do see with disfigurements or injuries - Miller makes the point that women (and by extension children and the family unit) will not be safe in a post-apocalyptic world.<sup>10</sup>

### **Post-Apocalypse Objects**

If his decision to underline the deterministic techno-primitive cycle and to cut women out of the narrative point strongly toward Miller's negative view of the post-atomic possibilities, then the ways in which post-apocalypse relics (and, specifically, the Leibowitzian blueprint) are regarded and utilized show a more open-ended view on Miller's part. He uses these objects to highlight man's potential for innocence and goodness and to provide his reader with an objective vantage point from which they may view the events of Canticle (a vantage point that Miller, fatalistic as he is, surely hopes his reader will use to understand the lessons Canticle has to offer and to avoid the fate of its fictional inhabitants).

Miller roots his positive view of humanity in Canticle's "novice". Francis is "new" in every sense of the word. He is young (approximately 17 years of age), impressionable but,

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<sup>10</sup> Because of his near complete exclusion of women in the text, Miller also manages to avoid the subject of sexual violence and predation with which many of the writers who follow him will deal. In all of his portrayals of male violence in Canticle (the men rob, shoot and eat one another and wage wars), Miller never directly examines how that violence and social disorder might have affected the women and children of *Fiat Homo* and *Fiat Lux* (periods which correspond with our own Middle Ages and Renaissance, respectively). Certainly the idea that women and children could be the victims of rape and violence in this type of world occurred to Miller and, yet, instead of exploring the effect that a sudden and catastrophic dissolution of modern society would have on men and women's familial and sexual interactions with one another, Miller nearly pushes women and children out of the world altogether by rooting his story in the walls of an abbey. This could be out of respect for his 1950s era audience, which might have been uncomfortable with allusions to rape or incest, or because adventure and science fiction novels during this time were told largely from a male point of view.



more importantly, he is the first person we see in this post-apocalypse society. For all intents and purposes, he is Adam, the first man. And, in an inversion of the Biblical Eden, Francis' inheritance is not a lush utopian garden but an arid, dangerous desert where, says W.A. Senior, "monsters, not just the deer and the antelope, roam the southwestern range as the consequence of an irradiated species and genetic mutations" (330). Miller uses Francis' innocence and purity (which stand in stark relief to this befouled setting) and his relationship to the Leibowitzian blueprint, in particular, as a way of highlighting the fact that, paradoxically, it is man's innocence in the absence of technology that makes him most vulnerable to technology's or knowledge's threats. This innocent is unable to recognize the danger of a "forbidden apple" because the apple itself is the only thing that will allow him to understand its capacity for destruction (tasting the forbidden fruit was the only thing that would allow Eve to truly understand or avoid the dangers of tasting it):

First he examined the jotted notes. They were scrawled by the same hand that had written the note glued to the lid, and the penmanship was no less abominable. *Pound pastrami*, said one note, *can kraut, six bagels - bring home for Emma*. Another reminded: *Remember - pick up form 1040, Uncle Revenue*....After returning (this document) to the box...he turned to the second folded document...a diagram, it seemed...a blueprint! (22).

Prior to Francis' discovery in the desert, as Ralph Wood notes,"(the society has) undertaken their own fearful Simplification, a barbaric burning of all books, both sacred and secular. The consequent benightedness is so great that literacy itself has nearly been lost (and so)...they have no way of knowing the import of such phrases as '*Pound pastrami*' (28). Miller's portrayal of the monks as "innocents" who are befuddled by these objects and their contexts is what endears them to us and allows

us to forgive them their trespasses as they begin the process of building towards the next nuclear holocaust - just as we are inclined to forgive Eve her bite of the tempting apple.

For, with these Edenic parallels, Miller points out that Francis' innocence is no match for man's insatiable and innate curiosity and that these discoveries, at least that of the Circuit Design, will eventually lead to the inescapable and onerous technological zenith point from which Miller's characters cannot escape (per their place in Miller's deterministic, techno-primitive cycle which always builds towards destruction). But at the same time, Francis' adoration of the relic-blueprint and his subsequent labors to grace its reproduction with gold and floral designs do nothing to further man's movement toward a techno-zenith or tipping point. He does so only for the joy of artistically illuminating an object that so mystifies and delights him. Similarly, Brother Sarls toils over the algebra text because he finds joy in problem solving and not because he will actually ever see the book translated and certainly not because he would ever live to see its concepts put into practice. Miller uses these positive, uniquely human traits to highlight the double-edged beauty of man's capacity for discovery. Through these innocent child-men of *Fiat Homo*, he shows that ultimate destruction begins with just a few endearing, toddler steps towards understanding the world around us (post-catastrophe). Thus these early character studies become a wry celebration of humanity in what is, largely, a grim allegory of societal failings.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Judith Butler also sees Rachel, the second head of Mrs. Grales who appears to Zerchi in his dying moments at the end of *Fiat Voluntas Tua*, as a new incarnation of the "innocent" early man, Francis. "(Rachel)," she says, "represents innocence and the continuation of the human cycle of innocence and free will, followed by the fall" (344). While Walker Percy says that the reader must ask him/herself "Who is Rachel? What is she?", and that their answer to that question will determine whether or not the reader "got the book or missed it" (578). Perhaps Miller is using Rachel, at the end of the novel, as a sign of hope that man has evolved into a new creature, one that is resistant to the effects of radiation and one that will avoid the

A second way in which Miller uses the apocalyptic relics to counterbalance the fairly negative, allegorical elements of Canticle is by using Francis' early discoveries in "INNER HATCH" and the later descriptions of ancient cities (our New York or Philadelphia) to create nostalgia for objects and places that are not actually in the past (though they are "ancient relics" to Francis, Paulo and others) and create a "remove" from which readers can observe their own modern lives:

That there was on this continent a more advanced civilization than we have now - that can't be denied. You can look at the rubble and the rotted metal and know it. You can dig under a strip of blown sand and find their broken roadways. But where...are the remains of self-moving carts, of flying machines?

Beaten into plowshares and hoes. (106-07)

Miller provides his reader the thrill and control of watching these dusty figures of the future scratch their heads over the mundanities of our lives and emphasizes that, in a post-apocalyptic world, the ordinary is taken away and the remnants or relics that remain are reduced to the utilitarian sum of their parts: cars are metal to be used for tool making; asphalt roadways are busted up and used for building homes. The all-powerful organizing objects of modern society are caponized and reconfigured - leaving us only with the charred or forgotten remnants of those objects. In so doing, Miller shows us what happens to the fancy modern conveniences of a society that does not learn or care to learn how to control its own technology; they are destroyed and rendered meaningless along with the society that created them, a vantage point is oddly comforting, even thrilling, as Walker Percy points out:

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mistakes of its ancestors. Even if this is the case - I'm not sure it grants reprieve to *our* human society since the human beings of our earth, our progeny, are shown getting onto a starship to find some "new Eden" and taking with them the "Memorabilia" which may act as the seeds of a new destruction.

The setting is the desert. An old civilization lies in ruins. There is silence. Much time has passed and is passing. The survivor (Francis, in *Fiat Homo*) is alone. There is a secret longing in the reader either for the greening of America, vines sprouting on 42nd Street, or for the falling into desert ruins of such cities as Phoenix. Phoenix should revert to the lizards... Here is the authentic oxymoronic flavor of pleasurable catastrophe (575).

In creating this "pleasurable catastrophe", this "greening of America", this decommissioning of society's organizing objects - Miller allows his reader to take, perhaps, a pleasurable step back from their modern lives, from the problem at hand, and analyze what might become of their society if it does not learn to control its weapons and aggressions.

However, in keeping with his deterministic themes, Miller's later descriptions of the objects (or rather the technologies that the relics of *Fiat Homo* have helped to birth) are baleful and gloomy. He uses - at times - near violent language to describe the arc light's introduction into society in *Fiat Lux*. Brother Kornhoer and his assistants work in the basement of the abbey until they finally get a spark and a light from the large contraption. At this point, its artificiality overwhelms the elemental technologies (candles) and minds of the monks, lighting the basement with blinding brilliance but casting a dark shadow over the society's future:

Thon Taddeo gasped an oath in his native tongue. He retreated a step. The abbot who had neither witnessed the testing of the device nor credited extravagant claims, blanched and stopped speech in mid-sentence... The blue-white glare cast knife-edge shadows in the room, and the candle flames became blurred wisps in the tide of light. "Bright as a thousand torches," breathed the scholar... "Ghastly," wheezed Dom Paulo... "Hellish!..." (156-57).

The descriptions of the "ghastly", "hellish" arc lamp help to create a sense of foreboding regarding science in Miller's reader, since the reader, more than the characters in *Fiat Lux*, is

able to recognize the lamp's dark promises of nuclear annihilation. Absent in these proceedings and the ones that follow in *Fiat Voluntas Tua* is the type of awe, artistry and childlike reverence that Francis bestows upon the inert/innocuous blueprint in the opening of the story, since Miller sees little reason to celebrate or limn these stark, motorized portents of destruction. The society in *Fiat Lux* is at a tipping point, a point at which electricity, which requires the understanding and manipulation of elemental laws of nature and physics, is within their grasp. Once they've grasped it, Miller tells us with his tone and inflection in *Fiat Lux*, it is a short and nearly irreversible walk to the final, destructive phase of this society's development.

Miller's usage of post-apocalypse objects, his characters' interactions with them and the language he uses to describe them as the story progresses, provide some positive celebration of humanity's goodness (in *Fiat Homo*) and some hope for avoidance of our own society's apocalyptic fate (by creating a "remove" from which we can see and learn from our own destructive future). However, Miller's tale remains - at its core - one that sings not of the redemptive traits of the human race but of its barbs and vices - not our greed or murderous tendencies (which are part of the primitive order) but the insatiable desire to understand and manipulate our world. This desire, Miller tells us, is the one that eventually drives us to create super-weapons, to go after the objects we covet or kill our enemies on a scale that supercedes the natural order. And Canticle tells us that we are unlikely to escape

these downfalls, despite our underlying innocence or goodness because the techno-primitive cycle is one that will continue again and again.<sup>12</sup>

By highlighting and reinforcing this inescapable techno-primitive cycle and by painting a sterile, womanless terrain that is incapable of positive evolution or procreation - Miller seeks to warn a generation of Americans who were anxious about the possibilities of mass destruction but rather complacent about its own technological/scientific involvement in that scenario. However, Miller's tale - though it sees largely fatalistic cycles of human history taking place after the apocalypse - is still one that sees a society in motion, one that is evolving, changing and grappling with (for better or worse) the notion of what it means to be human, to possess knowledge and to lose it. For Miller, the post-apocalyptic terrain is one where villains and saints are not easily identified. The clergy play their role in the rise of the destructive technology as much as do the scientists. And so, while Canticle does seem on many levels to suggest that society may never escape its own destructive tendencies, he also hints that -- in the very act of moving, growing, changing -- this society still has a chance of someday finding a "new Eden" that it will protect rather than kick apart.

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<sup>12</sup> One other obvious point of hope that is worthy of note is the mysterious "Rachel" whom Miller introduces at the close of the novel. Rachel comes to life from the inert head of Mrs. Grales, an old, two-head woman (a remainder of the mutations suffered from the "Flame Deluge") who sells vegetables outside the monastery. When the second nuclear explosion goes off, the head of Mrs. Grales shrivels and is stilled while her inoperable head comes to life in the form of a young, mute woman named. This woman, who seems immune to the effects of the radiation, anoints Zerchi as he is taking his last breaths. And while this character is less developed than some of the "redemptive characters" I will discuss in later chapters (the boy in The Road and the literate children in "Speech Sounds"), Miller certainly uses her character to point to some possible mutation or transformation that might be occurring in the human race. In this way, he also points toward a possibly "progressive" evolution of any society that might remain after the explosion: one imbued with natural goodness and one that is immune to the effects of radiation.

**Chapter Two**  
**A Flame in the Darkness: A Society of Two**  
**in Cormac McCarthy's The Road**

One of the most critically heralded post-apocalyptic novels in recent times is Cormac McCarthy's The Road. "The vulnerable cultural references for this daring scenario obviously come from science fiction," Alan Warner observes, "but what propels The Road far beyond its progenitors are the diverted poetic heights of McCarthy's late-English prose." Published in late 2006, the novel received the Pulitzer in January of 2007 and, at the present moment, is a national bestseller. In it, McCarthy cuts to the core of the American fears and hopes surrounding the subject of our own hypothetical demise - showing a paradoxical awareness of the multi-faceted realities<sup>13</sup> of societal dissolution coupled with a hopeful attempt to cling to the "forms" of society even when society itself has been almost completely demolished. Though it imagines a world defined by barbarism and violence, The Road maintains the hope that civilized values and actions can endure, despite humanity's capacity for savagery. For Cormac McCarthy, after the apocalypse, only community at the most basic level is possible: civilization - community - has to rebuild itself at the cellular level. The family unit, he suggests, will be the last flame of true society to endure once all else has collapsed, the elemental point to which society will devolve and from which it must begin to rebuild itself, if there is any rebuilding to be done at all.

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<sup>13</sup> McCarthy deals with both the public and private spheres of this dissolving society - the "marketplaces" (and, by extension, Capitalism and the world of mass production) as well as neighbors and towns (the social, familial sphere).

The parent-child relationship is central to the novel itself, which is set some eight to ten years<sup>14</sup> after a nuclear war or asteroidal collision has destroyed and burned much of the landscape, immolated vast numbers of people and created a sort of nuclear winter, which threatens what few survivors remain. It is bitterly cold and ash falls day and night, obscuring the sun which "circles the earth like a grieving mother with a lamp" (32). Because the sun can only partially penetrate the ashen atmosphere, trees, plants and animals have withered or died, and the humans (unable to band together even in some dystopian agrarian community) are left with a dead landscape and what remnants of preserved foodstuffs or usable trash remain from the old society. The father and son search for clean water, stray cans of peaches or Kool-Aid packets while "the bloodcults", warring bands of savage cannibals, search for human prey. In the midst of this perilous endgame, McCarthy puts on center stage the intimate relationship between a father and his son who are traveling southward on a deserted highway in the hopes of finding a warmer climate and, perhaps, other remnants of civilization.

And, it is in the rhythms of this relationship - as well as the ways in which it contrasts with the blighted landscape around it - that McCarthy lays out his vision for the possibility of "society" in the post-apocalypse. He sees a world in which large-scale organized society has fallen under the weight of its own precariously complicated systems and in which the only organized societies are pockets of barbaric men that prey upon the weak. In the middle of this, the father and son form a society unto themselves - one that operates within the rotting corpse of the old as they roam the barren hills and valleys of the "intestate earth" (130).

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<sup>14</sup> We can guess this based on McCarthy's descriptions of the boy - who seems to be between seven and ten years old and was born on the night of the cataclismic explosion or collision.



The novel's ending suggests, at best, that these remnants of civilized behavior nurtured by the father and son have formed a larger community. But whether this community can endure, or be one embodied at the social level, is not clear. Thus Cormac McCarthy's novel sees this post-apocalyptic world in a moment of transition or change, but to *what* is left indeterminate.

### **Dismantling the Private Sphere**

McCarthy begins the process of creating his society of two by systematically stripping the man and boy of the domestic referents of the old, modern society - divesting them (the man in particular) of the remaining private symbols of society to which they may cling. In several scenes in which the two encounter emotional or potent symbols of the fallen society, the father sees the wreckage but also sees, momentarily, through it; he sees what it *used* to be, the foundations of the old society. In his attempts to bring those memories to life for his son, he only cements their distance from the past: McCarthy uses these moments to show the hopelessness of revisiting the past and the importance of giving up these old markers of domesticity in order to make their own version of home.

(The man) felt with his thumb in the painted wood of the mantle the pinholes from tacks that had held stockings forty years ago. This is where we used to have Christmas when I was a boy. He turned and looked out at the waste of a yard...In the living room the bones of a small animal dismembered and placed in a pile. Possibly a cat...They went up the stairs and turned and went down a hallway...This is where I used to sleep...to dream the dreams of a child's imaginings, worlds rich or fearful such as might offer themselves but never the one to be. He pushed open the closet door half expecting to find his childhood things. Raw cold daylight fell through from the roof. Gray as his heart.

We should go, Papa. Can we go?

Yes. We can go.  
I'm scared.  
I know. I'm sorry. (26-27)

In this brief scene, McCarthy manages to illustrate the degree to which domesticity, family, religion and childhood - the foundations of civilization and home - have passed away. The house itself, its physical presence, has been altered. We are told that the clapboards are largely missing from the lower section "leaving the studs and insulation exposed"; these have been taken by foragers and used for firewood (25). The porch and yard are littered with trash. This outward detritus hints at a loss of orderliness and sanctuary that, McCarthy suggests, cannot be retrieved. Houses, the discarded shells of domestic life, are no longer safe or practical places to live or raise a family in the post-apocalyptic terrain. They aren't near food or water and staying in one for too long only makes a traveler vulnerable to attack or theft. Thus, they are useful only to the extent that they can be picked over for wood or supplies - a utilitarian sentiment to which the father normally adheres but forgoes, in this scene, in his search for emotional sustenance.

Inside, there are less tangible losses; the Christmas stockings have been reduced to pinholes in the mantle, markers that only the man can find or coax meaning from. They hang above the hearth only in his imagination since Christmas, McCarthy reminds us, has completely vanished (as have all organized religious traditions or secular markers of time). And in the corner of the living room, the piled bones of some dismembered creature ("possibly a cat") serve as a macabre stand-in for the family pet. In this unadorned society there is certainly no room or resources for a family pet, and any animals, which might have

been considered off-limits as a source of food before the disaster, are now fair game.<sup>15</sup> Here, cats and dogs are not coddled; they are eaten. Children are not coddled either, as McCarthy shows us when the man and boy ascend the stairs to the father's childhood room. In it the man finds only "small cones of damp plaster" and a closet (where his boyhood toys used to be stored) that is as empty and "gray as his heart" (27). There is no literal or figurative room for a insulated childhood in this decimated landscape, no designated spaces for imagination or playfulness in a world that is more fearful than anything the father could have dreamed up when he lay on his boyhood cot.

In this scene, McCarthy emphasizes that the father and son, though they (but, mostly the father) are attempting to reconstruct the patterns of domesticity, are irrevocably separated from the communal protection that this house, neighborhood or city once offered. These systems have been permanently taken away and will not return. And so, The Road suggests, they must scrounge to create the best version of domestic comfort they can from the meager offerings of their dying world, as in several scenes when McCarthy shows the father and son fashioning their own version of "hearth and home" in unlikely, barren circumstances:

When it had cleared they went down to the cart and pulled away the tarp and got their blankets and the things they would need for the night. They went back up the hill and made their camp in the dry dirt under the rocks and the man sat with his arms around the boy trying to warm him....They ate their

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<sup>15</sup> We learn later, through a flashback, that the father once tried to catch and eat a dog that was following them before the mother killed herself. He fails, however, because he's unwilling to use one of the three cartridges in their gun, and the dog is too wary to approach him (87). The boy seems naturally disinclined to participate in this survivalist practice. Though he has grown up post-disaster and has certainly never experienced "pet culture", he foolheartedly or hopefully clings to the idea of dogs as companions and not as food - even if this means the difference between starvation and a meal. When the boy hears a distant dog-bark in an abandoned city he makes his father promise that no harm will come to the creature, even as their bellies are empty and there's no food in sight: "We're not going to kill it, are we Papa?" "No, we're not going to kill it." (82) The remains of the "cat meal" in this scene are also the first insight McCarthy provides his readers into the comestible abasement of this anti-society, a first introduction to the concept of eating living things which are, in most modern societies, considered sanctified or not fit for consumption. This will be later followed by the revelation that cannibalism and infanticide are also common practices in this world.

poor meal cold and lay down in their bedding with the lamp between them. He'd brought the boy's book but the boy was too tired for reading. Can we leave the lamp on till I'm asleep? he said. Yes. Of course we can. (9-10).

Here, as in many scenes throughout The Road, McCarthy shows the father and son recreating, in a utilitarian palate, the forms of home and hearth. Their home is mobile and lacks the adornments that were afforded to pre-apocalypse dwellings. And while there is certainly pathos to this (the father and son often sleep on dirt, in abandoned cars or hunkered under a tarp with rain beating down on them), there is also something reassuring about their domestic routine. Even in the midst of post-apocalyptic disrepair, McCarthy implies -- home can still exist as long as two people who love one another can make camp and fashion some semblance of "family space".

This early scene of dystopian domesticity is one that McCarthy repeats throughout the narrative. Near a jack-knifed, body-filled tractor trailer, beside a rushing waterfall, under an overpass in a deserted city: the man and boy continue to pack away or unfold their small, mobile sphere of family, community and home until the very end of their journey together:

They crossed the river and a short ways on they came to a crossroads. Downcountry a storm had passed over the isthmus and leveled the dead black trees from east to west like weeds in the floor of a stream. Here they camped and when (the man) lay down he knew that he could go no further....(The boy) went up the road and came dragging back a piece of plywood from the roadside trash and...made a rickety leanto. (277-78)

Even in this final scene, when the father knows he's about to die, McCarthy continues to stress the importance of maintaining the "forms" of family and society. The comforting rituals, the scrap wood lean-tos, the beds of dirt, the bedtime stories read aloud in a barren land - these attempts to maintain a sense of home allow them to connect with an ancient,

overarching human continuum and raises them above the realities of their surroundings and their circumstance.

### **Eroding the Public Sphere**

In the same way that McCarthy strips the father and son of their connection to the private, domestic realm while highlighting their efforts to recreate it - he often puts them in contact with the impotent products and marketplaces of the old society to show that they are both completely separate from this world and oddly dependent upon it for survival. The father and son incorporate elements of "fallen marketplaces" into the rhythms and workings of their small social unit and the preserved foodstuffs that remain are their most important source of nutrition.

In an early scene, they scour the shelves of a nearly clean-picked grocery store. The father manages to find one "cold metal cylinder," a single can of Coke in a vending machine. He pries it loose and leans his nose into the slight fizz - wizardry of a world long-gone - but passes up the rare indulgence and encourages the boy to drink it all: "What is it Papa? / It's a treat. For you." (23). The can of Coca-Cola, in this scene, carries important cultural and social symbolism; because it is one of the most recognizable brand names the world round <sup>16</sup>, it represents a huge interplay of modern economic forces (marketing, branding, production) that have completely collapsed, making this world one in which "the discovery of a solitary

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<sup>16</sup> Newsweek identified Coca-Cola as one of the top "global brands" of 2006 ([http://www.ourfishbowl.com/images/surveys/BGB06Report\\_072706.pdf](http://www.ourfishbowl.com/images/surveys/BGB06Report_072706.pdf)). Additionally, journalists have coined the term "Coca-Colanization" (which was first used in American media in 1978) to refer to the growing Americanization of foreign marketplaces (and cultures) as it is represented in the Coca-Cola Company's marketing practices and widespread brand recognition. (<http://www.wordspy.com/words/Coca-Colanization.asp>).

can of Coke is like the gifts of a thousand Christmases," David Hellman observes.

And, on this level, McCarthy is using the highly recognizable product as a succinct marker of the mighty but fallen "world of goods" in which this micro-society must operate and upon which it must feed. This realm, like the derelict houses and towns, has completely collapsed in McCarthy's post-apocalyptic scenario, and the father and son are left to search for the errant canned foods that might sustain them for another few days. On a more emotional level, the alien beverage allows the father to bring to life for the boy some small part of a "planet that no longer (exists)" except in his own memories (153).

He gets that chance again when the duo encounters an underground cache of canned goods, paper plates, and other supplies. The boy is uncomfortable from the outset with the small room, though it provides them with much needed shelter and food as well as the opportunity to bathe and restock their supplies. The father is bolder and relishes, at first, the sights and smells of his old life.<sup>17</sup> However, he eventually becomes uncomfortable in the bunker. "This was not hiding in the woods. This was the last thing from that," (144) he thinks, and soon he is visited by strange dream-creatures who exhort him to leave:

All that was left was the feeling of (the dream). He thought perhaps they'd come to warn him...that he could not enkindle in the heart of the child what was ashes in his own. Even now some part of him wished they'd never found this refuge. Some part of him always wished it to be over (154).

For the man and boy, McCarthy suggests, any return to the plastic comforts of the old world must be temporary and must be coupled with a sense of unease. For while they incorporate

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<sup>17</sup> It is interesting to note that the two drink "Coca Cola out of plastic mugs" (148) while they are in the bunker despite the boy's earlier observation that he would "(never) get to drink another one" (24). The bunker is so filled with the fare of the old world that they can both partake in the treat; and they can eat a breakfast of fried ham, scrambled eggs and coffee and take hot baths.

the detritus and scant remaining goods of the dead marketplace into their diet and their daily routines<sup>18</sup> - they can never fully return to it. Their society is far more suited to the type of lean efficiency the father displays later in the narrative when he finds a sack of cornmeal in a deserted house after a long, fruitless search for food. The meal has been overlooked by foragers but not by the rats that have been eating and defecating in it. Undeterred, the man "sift(s) the meal through a section of window screen...collect(s) a small handful of dried turds...(builds) a fire on the concrete porch (with them)" and cooks the small mealcakes "over a piece of tin"(84) -- thereby making expeditious use of both the edible and inedible parts of his find (the cornmeal and the rat droppings).

This same resourcefulness is exhibited again when the father leaves the boy "(lying) in the woods like a faun" to search for food on a deserted farm. Walking barefoot through the dead orchard he finds a shirt load full of "brown and shriveled" apples and, later, a forgotten cistern of sweet rainwater, which he collects in mason jars to take back to the boy. In this scene, McCarthy provides an especially powerful counterpoint to earlier scenes in which the duo is picking at the remains of the "preservative culture" (the lone Coke, the underground room full of canned goods and paper plates). Here, they manage to eat a meal that is, for once, completely independent of the lost, mass-food-market. They eat the shriveled apples whole, seeds and all, and drink the clear water till their bellies bloat and there is, the father says, "nothing in...memory anywhere of anything so good" (123). The scene binds the two together as a survivalist society which, to operate most efficiently, must

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<sup>18</sup> In addition to the canned foods and powdered drink packets that are incorporated into their diet, the two also use a grocery cart to transport their food, belongings and bedding from one place to the next. Much energy is put into hiding the cart when they camp, and it occupies such a place of supremacy in their lives that it often dictates their movements over the terrain (i.e. at one point, they "[noon] in the middle of the road and [fix] hot tea" because "the cart [is] too heavy to push into the wet woods" [156]).

keep a foot in each of the two worlds - that of the mass-produced and that of the natural.

Both worlds, McCarthy shows us, are dead or dying: the trash-strewn, water logged grocery stores represent a type of death as real as the barren tracts of land over which the two travel.

The world of the man-made and the world of the natural - each have shriveled and dried up in the post-apocalyptic realm of The Road, and the only society that can still exist is one that learns to effectively exploit the tiny remnants of life, of sustenance, that might still exist in these spheres.

### **The Barbaric Societies: the Bloodcults**

While the society of two makes its way quietly through the countryside - an amorphous unit that ingests the decaying elements of man-made society and takes refuge in the forests and hills of the dying natural world - they must be wary of contact with the bloodcults who form the only fixed, multi-person society we see in The Road. The bloodcults are made up of barbaric men who will rape, kill, eat or enslave any travelers they find and who war with one another for power. The father and son's interactions with them are mercifully limited (the father is forced to shoot one of them when the barbarian stumbles into the woods to relieve himself and attempts to capture the boy at knifepoint). Other than their brief contact with the "rachitic" man whose "colliculus and temporal gyrus" are turned "to soup" by the father's bullet -- the man and the boy have only indirect contact with the cults themselves (63,64).

What indirect contact they do have, however, sheds much light on the way in which society, in McCarthy's vision, has regrouped itself post-disaster. McCarthy lets us know that in the first years after the apocalypse the "roads were peopled with refugees...credless shells



of men tottering down the causeway"(28). But by the time we see the man and boy, they can travel for days - even weeks - at a time without encountering another living being. Society has become, McCarthy suggests, as thin and anemic an organism as the curs that roam the outskirts of the deserted towns. People do not group together in large numbers because larger numbers are more likely to attract the attention of the bloodcunts and because there are, simply, fewer and fewer people left.

The dominant multi-peopled communities that still exist are the bloodcunts themselves. These rustic bands of men have fought many wars with one another for control of the land, the evidence of which is strewn across charred farms and forests. In one scene, the father ruefully observes the ruins of an old battlefield that is reminiscent of some scene from the Middle Ages:

Shapes of dried blood in the stubble grass and gray coils of viscera where the slain had been field-dressed and hauled away. The wall beyond held a frieze of human heads, all faced alike, dried and caved....crude tattoos etched in some homebrewed woad faded in the beggared sunlight. Spiders, swords, targets. A dragon. Runic slogans, creeds misspelled (90).

In this snapshot of a battle long-gone, we get a glimpse into the workings of this society of brute warriors; McCarthy paints them as men who lived hard and violent lives, men who inflicted much violence upon others but were not, themselves, immune to the repercussions of such a lifestyle and who often died terrible deaths. They are indelibly marked with the symbols of their tribes and with runes that indicate, perhaps, a return to the days of magic and witchcraft.

While this community is clearly ordered and ruled by savagery, it is the only one that can survive on any large-scale in a dying post-apocalyptic earth. Because there is no fertile

soil to till or food to grow, agrarian communities cannot form. Thus the only community that can be sustained beyond the basic family unit is one based solely on war-mongering and cannibalism, preying on those who are weaker or smaller in number than themselves. Their ruthlessness makes them, in some respects, less vincible than the other travelers on the road; thus they are also the only beings who dare traverse the burned, ashen highways without fear - as is evidenced when (shortly after coming upon the old battlefield) the father and son cautiously observe a large band of them (with slaves in tow) marching down the road:

...all wearing red scarves at their necks...an army in tennis shoes, tramping. Carrying three-foot lengths of pipe with leather wrappings. Some of the pipes were threaded through with lengths of chain fitted at their ends with every manner of bludgeon...the phalanx following carried spears or lances tasseled with ribbons, the long blades hammered out of trucksprings...behind them came wagons drawn by slaves...and after that the women...some of them pregnant, and lastly a consort of catamites...yoked each to each (91-92).

Like the yellowing tattooed skulls of their dead comrades, these men also bear the marks of a gruesome sort of community. They wear scarves of red or orange around their necks to visually tie themselves together. They also carry weapons that are uniform in their makeup and production; one group carries matching lead pipes (three feet in length with leather wrappings and lanyards) while a second group carries spears and lances. On their wagons are the goods they have plundered from other bloodcults like themselves or perhaps from one of the "good" settlements the father alludes to but which we never see (one wonders if perhaps they have become extinct). Their wagons are drawn by slaves and trailed by captive women and young boys (catamites) who are kept alive only for their use as sexual objects. Some of the women are pregnant but we suspect their infants will meet the same grim fate as

one the father and son come across later in the novel.<sup>19</sup> These perversions, The Road tells us, comprise the normative embodiment of "family" and fertility in this post-apocalyptic wasteland; most of the women and children we see in the novel have been captured by the bloodcults and kept alive as sex slaves or, worse, harvested as sources of food. The father and son, in their incessant searching for the scant remains of the "dead marketplace" (cans of food), would seem to be the exception rather than the rule. Most people (we assume) long ago gave in to the temptations of cannibalism or, else, were consumed by those who did.

In addition to being the only group who undauntedly travel the roads and byways, the bloodcults are also the only people we see who still maintain some semblance of "domesticity" in its traditional realm - the house. In a morose inversion of family and home, it is the bloodcults alone who (in a multi-person community that mimics, on some level, a family) live in the one occupied house we see in The Road. The house is a great, dilapidated structure and the setting for what is, arguably, the most disturbing scene in the novel. From the descriptions McCarthy gives it easy to guess that this house is an old plantation home, "a once grand house...with white Doric columns across the front" whose windows are "oddly intact" (105). Previous descriptors in this section hint that the duo are traveling through one of the Southern states, and as they ascend the front steps and cross the great porch, the father observes that "chattel slaves had once trod those boards bearing food and drink on silver trays" (105). The layered significance of this particular location (one that formerly housed slaves) is made more obvious when the father discovers a padlocked hatch in the floor of a

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<sup>19</sup> At one point, they see three men and a pregnant woman walking down the road - "all of them wretched looking beyond description". Later, they catch up to where these same travelers have made and fled camp, only to discover a "charred human infant headless and gutted and blackening on the spit" (195, 198).

side room. Thinking it may hide a secret store of food, the father determinedly pries open the lock and descends the steps into the darkened basement. There he encounters a sight as macabre as any in Dante's hell<sup>20</sup>:

Huddled against the back wall were naked people, male and female, all trying to hide, shielding their faces with their hands. On the mattress lay a man with his legs gone to the hip and the stumps of them blackened and burnt....Help us, they whispered. Please help us. (110)

These pitiful souls are being held as food stores by the band of cannibals who occupy the plantation house. The father hastily and uncomprehendingly observes the evidence of the cannibals' "trade" as he is searching for an implement to open the hatch (piles of clothes, shoes, belts, etc. taken from the captives; a 40 gallon cauldron that was once "used for rendering hogs"; a cord and brass bell used to signal, from the road, that "prey" is approaching the house[109]).

And while this scene is certainly horrifying and far from any conventional ideas of home or family, McCarthy presents it as a black inversion of fixed domesticity<sup>21</sup> in this sterile, sunless world. Because they have devised a system to catch the only available "prey" (other human beings) that still roams the dull grey hills and valleys, these cannibals are able to stay rooted in one spot and enjoy some of the benefits of such a lifestyle; there are mattresses and bedding arranged in front of the fireplace of their home -- indicating that,

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<sup>20</sup> In the Ninth Bolgia of the Eighth Circle of Dante's *Inferno* is a sword-wielding devil who hacks away at the Sowers of Scandal and Schism. These poor sinners are "maimed with limbs lopped off" and "guts (spilling) out, with the heart and other vital parts, and the dirty sack that turns to shit whatever the mouth gulps down" (326). To ensure they will continually endure the pain of fresh injury, their bodies heal themselves each time they walk round the circle until they reach the devil who hacks away at them once more. As the father and son descend into the hellish basement of the plantation house, they encounter the captured travellers who are similarly dismembered; their limbs, however, will not regenerate but will end up in the cauldrons of the bloodcult.

<sup>21</sup> The father and son present a model of small-scale, *mobile* domesticity and have perfected the art of assembling and disassembling their moveable home; however, they are unable to stop in one spot for too long for fear of being discovered by exactly these types of people (cannibals, bloodcults).

while the father and son spend most nights cowering in the cold, ashen darkness of the woods and plains, these cannibals spend most of their nights sleeping comfortably in front of a warm fire. And while the novel certainly does not suggest that theirs qualifies as a bucolic existence<sup>22</sup>, the house remains the closest thing to a physical "home" that can be found in McCarthy's vision of the post-apocalypse.

### **Hope for the Future**

While McCarthy's vision of society in The Road is bleak - he does gesture toward some hope for recovery as it is embodied in the boy. The boy is an innately spiritual being and one who tends, against all odds and often foolishly, to reach out to the other travelers the pair meet on the road. McCarthy uses this natural altruism as well as the father's own estimations of the boy as being "god-like" to highlight what might be a new type of "citizen". While the boy cannot guarantee society's survival, he is at least striving towards some rebuilding of community. For the boy, more than his father, sees the world as one of possibilities and not as one "shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities"<sup>23</sup> (88). As David Hellman suggests, he is still able to see opportunities for joy and spirituality in the landscape and seems, at times, to be "the last flame of sanguinity in the world".

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<sup>22</sup> In addition to McCarthy's descriptions of mattresses in front of the fireplace, we are also told that their kitchen is piled with trash and smells of "mold and excrement" (108).

<sup>23</sup> This is how the man describes his shrinking world - in which "the names of things slowly (follow) those things into oblivion...in time to wink out forever" (88-89). For him, who lived in the pre-apocalypse world, this new earth is a mere phantom of what once was and so a sense of death and loss continues to accost him long after the last plants and animals have died. As his memories of the long-dead creatures and fauna fade away - he feels as though he is losing them all over again. The boy, who has never known of the old world except through his father's stories, is not tormented by these memory-deaths and is thus freed to see the world for what it actually is. If nothing else, McCarthy suggests, this vantage point provides him a neutral starting point from which to build his view of community.

The most obvious nods to the boy's place as a type of ethereal being lie in the father's overt references to this trait; early on in the novel, the father scans a canyon for signs of life below and thinks of the boy: "If he is not the word of God, God never spoke" (5). Later, when discussing the boy with an old man they meet on the road, he says: "What if I said that he's a god?" (172). These allusions are made especially powerful because the man has *lost* faith in his own God<sup>24</sup> (the God of the old, modern world) and seems to cling to the boy as a new referent for godliness.

The boy himself is naturally altruistic. Again and again throughout the novel, McCarthy shows the boy attempting to reach out to the beings whom his father urges him to avoid or view with indifference: the old man they meet on the road (he convinces his father to give the man a can of peaches), the "phantom boy" he spots in a deserted city ("I'm afraid for that little boy... We should go get him" [86]), a dog barking in the distance (the boy makes his father promise they would never eat a dog), the infant who has been gutted and charred on a spit ("If we had that little baby it could go with us" [200]). In each encounter, the boy asserts his sense of community - despite all evidence pointing him away from such idealism. So strong is his desire to connect with other beings that he even reaches out to the dead; when they find the cache of food in the underground storeroom, it is the boy who inquires about the people who put the food there and insists on offering thanks to them for the meal they've provided:

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<sup>24</sup> At one point in the novel, the man cries out to his old God: "Are you there?...Have you a neck by which to throttle you? Have you a heart? Damn you eternally have you a soul? Oh God...Oh God." (11-12). The God of the father's world is "recused and denied in this novel," David Hellman posits, "...but this is also a spiritual work, in the sense that spirit and faith are constant partners".

Dear people, thank you for all this food and stuff. We know that you saved it for yourself and if you were here we wouldn't eat it no matter how hungry we were and we're sorry that you didn't get to eat it and we hope that you're safe in heaven with God (147).

With this simple "prayer," McCarthy points directly toward the two traits the boy possesses that his father, who lives with one foot in the new world and one in the old, has lost - a sense of interconnectedness with other beings and a faith in some greater power.<sup>25</sup> And it is this natural straining towards community and goodness in a landscape that seems fit for anything but - that marks the boy as being somehow different. It as if his soul, McCarthy suggests, has adapted to the gray wasteland, as if he is able to see the potential for spirituality and fusion between all living things which his father can or will no longer see (no matter how ardently he attempts to "invoke the forms" [123]). "Any deus here is long absconditus", Niall Griffiths points out, "yet there is a reaching out to (their) gone God, especially from the boy who, we are repeatedly told, is 'carrying the fire' of simple hope attached to his vital innocence."

However, in the final moments of the novel, as he lies dying beneath the crude lean-to the child has constructed for him - the father finally seems able to access his lost spirituality without hesitation: "He lay watching the boy at the fire...Look around you, he said. There is no prophet in the earth's long chronicle who's not honored here today."<sup>26</sup> Whatever form you

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<sup>25</sup> The father speaks aloud of the strength of the boy's faith when talking to the old man they meet on the road:

Old Man -- "Maybe (the boy) believes in God"

Father -- "I don't know what he believes in"

Old Man -- "He'll get over it"

Father -- "No, he wont" (174).

<sup>26</sup> In his final moments, it seems the father is able to tap into some sense of a collective unconscious. In the West, the idea of a collective unconscious is often associated with Emerson's idea of the Over-Soul: "The supreme spirit believed in some mystical philosophies to pervade, animate, or constitute the universe, and with which all human souls are believed to be united...coined by R. W. Emerson" (OED). The concept is also present in Eastern philosophies as Paramatman or Advaita Vedanta.

spoke of you were right" (277). Perhaps McCarthy is suggesting that in nearing the portal between the world of the living and the dead, the father is finally able to swing free of his oppressive memories and embrace the boy's hopes for community. Or perhaps the man is feigning his faith for the boy - attempting to bolster the child's confidence in a future that will not longer include the father. But whatever his motivations, the father makes a point, in those final moments, of embracing the boy's beliefs in a transcendent community.

And in the closing scene of the novel, McCarthy seems to suggest that the boy does join a larger community, one guided by ethics, one that will both protect his body and nurture his spirit. The man who finds him in the road and urges him to come with them seems strong and able to survive the challenges that will face them; he carries "a shotgun upside down over his shoulder on a braided leather lanyard" and he is "a veteran of old skirmishes...scarred across his cheek and one eye wandering" (281-82). Unlike the boy's father, this new figure has a "bandolier" filled with ammunition for his gun and his battle scars seem proof that he has fought and won many battles on the road. However, he is also kind, as his words to the boy inform us. He firmly but kindly encourages the child to go with them ("You can stay here with your papa and die or you can go with me. If you stay you need to keep out of the road...but you should go with me") (283). This man seems to be one who can both protect the boy and provide him with a positive paternal model. Plus, he has children, the boy learns - a boy<sup>27</sup> and a girl. And he has a wife who, when she sees the boy, "put(s) her arms around him and (holds) him" and who speaks to him "of God" (286). All of these things certainly suggest hope since certain of the child's dreams of community and

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<sup>27</sup> We suspect this is probably the other boy who was spotted earlier in the deserted city.



family have been fulfilled by this new band of travelers; he now has two children to play with, a mother figure who shares his spirituality<sup>28</sup> and a is part of a group which seems better equipped than his father to reach out to the other travelers they encounter<sup>29</sup>. Furthermore, we know that McCarthy sees this new family's journey as extending at least somewhat into the future (beyond the father's death) since he refers to their interactions, in the final paragraphs, in the past tense.

And, yet, no matter how promising these developments and new relationships might seem, The Road makes no promises as to the community's survival in this post-apocalyptic world. Community on both the micro and macro level is still threatened and the intricate natural balance of the world, once destroyed, can "not be made right again" McCarthy tells us (287). Without the ability to grow food and with the occasional band of cannibals to avoid, we aren't certain how long the small family can survive. But the novel offers a small hope that survival and even -- progress -- is possible. And that, while they are alive, they will strive to maintain the same "forms" of community, family and domesticity that the boy and his father so fiercely guarded despite their woeful surroundings and all portents encouraging them to give up hope and resort to barbarism like so many before them. For McCarthy, the fate of mankind in a post-apocalyptic landscape is an ambiguous one, one fraught with peril and uncertainty - but one in which positive models of community have some chance of survival as long as there are men, women and children who will nurture that small flame.

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<sup>28</sup> The boy tries to talk to God but feels more comfortable talking to his father. The woman tells him that this is "all right". "The breath of God," she says, "was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all of time" (286). Her sentiment recalls the father's deathbed observations about the intertwining of all beings, and this woman seems well-suited to nurture the child's yearning spiritual side -- much moreso than his own mother who could see no reason to keep living in what, to her, seemed a godless, forsaken world.

<sup>29</sup> We can assume that, since they have accepted the boy into their fold, this family must be better able to reach out to other travelers than was the the boy's father.

### **Chapter Three**

#### **Stuck Between Past and Present: The Pre-Linguistic Present of Butler's "Speech Sounds"**

In her short story, "Speech Sounds", Octavia Butler is interested in the loss of language as an apocalypse in itself. No large-scale, natural disaster has occurred; there is no fire from heaven, no bomb or great wall of water overthrowing the towns and cities. In Octavia Butler's vision, the apocalypse is precipitated by a loss of complex spoken and written language, which, in turn, highlights the ways in which our complex linguistic system is so intricately tied to our complex societal systems. Only because of our ability to communicate with such nuance, she suggests, are we able to sustain large cities and communities that house, feed and transport hundreds of thousands of people everyday. Without effective communication, these systems fall into disrepair. Thus, for Butler, language is the most essential binding element of any complex society. Without it, a society reverts to one based not on a nexus of rules and metarules but, instead, on the atavistic laws of nature, which are just beneath the surface of our everyday lives.

In "Speech Sounds" this transition from language-rich social order to anarchy is not yet complete but is in medias res. This falls in line with what Jenny Wolmark sees as Butler's tendency to be "concerned with the exploration of transitional states in which boundaries between self and other become fluid" (Wolmark 29, *quod*. from Sands). And while there is certainly that thread of the ellision or breakdown of personal identity in the face of some formidable new force (Rye struggles to reconcile the old vision of herself with her new role in the Post-Apocalyptic wasteland), I aim to focus more on Butler's overarching

vision of transition as it applies to this post-apocalyptic society as a whole<sup>30</sup>. Butler sees the society as one in flux and one in which even the sporadic remainders of the old system (the Ryes and Obsidians who can still speak or write) are hard pressed to join together and form literate communities. If they are lucky enough to find each other, Butler shows us, there is no guarantee that their language skills will be compatible. Thus "Speech Sounds" shows a society in a moment of suspended collapse - struggling to let go completely of its old referents and accept this new, atavistic agrarian order.

She represents this metamorphosis in the characters of Rye, Obsidian and the bus driver who capture, more succinctly than do their grunting comrades, the unique moment of "suspended transition" in which this society finds itself: for Butler the post-apocalyptic, language-less human society is one that is stuck in an "pre-linguistic present." The past has been eradicated. Written historical records are rendered meaningless because no one can read them, and no new histories can be written or even passed along orally -- thus, there is no past or future. There is only an eternal, visceral present. The society is not static, Butler shows us. The society as a whole is adapting to the new reality and creating new definitions of family, community and lawfulness - to suit the demands of their new, silent world. However, the loss of language as a result of some bio-agent or man-made pollutant has robbed this world of its core human traits - the ability to remember the past and project hope into the future. Without this tool there is little hope that the society will ever be more than an

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<sup>30</sup> There could also be room within "Speech Sounds" to look at Rye's struggle with the newly established gender roles of this dystopian society, a trend toward the "reimagination of women's cultural and narrative roles" which, Peter Sands relates, many critics have examined (1).

animalistic clan of mutes and little hope that they will be able to hold onto even the modicum of technology and democratic order that still remains.

Butler does show, at the end of the story, that Rye at least has gained a community with "historical potential." She vows to act as "protector and teacher" to the verbal children and will take Obsidian home to bury his body and, presumably, mark his passing (a type of historical record). However, whether or not these beings indicate a new wave of literate children is left unclear. If they do exist and proliferate, they will be born into a world with very narrow historical horizons - and one which may never recover from this "pre-linguistic present."

The story begins with Valerie Rye, a former history professor at UCLA, making a dangerous journey between L.A. and Pasadena where she hopes to find her brother and three nephews still alive. Her husband and children have long since died as a result of a mysterious disease, a "new virus, a new pollutant, radiation, divine retribution..." that struck the world's population and robbed them of their ability to speak, read or write. "The illness was stroke-swift in the way it cut people down and strokelike in...its effects" Rye tells us, "...language was always lost or severely impaired (and) it was never regained" (96). In the wake of this disaster, people have deserted the cities and fled to the countryside where they live, to a large extent, like animals. Because they can no longer speak, most beings communicate with grunts and gestures or - often - with fists and violence. This is the case on Rye's bus journey as a scuffle breaks out between several brutish young men. Blessed with the rare ability to speak, Rye is forever on guard against these sorts of men and against being recognized as

"different"; she keeps a close hold on the "old forty five automatic" she carries in her coat (91) and trusts no one until she meets Obsidian, another intelligent being who can read and write and still patrols the deserted streets in his LAPD uniform. He offers her a ride in his car and respite from the dangerous bus, which she hesitantly accepts. No sooner have the pair agreed to be partners and mates (they consummate their union in the back of Obsidian's car) than Obsidian is killed while trying to protect a woman from being murdered. Rye is forlorn at the loss of this new companion but buoyed by the discovery of two intelligent children who also retain their ability to speak<sup>31</sup>. She packs the children into Obsidian's car and heads back to her home - with a new family and a new sense of purpose.

### **Remnants of the Old Order**

Butler uses the three main characters of the story (Rye, Obsidian and the bus driver) to highlight the unique moments of change in which this society finds itself - the suspended transition between the ways of the old, modern world and the ways of the new, primal one. Each retains some of his or her linguistic ability and suffers, on certain levels, from the same frustrations, jealousies and communication hurdles as do the more oafish denizens of this terrain. As a result, Butler shows us these characters with one foot in each world; and they are - accordingly - maimed and hobbled in their efforts to navigate an environment for which they are only partly suited. Their plight is the plight of this society, Butler posits, one that has adopted radically new, animalistic definitions of community, family and history (or the lack thereof) and is struggling to make sense of these new paradigms.

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<sup>31</sup> They've been left behind by the murdered woman who Obsidian died trying to protect.

Rye, a former professor of history and freelance writer, has retained her ability to speak but not to read or write. She has a "houseful of books that she (can) neither read nor bring herself to use as fuel" (98). For Rye, the loss of language has been especially painful since the abstract realm of education and higher thought which she occupied pre-apocalypse has, Butler shows us, been totally eradicated in this new environment. Not only are there no journals or newspapers, no schools or universities, but there are also no history books (there will *be* no more history books) because "history" itself has ceased to exist. Without the ability to read or write, these humans cannot record their own history - relate the tragedies that have occurred as a result of the enigmatic disease or warn future generations. And without the ability to speak they cannot even pass along oral accounts of the past to future generations.<sup>32</sup>

Thus Rye, living in solitude with her myriad impotent books, represents the dying world of education, of learning and - importantly - of historical reality. For Butler, this is a society permanently trapped in the present. With no past behind them and no future ahead, they are, she suggests, doomed to live out the animalistic patterns of this society without any room for lateral movement. Using Rye's unique vantage point as a former record keeper and guardian of the past, Butler shows that these people live in a nearly flattened reality, two dimensional in its emotional and intellectual scope. It is Rye's discomfort and mournfulness as she observes the narrow minds and narrow horizons of her fellow citizens that highlights most pointedly the stunted nature of this illiterate a-historical world: "Today's children

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<sup>32</sup> To add insult to injury, their memories have also, Butler indicates, been affected. Rye says "she (has) a memory that would not bring back to her much of what she had read before" (98). And so any oral history that could be passed along would probably soon be forgotten.

(gather) books as well as wood to be burned as fuel," she tells the reader, "They (run) through the streets chasing one another and hooting like chimpanzees. They (have) no future. They (are) now all they (will) ever be" (101).

Butler uses Rye's pained observations to highlight the waning of historical potentialities, and for Rye, this loss is a tragic one. But most of the inhabitants of this world, she shows us, have already surrendered themselves to the consciousness of the animal world in which histories are not recorded or passed on to future generations. This world is one of quick, visceral moments - a heated struggle on a crowded bus, a threat of rape or violence delivered with a "quick...obvious" gesture of the hand (94). And it is one driven by immediate, basic goals - food, shelter, and procreation.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, for Butler, the absence of language "flattens" the post-apocalyptic world. Their society is paralyzed - although there are flickering signs of flux and change.<sup>34</sup>

While Butler uses Rye's struggles in this silent terrain to highlight the collapse of historical horizons, she uses the bus driver and Obsidian to show the disintegration of technology and organization that swirls within this pre-linguistic present. For without organizing language, Butler shows us, a society cannot continue to function on any abstract, complex level and its technological systems will fall into disrepair. Of the buses themselves Butler tells us: "Buses

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<sup>33</sup> Most of the ignorant brutes, Rye tells us, have moved to the countryside to raise "corn, rabbits and children" (99).

<sup>34</sup> As is evidenced by the fact that Rye is a remainder of the old world who is trying with great pains to find an outlet for her voice in this new, silent terrain.

were so rare and irregular now, people rode when they could, no matter what" (91) and of the bus driver himself we are told:

He had pasted old magazine pictures of items he would accept as fare on (the bus's) sides. Then he would use what he collected to feed his family or to trade. If the bus did not run, he did not eat. (93).

For Butler, the loss of essential language makes these citizens seem like feckless children playing "shop" or "school," using the small props or toys given to them by their parents to act out and imitate complicated actions which they do not fully grasp. For in the post-disaster, simple society - the bus operates outside of the normal, complex markers of economy or business that ruled the modern world. No money passes hands; money has become worthless. These complex elements, Butler shows with the bus driver's bartering system, have dissolved and the driver is left with two simple objectives: keep the bus running, collect food or other goods as fare.

We know that he, like Rye, may retain some of his linguistic abilities<sup>35</sup> and is, to some extent, partly in the new world (the animalism, the violence) and partly separate from it. He clearly has the wherewithal and reasoning abilities to drive his route - even if his operation is sporadic and makeshift. The bus driver and his bus, for Butler, represent the dissolution of a myriad of social constructions and systems (transportation, technology, economy) as well as metaphorically pointing to the entrapment of these citizens as a result of their loss of language. They are trapped, existentially, (as we see through Rye's viewpoint) in the present moment - divested of past and future, divested of historical records. And they are trapped, quite literally, in the countrysides and polygamous family units in which they

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<sup>35</sup> When the bus driver yells at Obsidian, Rye observes: "there seemed to be words in his shout" (94).



have settled since any semi-safe movement about the terrain relies on these ailing technological dinosaurs - the buses - that will likely stop moving altogether in the near future.

Butler uses Obsidian too to show the ways in which this society has undergone vast organizational changes in the wake of language loss and highlights the difficulty (and, perhaps, pointlessness) of maintaining democratic ideals. When Rye sees Obsidian in his LAPD uniform, she thinks of him that he is "playing cops and robbers" (101). Obsidian's efforts to police the deserted streets are, though laudable by our standards, at odds with the natural law that governs this society. Complicated systems of law are meant for complicated societies and, in this new world (one without a past or future), Social Darwinism rules the landscape. Obsidian is powerful only as long as he maintains a hold on his handgun; the minute his guard is down, he is unceremoniously shot in the temple and dies instantly. In a world without long-term consequence, one with no tomorrow, there is little place, Butler tells us, for laws or lawmen. However, Obsidian persists in his attempts to maintain some connection to his life before the disaster. For him, community does, on some level, still exist and is embodied by those who retain language skill, memories and - thus - histories that extend beyond the present moment.

In Butler's vision, the loss of language has halted any societal progress, undermined and nearly destroyed the technological and organizational webs that bind the modern society and, most importantly, has robbed these humans of their ability to remember history or to

create it. Thus, their chances of recovering positive societal structures or of creating an environment in which new, linguistic societies could form<sup>36</sup> are very slim.

At most, Butler indicates that Rye has found an outlet for her intellectual and verbal desires, which are so at odds with the rest of the "community." She packs the vocal children into her care and heads for home with a new family and a new sense of purpose. She, at least, will now be able to communicate with beings like herself and will, in this communication, be able to tap into the elusive realms of human memory and projection from which she was formerly exiled. She may be able to create for herself and the children, Butler hints, some exchange of ideas which will raise them above their present reality. They can discuss past events and muse about futurities. In short, Butler puts within Rye's grasp - at the close of "Speech Sounds" - the potential to form a small community that will be more more "human" than the brutish world that surrounds it.

In this development, there is some small hope - if only the "hope of hoping".<sup>37</sup> But whether Butler sees or predicts a recovery of language or the organizational systems and record keeping it undergirds is not certain. What she does see is a society in flux, one that is very much in the *present* and in the process of giving itself over to a Darwinian social order. This process is nearly complete save the few remnants of the old society (the literate beings who, like ghosts or feckless children, still walk amongst the brutes, acting out their roles from the old social order). As long as they live, Butler insinuates, there is an outside chance that this "society of the present" could someday

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<sup>36</sup> Societies which would be comprised of those who retained some language skills and the new children who may be born with the ability to learn language.

<sup>37</sup> Butler has said of dystopian narratives that lean towards a hopeful scenario for humanity: "...the very act of trying to look ahead to discern possibilities and offer warnings is in itself an act of hope" ("A Few Rules", 165).

## Conclusion

The post-apocalyptic narrative has the leeway to imagine, and is charged with the task of, imagining the end of modern civilization for a world that lives with the reality of that "possible annihilation" ever day. Americans in particular no longer needed to rely on Biblical images of the Apocalypse to envision the end of humanity, for we could see the seeds of world-wide destruction being sown by our own lawmakers and representatives.

Post-apocalyptic literature then, certainly represents a type of death. In its macabre visions of cannibalism, brutality, rape and starvation we play out our worst fears about what it would mean to live through "the end of everything". And yet, these stories do not portray the end of everything but, more accurately, the transformation of everything. More often than not, post-apocalyptic narratives serve to show us how a catastrophe of apocalyptic proportions might distill our own society, how this catastrophe might force that society to redefine itself. For these narratives, on the whole, are not static. After the imagined explosion or disease has leveled human habitation and the human gene pool, "the world, impossibly, continues and the apocalyptic writer continues to write" (Berger, 132). And those visions almost always include some shifting, evolving picture of a human society that is very much moving toward the inevitable reclamation of "community" in the modern sense of the word. The push for the re-establishment of community is not always achieved; sometimes, in the case of Miller's deterministic view of the post-apocalypse, it is achieved and then lost again. And at other times, as with McCarthy and Butler, society is recreated in small, stealthy communities whose very existence seems to defy the laws of the brutish

landscape around it.

But in all three of the works I've examined, these writers present a world in flux, one defined by the tensions of determinism, decay, small-mindedness contrasted with motion and a hope. For Miller, there is hope that the monks of the order of Leibowitz might, this time around, get it "right". That their colonization of some new planet might not set them on an inevitable course towards a new destruction. For the one thing Miller seems to say with certainty is that humanity won't escape this techno-primitive cycle anytime soon (the monks take the Memorabilia with them into space). And as long as they are moving, changing, getting second or third or fourth chances - there is hope, we must infer, that they might someday get it right. Or else, Miller hints, nature will get it right *for* them and create some new creature (as represented by Rachel) who is immune to the effects of radiation.

McCarthy, too, sees a society in motion, one that is valid in its own right and has the ability to tap into some overarching spirit of humanity. Whereas for Miller society is moving in large, sweeping circles (an Oroboros eating its tail), McCarthy sees two pale figures, plastic bags on their road-weary feet, trudging slowly down the empty, melted roadways of a post-apocalypse America. This too, McCarthy says, is a society. Look to it and see all the forms of your busy communities - simplified, dirty, garish at times but real, nevertheless. And certainly McCarthy, like Miller, sees reason to mourn this blighted landscape and these waifish figures who inhabit it. His narrative certainly makes no promises as to *where* society might go, but that it is going *somewhere* away from death, away from inhumanity is certain. Those things lie behind the new family that is formed at the end of The Road; that much we know. But what lies ahead of them is a mystery. McCarthy

leaves us room to hope that the futurities might be better than the past.

And Butler, finally, shows a society whose movement or evolution is more constrained, less easily spotted than in the other narratives. The inhabitants of her world are mute and dumb. They have lost their old histories and their abilities to create new ones. They are trapped, it seems, in the present moment - with no thought or conception of "tomorrow". And, yet, even this seeming checkmate has room for negotiation. There might be, Butler hints, a few moves left before complex, human society is completely dismantled. In the characters of Rye, Obsidian and the busdriver - Butler shows a society that has not completely given into the virological agent that threatens it. Words are still spoken in this landscape, though they might be whispered behind closed doors. And new life too, she indicates, may be adapting to the disease; the verbal children (like Rachel in Canticle and the boy in The Road) seem more adapted to the post-apocalyptic terrain than do the original survivors - the semi-linguistic adults. In this Butler points, like Miller and McCarthy, to some possible Phoenix rising from the ashes of the old. There is hope, she says, though it is small and ungainly. It exists in a world, in each of these worlds (Miller's, McCarthy's and Butler's) because society, in various new forms, is still in motion.

Thus Miller, McCarthy and Butler - like so many other apocalyptic writers of the past fifty years, strain to show us the devastation, the carnage, the brutality - yes - but also the potential for social survival after the apocalypse - whether that survival is large-scale or very contained. They do not see much hope for redemption, but they do see *some* hope, and it is this straining toward hope that makes the post-apocalyptic novel not merely a narrative of the decimation of society but also, as "(a history) of a future yet to come" (Wolf-Meyer, 6).

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