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“Golden Chalice, Good to House a God’: Still Life in *The Road*”

In the conclusion of his ecological study *The Song of the Earth* Jonathan Bate requests that the reader “hold in your mind’s eye a photograph of the earth taken from space: green and blue, smudged with the motion of cloud . . . so small in the surrounding darkness that you could imagine cupping it with your hands. A planet that is fragile, a planet of which we are a part but which we do not possess” (282). Such a portrayal of earth, a photographic object study viewed as if from an orbiting spacecraft, has been used repeatedly, according to Stephen Yearly, “to evoke Earth’s isolation in space, its fragility and wonder, and the sense the beings on it share a restricted living space surrounded by an unwelcoming void” (65). In Cormac McCarthy’s new novel, *The Road*, we see perhaps the endgame of this fragile, vulnerable ball, as an unnamed father and son make their desperate journey toward the southern sea, shrouded pilgrims witnessing the seeming death throes of the planet. It is an apocalyptic narrative, participating in an ancient genre, getting its name from the Greek *apo-calyptein*, meaning to “un-veil.” As Damian Thompson has suggested, these narratives frequently take “the form of a revelation of the end of history. Violent and grotesque images are juxtaposed with glimpses of a world transformed; the underlying theme is usually a titanic struggle between good and evil” (13-14).<sup>1</sup>

In *The Road*, as in all McCarthy novels, the presence of evil is palpable and serves as a primal force in the world with which characters must in some way contend. McCarthy’s use of visual structures and tropes often function as signs to guide the reader toward understanding this narrative violence, especially with regard to characters’ vision and the text’s framing of specific visual scenes. Several scholars have noticed the prevalence of McCarthy’s extended landscape

passages, those rhetorically opulent spaces that often double as characters and reveal crucial  
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thematic and tonal information.<sup>2</sup> The physical landscape of *The Road* is certainly no different, a terrifying picture on a grand scale, complete with its blackened valley of ashes, roaring winds and burned out stalks of trees amid endless miles of catastrophic devastation. And yet, this narrative landscape is also significant for its littering of material objects, its broken and abandoned artifacts scattered across this bleak wasteland, remnants shorn of their previous functions in a post-apocalyptic world. In accordance with the ancient narrative of the Apocalypse, many of these objects are represented in such a way that they resemble still lifes, that often overlooked genre frequently relegated to the bottom tier of fine art hierarchy, considered mere formal exercises incomparable to majestic portraits or grandiose landscapes. And yet, as Rosemary Lloyd has argued, still life offers a unique voice in written texts, a *sotto voce* that nevertheless speaks volumes despite its humble and familiar pedigree.

John Hollander, in his analysis of ekphrasis,<sup>3</sup> argues that certain literary passages mimic painterly genres such as the still life and thus “exploit deeper rhetorical design. . . . [through] the emergence of some explanatory or interpretative agenda” encapsulated in the narrative image or scene (90). Many of these textual images can be read through a variety of critical lens that imbue the scenes with a multi-voiced presence depending on how we look at them, whether we see them as “purely narrative, iconographical, formal, or . . . structurally semiotic” (90). In *The Road*, still life passages demand a variety of interpretive strategies to ferret out their potential messages, for these scenes function as focal points in the construction of narrative meaning and foreground the Apocalyptic narrative’s emphasis on vision and unveiling as central metaphors of the novel. In this regard, *The Road* emphasizes the visual through isolated images and material objects that, like the precious blue and green orb seen from outer space, register as object studies

where the novel's central tensions are dramatized.

Guy Davenport asserts that the still life genre, with its origins in ancient Egyptian and Hebrew cultures, has always encoded its objects as metaphorical transactions regarding issues of time, agency, power and metaphysical speculation. Long before the prosperous Dutch merchants would adorn their northern homes with impeccably rendered images of exotic fruits and material abundance, ancient peoples offered still lifes of sustenance to their cherished dead. In Egypt, devout mourners would place sacred objects beside baskets of fruit, and even paint a picture of a meal on the tomb wall, so that the *Ka*, or soul, would have sustenance "until the coming forth day of Osiris, [when] time will stop, and the righteous dwell forever in the eternal July of the redeemed Egypt" (Davenport 5-6). In the Book of Amos in the Christian Bible, the eighth century shepherd and prophet was given a vision by God: "Thus hath the lord God shewed unto me, and beholde, a basket of summer fruit. And he said, Amos, what seest thou? And I sayde: a basket of summer fruit. Then said the Lord unto me, The ende is come upon my people of Israel; I will not again pass by them any more" (8:1-2). Later developments in the genre, particularly the *vanitas* and *memento mori* motifs with their hollow-eyed grinning skulls<sup>4</sup> and their emphasis on the brevity and uncertainty of life further contributed to the still life's history as "a symbol of what we shall have taken from us" (Davenport 7). Sustenance and annihilation, hope and belief, beauty and death, the elements of ancient still life cohere around a central dualism that embraces both the present physical state of one's existence and the haunting specter of future oblivion, immediacy in the present and ultimate disintegration in the void, and thus has traditionally performed as a contested site that registers anxiety regarding one's mortal existence and the troubling questions regarding spirituality and an afterlife.

In *The Road*, the violent and macabre images of this bleak new world are not juxtaposed with glimpses into a glowing utopian afterlife, but either with haunting dream passages or with framed images that often display material objects in a constructed space for a viewer's contemplation. Even in their stripped-down form,<sup>5</sup> many of these visual passages mimic traditional still lifes or still life elements, either through physical description or metaphor. These scenes encourage visualization on the part of the reader and focus on the power of observation as a means of reading the world. If these characters—the boy in particular—are indeed those to whom the veil of history will be rent in accordance with apocalyptic philosophy, then visual acumen assumes extreme importance with regard to the narrative's obsession with vision as a means of unveiling. In fact, McCarthy uses two visual cues stressing this sensory metaphor to begin the novel, the first a harrowing dream vision of an interior cave-like world complete with slobbering beast and impaired vision, “eyes dead white and sightless as the eggs of spiders” (3), and the second when, after waking, the father scopes the valley below through the lens of the binoculars.<sup>6</sup> Together, both tropes produce a crucially thematic interior/exterior structural motif which will continue throughout the text: in this case, the inner landscape of the tormented human mind and the burned and blackened physical landscape they must navigate on their quest to the sea. And both are intimately connected— structurally, metaphorically, symbolically—as the father tells the son, “Just remember that the things you put in your head are there forever” (10).

One of the central ironies in *The Road* is that unlike castaway narratives, especially those marooned in the South Seas where there is usually some type of sustenance but no advanced material objects, everywhere in McCarthy's novel we find the detritus of a broken civilization—

abandoned gas stations and homes, burned out shells of buildings and cities, rolls of metal roofing, barrels of tools, jack-knifed tractor trailers and even a sylvan locomotive—but little to no food with which to sustain life. In this new no country for old men, perhaps on its way to becoming no country for *any men, women or children*, the procurement and use of material objects often rivals the search for food itself as determinants of the characters' survival. In many ways, the plastic blue tarp, the binoculars, the cigarette lighter, the pliers, the pistol, the map, and the shopping cart are as essential as the random stores of canned goods or other foodstuffs for which the father and son continuously search. Objects become, then, intimately connected with the protagonists' very existence, some even to the point where they become psychologically embodied, and when they are lost or left behind, engender in the mind anxiety and something akin to the human sense of loss.

The photograph of the wife is the most obvious example, and one to which I will return shortly, but the father also seems to imbue agency on other artifacts as well, linking these objects to ancient still life elements as ritual helpers along the route of this nightmarish journey towards an afterlife. After a “ragged horde” passes by—possibly one of the new world cannibalist creeds—the father acknowledges that “It’s not a good sign” and that they “*need* to get the map and take a look” (78) for an escape route [emphasis added]. Later, somewhat lost and becoming disoriented, the father again relies on a material object for succor. Freezing and bereft of their provisions, he emphatically tells the boy “[w]e *have* to find the cart” (84) [emphasis added]. The shopping cart, one of their most treasured material helpers, is also both physical and symbolic container. Its core function in the once prosperous society from which it was created was to carry surplus groceries by the abundance, foodstuffs of such abundance one literally had to cart

them away. Now, it remains as a stark reminder of plenty, but like so many of these objects it is an unstable sign, for fitted with a sidebar motorcycle mirror, the cart also functions as post-apocalyptic roadster, its “trunk” loaded with the precious items necessary to their desperate existence, and serves as a testament to human creativity and determination in the face of catastrophe.

In *The Road*, objects used as containers and passages suggesting still life compositions often perform as ironic registers, frequently composing themselves through contradictory images that suggest layers of meaning. In fact, the first physical action of the novel is the father’s preparation of a meal, striking for its display as a still life of objects framed for visual consumption. Waking to the first gray light of a barren world, the father gathers some of their few provisions and returns to their overnight camp “with their plates and some cornmeal cakes in a plastic bag and a plastic bottle of syrup. He spread the small tarp they used for a table on the ground and laid everything out . . . (4-5). This is a highly significant gesture on the father’s part, for despite their condition as scavengers in a seemingly cataclysmic world, he performs the centuries old ritual of preparing the meal as a sign of civilized humanity. Claude Levi-Strauss has argued that “in preparing food for . . . consumption, by symbolic understanding of the ritualness of eating, and by the evolution of table manners, we crossed over from the wild to the tame, from nature to culture” (qtd. in Davenport 11). Since “culture” has been destroyed in this narrative and belongs to the void in a sense, the father’s replication of the civilizing function of still life seems a strategic attempt to maintain a sense of dignity and a meaningful connection to human history as a means of surviving in this raw new world, where barbarity and the specter of cannibalism continuously threaten.

Despite this bleakness, the day should begin properly with breakfast, the still life says. The cornmeal cakes will be eaten with the syrup as a something of a delicacy in this barren world. But this initial still life features a more threatening object, for after the father sets the food on the improvised table, “he took the pistol in his belt and laid it on the cloth and then he just sat watching the boy sleep” (5). The natural and the material merge in this object composition, one we could label “Still Life with Cornmeal Cakes, Syrup and Pistol,” but the passage is important here at the beginning for more than evoking the symbolism of life and death. All these elements—the cakes, the bottle of syrup, the plastic bags, the pistol—perform as containers, an aesthetic strategy developed throughout the narrative with pockets and clusters of other images replicating this spatial metaphor. Bill Brown, in his study *A Sense of Things*, contends that all material objects contain variant levels of significations, such as the “place things occupy in daily life; the place they occupy . . . in the history of human-being; the pressure they exert on us to engage them as something other than mere surfaces” (12). In this sense, the cakes, made from cornmeal and water and laid out flat on a stone or wrapped in a cloth or cabbage leaves directly into a fire itself, contain the history of the region, for it was standard Cherokee practice to cook in this manner what they called “ash cakes” (Folkways 209-211).<sup>7</sup> The image lends a subtle nod to the generations of humanity who have come before, but this positive connection is undermined through its linkage to the billowing clouds of ash that blow incessantly across the now blighted landscape and from which they protect themselves with face masks. The pistol contains two bullets, even though the father will later add fake wooden ones as a ruse, and as a material object literally contains death. And yet it is also an ironic symbol, like the cakes, for although it offers protection and serves as a weapon for disposing of evil in the

world, it is also an iconic image that encapsulates the mindset of the violent and dominating culture from which ostensibly the world-threatening catastrophe has originated.<sup>8</sup> For Brown, the surface of objects leads to our efforts “to penetrate them, to see through them, and to find . . . within an object . . . the subject” (12). Within the elements of this initial still life passage, McCarthy encodes the “subject” of the text, which unblinkingly asks the question: In a world bereft of order, without the civilizing structures of generations of human history, a world seemingly in its last stages of existence, what should be the ethical behavior of a human being—to himself, to others, to higher humanistic or spiritual values?

Although *The Road* (and *No Country for Old Men* as well) may be seen as deviating from McCarthy’s previous writings, in many ways these are questions he has been posing all along. While most scholars have understandably focused on the overarching violence and apparent nihilism in McCarthy’s work, others have viewed McCarthy in more humane terms, suggesting that despite the “exuberant violence . . . there is also evident in his work a profound belief in the need for moral order, a conviction that is essentially religious” (Arnold 46). William Prather has argued for McCarthy’s Camusean existentialism, while Steven Frye posits that McCarthy’s novels occupy a middle ground between the utter darkness of nihilist extremism and the comforts of structured religious faith. Frye’s thesis regarding McCarthy’s imagery, particularly his use of religious and classical iconography, bears special notice for a reading of *The Road*, for Frye considers such passages wrapped in “a tortured ambiguity” that makes reading the images difficult, if not impossible (185, 191). As a visual writer, all of McCarthy’s texts seem to overload the senses with dizzying arrays of images and clusters of signs which often seem enmeshed in ambiguity, and yet the moral message of *The Road* asks us to look closer, to



think more deeply, and to consider from an extreme point of view the condition and purpose of humanity as a species. In this regard, the photograph of the wife presents a particularly difficult problem, for it shares a similar function as other still life elements positioned throughout the text as a surface that contains layers of narrative meaning, but what exactly are we supposed to see? The photo is presented to the reader as part of a larger ensemble of personal items that the father lays out for reflection: “He’d carried his billfold about till it wore a cornershaped hole in his trousers. Then one day he sat by the roadside and took it out and went through the contents. Some money, credit cards. His driver’s license. A picture of his wife. He spread everything out on the blacktop. Like gaming cards. . .” (43).

Unlike most of the passages in the novel that feature a variety of different meals (there are forty such scenes involving eating and drinking), this still life functions more as an object study that resembles something of a self-portrait. Lloyd has argued for a reading of still life passages in texts as performing analogously to the “Italian maxim *ogni dipintore dipinge se* (all painters paint themselves and thus each portrait of the Other is a portrait of the self)” (92). While the father is obviously not an artist, he nevertheless repeatedly frames images and collections of objects for contemplative reflection, and this “Still Life with Wallet, ID Cards and Photograph” is yet another example of this tendency. The billfold is another container image, one that had previously supplied the father with all the certainties built into generations of human history surrounding the rise of modernity—money, credit, a spouse and an official identity marked in time, stamped and approved by the State. The billfold symbolically registers that former self, a realization that the father recounts in this scene, one of several inset memory fragments that haunt the first movement of the novel. Taking one last look at this

“sweatblackened” shell, he pitches it into the woods, but cannot let go of the image of his wife so easily, and he “sat holding the photograph” (93), alone in the road.

The character of the wife in *The Road* presents one of the more difficult interpretive problems of the novel. McCarthy’s representation of women has been widely criticized, and the wife’s brief appearance in *The Road* will not allay such attacks, but if we view the wife’s role in light of the novel’s apocalyptic philosophy, we can begin to see why McCarthy represents her as he does. While it remains unclear why McCarthy chooses the husband over the wife, the novel demands that one of the child’s parents die, so that the entire burden falls on the individual and not a family structure. Although the wife’s reasons for committing suicide and merciful murder may seem logical, even rational, given the potential threats of rape, torture and cannibalism, McCarthy seems to drive the point home here that such a philosophy is untenable, even immoral in the face of human suffering, whether there is an absolute God or not. At night, the father still dreams of the wife, her beauty entrancing and otherworldly, a Botticelli-like vision he learns not to trust: “In dreams his pale wife came to him out of a green and leafy canopy. . . . She wore a dress of gauze and her dark hair was carried up in combs of ivory, combs of shell” (15). Ostensibly, this is the type of image the father has captured in the photograph, a beauty shot of earthly love and sensuality, which he has carried with him since she abandoned them. His gesture of laying the photograph “down in the road” (44) is not an angry rejection of the past, but a renunciation of sensuality, a farewell to previous conceptions of romance, neo-platonic love and the self-absorbed attitude this union can represent. That McCarthy dumps the burden of this theme on the wife may seem unfair, but as a trope she embodies the human mentality that succumbs to fear and doubt and deprivation because it cannot think beyond the limited scope of

the self, one that too readily relinquishes the duty of life, an obligation to which the father so desperately clings. Mere physical beauty has no place in this new world, the father's gesture implies, and the leaving of the photograph frames a fundamental feature of the father's personality, for he will suffer himself no distractions in his sacred guardianship of the boy.

Despite the barrenness of this ashen gray landscape and most of humanity's acquiescence to the bestial under these conditions, beauty plays a profound role in *The Road*. One could even make a strong case that the entire narrative is swathed in the Sublime, the terrifying vision that rends the veil of physical reality and offers the human mind a glimpse of the absolute in all its boundless glory.<sup>9</sup> But while terror may be the crucial component of the Sublime, the father's repeated descriptions of the boy register as the ancient ideal of the beauty inherent in moral goodness. The classical doctrine regarding beauty is grounded on the fundamental tenet that what is regarded as beautiful is equated with the good. Although Greek thought was notoriously ambivalent regarding the physical aspects of beauty (Plato, for instance, famously rejected mimesis as a mere illusory copy of actual Truth), Socrates' theory of functional beauty is of particular importance regarding the father's guardianship of his son in *The Road*. For Socrates, "all things capable of being used by man are considered at once beautiful and good with respect to the things they happen to be useful for. . . . If, therefore, a thing is well-suited to its purpose, with respect to this it is beautiful and good" (*Memorabilia* 133). While this line of thinking is based on material objects, the concept also applies to mental images and metaphors as long as they are "well-suited" to their purpose. In perhaps the most tender scene in the novel, the father gently washes the boy's hair, literally rinsing away the splattered brains of one of the "bad guys" who had briefly held the child hostage. The father muses, and characterizes the boy as a still life

element that evokes Grail imagery: “He sat beside him and stroked his pale and tangled hair. Golden chalice, good to house a god” (82). In extending the still life metaphor to unite material objects with humans, the father conceptualizes the son as an icon of religious significance and suggests the potential sacredness of the human mind. After all, he has previously revealed that his mission is divinely inspired, that “[h]e knew only that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke” (4). As a still life element, the chalice echoes the treasured cup of the Eucharist, and “the head as fate” echoes similar classical and religious busts often included in still lifes which imply philosophical and religious dimensions.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the boy’s head, like other still life imagery throughout the novel, is shaped as a site of intense significance, performing as the narrative’s supreme container motif, the core of ethical and religious values. The boy’s innocence, coupled with the father’s mental imagery, combine to evoke a sense of divine goodness, with language and metaphor serving as a functional beauty that allows the father moments of determined faith that buoy his protection of the child from danger.

Although a reading of all the novel’s still life imagery is outside the scope of this study, two passages linked to the initial breakfast scene lend insight into reading the father and son relationship in *The Road*. Structurally, the initial still life breakfast is echoed twice in the narrative in different settings, the bunker episode with its spoils of abundance and the scene at the dining table in an abandoned house later in the novel. The bounty in the bunker seems to be a godsend for the father and son as it affords them all the trappings of a sustainable existence, with its two cots and mattresses, gas burner plate, extensive stores of food and even a chemical toilet. Davenport has argued for an appreciation of the still life’s facility for puns and double

meanings, and this bunker scene is replete with them. When initially seeing the bunker's contents, the father, who is viewing the room as the child holds the lamp above him on the steps, mutters "Oh my God. . . . Come down. Oh my God. Come down" (116), but he is talking to the boy. The father says he has "found everything" (117), but the bounty of physical sustenance (which would eventually run out given time) suffers in comparison with the previous statement suggesting incarnate spirituality. But the supplies do offer temporary food and shelter for the exhausted, and the father is clearly moved to emotions approximating joy at the sight of such bounty: "Crate upon crate of canned goods. Tomatoes, peaches, beans, apricots. Canned hams. Corned beef. Hundreds of gallons of water in ten gallon plastic jerry jugs. Paper towels, toiletpaper, paper plates. Plastic trashbags stuffed with blankets. He held his hand to his forehead. Oh my God, he said" (117).

At first, the father is stunned, like Amos viewing the basket of summer fruit, as he thinks to himself "he had probably not fully committed himself to any of this. You could wake in the dark wet woods at any time" (119). In contrast to their previous sufferings and near starvation, the bunker does indeed seem providential, especially considering their mutual fascination with the crate of pears, a heavily encoded symbol in still life tradition. The father asks the boy "Can you see? . . . . Can you read it?," to which the boy replies "Pears. That says pears" (117). Apple and pear have been semiotic partners in still life iconography for centuries, a doublet of images that often evokes both husband and wife as well as temptation and forgiveness. Medieval and Renaissance painters included the fruits in their portraits of Madonna and child with the "apple symbolizing the fall, pear the redemption" (Davenport 56). Of all the potential meals in the bunker, the father asks the boy which he would prefer for supper. The boy says "Pears," and the

father answers “Good choice. Pears it is” (118). However, not surprisingly, McCarthy isn’t following this symbolism *de rigor*; after all, this is temporary salvation at best, and when they leave four days later the bunker is described as “a grave yawning at judgment day in some old apocalyptic painting” (131). And yet the rotting and decayed apple orchard the father and son visit before stumbling into this bunker scene along with the characters’ eating of the pears suggests McCarthy is aware of the potency of such thematic connections to specific fruits, especially when working within an apocalyptic tradition. In fact, the symbolic pears are equally important as puns and double entendres in this scene. Pears becomes “pairs,” as in the two-person team of father and son, a structure that noticeably excludes the mother/wife and emphasizes the bond-like relationship of parent and child. Pear can also be read as the French *pere* (father), with the plural form referring to both physical and spiritual fathers, a pun that takes on greater meaning during the ensuing meal.

The dinner on the footlocker is of central concern in this extended passage of material and sustenary abundance. Like the first still life meal, the scene is framed and emphasizes vision as a corollary component to its meaning: “He dragged a footlocker across the floor between the bunks and covered it with a towel and set out the plates and cups and plastic utensils. He set out a bowl of biscuits covered with a handtowel and a plate of butter and a can of condensed milk. Salt and pepper. He looked at the boy” (122). Still life compositions are based on relationships—spatial, formal, textural and symbolic—and in this regard the father and son become elements themselves in this passage with both the offering of food and the exchange of gazes serving as intimate connections on either side of the improvised table. The father is serving the boy, forking “a piece of browned ham onto the boy’s plate and scoop[ing] scrambled

eggs from the other pan and ladl[ing] out spoonfuls of baked beans and pour[ing] coffee into their cups. The boy looked up at him” (122). The simulated domestic space of this interior is foreground in this scene and contrasts with the previous outdoors breakfast spread on the tarp and accompanied by the pistol. Whereas the former meal had emphasized the father as protector, watching over the boy as he sleeps, this scene shows the father as teacher through the contents in the boy’s head that the father has been self-consciously shaping. The father has tried to shield his son’s vision from the world’s horrors, sparing him the frieze of human heads, the charnel house of the tractor trailer and various other scenes of horrific human depravity. And he has tried to fill the boy’s head with stories of “courage and justice” (35) where they “were always helping people” (225), stories of goodness and beautiful things, symbolized by the literal and metaphorical fire they carry. Although the child may not know how to butter his biscuits, he does have within him the knowledge of prayer, charity and gratitude, qualities that must have been embedded in the stories the father has told him. And even if the father forgets sometimes, the boy remembers—and this is a key point. Staring at his plate, the boy leads the father in prayer: “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” (123).

In many respects, this is a beautiful scene and contrasts sharply with the father’s leaving of the wife’s photograph on the road. In fact, the type of beauty on display here shines a brilliant light through the otherwise pervasive gloom of the text. There are some comparatively happy moments like this one, most significantly associated with food and still life imagery—the many small frugal repasts, the dinner of morels by the waterfall in the mountains, the can of coke from

an overturned soft drink machine, the bundles of apples and cold water deep from an untainted cistern. As ancient and medieval philosophers have argued, we apprehend the moral good through our recognition of the beautiful, and in many cases we define as good not only what we like, what we are pleased by, but also what we should like to have for ourselves, not in the materialist notion of possessing particular objects, but in admirable emulation of specific qualities.<sup>11</sup> The father's struggles throughout the narrative, both in dealing with the loss of his wife and the annihilation of the world he used to know, as well as being forced into the role of sole guardian, protector and teacher of the boy evoke the sense of the beautiful implicit in human tragedy for moral ends. Often, we describe someone's good deed as "doing a beautiful thing," so that the good often conforms to some ideal principle, one that usually demands human suffering, like the death of a parent who sacrifices himself for his child.<sup>12</sup>

The scene at the dining room table in an abandoned house later in the novel reinforces the father's duty as caretaker. Like the time preceding their finding of the bunker, the father and son have run out of food and have begun to despair, a situation made even worse by their stumbling upon the novel's most disturbing still life, the charred baby on a spit in the woods. The sight has nearly devastated the boy, and in his weakened state he is silent and still, gestures that evoke a child's potential fate without guardianship in this brutal world. Whereas the bunker meal mimicked a domestic interior but ultimately revealed itself as a grave, "the long Empire table in the center of the room" (175) is an actual domestic space, devoid of its past function and lacking significant elements such as the wife/mother. And yet, the father strips the table of its cloth and wraps the boy in its folds as a means of reviving him, placing him in front of the roaring fire which the man has just enkindled in the hearth. The meal that follows is eaten in silence: "They



ate slowly out of bone china bowls, sitting at opposite sides of the table with a single candle burning between them. The pistol lying to hand like another dining implement” (176). Lloyd argues for an appreciation of the nature of light in still life scenes, especially how light “can suggest particular emotions or desires. . . . evoke anxiety, reflecting the state of mind of whichever character arranged [the lit objects]. . . . or suggest change and impermanance” (77-78, 89, 86). The two sources of light in this scene—one, a roaring fire in the hearth and the other a thin spark from the tapered candle—evoke all of these functions, suggesting the father’s increasing anxiety regarding his role as protector and the looming specter of his deteriorating health. Symbolically, the hearth’s fire is related to the metaphorical fire the father and son carry throughout the narrative and, like the first still life breakfast, suggests the civilizing and moral nature of these two “good guys.” The candle, however, seems to offer a different reading, a diminishing light pooling its former shape into a puddle of wax at its base and suggests the human figure in dissolution, a fate that awaits the father shortly after the pair’s arrival at the coast. The transaction between these two lit spaces, the hearth and the table, prefigures the novel’s conclusion, for as the boy eats he succumbs to exhaustion and the father carries “him to the hearth and put him down in the sheets and covered him with the blankets” (177). Of all the various still life meals and scenes in *The Road*, this is the only one where the father and son separate, for after the father leaves the boy by the hearth, he returns to the table and later wakes “in the night lying there with his face in his crossed arms” (177). The boy resting in front of the warm hearth is nurtured by the (metaphorical) fire, while the father slumped at the table in the darkness of the spent candle flame suggests his approaching death, a fate that has concerned the father all along for if he passes then the boy will be left to fend for himself with only the

knowledge the father has imparted to him as defense against this darkened world.

As the father's health ultimately fails, the imagery of still life and a certain quality of light again emphasize the particularly equivocal symbolism of tragedy implicit in all beauty. The father's racking cough has worsened and he now sits "bent over with his arms crossed at his chest and coughed till he could cough no more" (233), a gesture mimicking his slumped figure in the table scene as well as the sputtering candle flame. When the son kneels over him with a cup of water, "[t]here was light all about him," a light that seems otherworldly and legitimates the father's earlier description of the boy as a golden chalice and as the word of God, as he thinks to himself: "Whatever form you spoke of you were right" (233). Light, of course, provides the foundation for all beauty, regardless of cultural ideologies, because through light the world is given form and coherence.<sup>13</sup> The mysteries of optics led ancient and medieval thinkers to imbue light with spiritual properties, as a creative force operating in the world like the unseen hand of God. Medieval scholars such as Bonaventure of Bagnoregio argued that light was fundamentally a metaphysical reality that "shall illuminate souls in glory" (qtd. in Eco 129), while the ninth-century Irish scholar John Scotus Eriugena contended that divine light would "reveal the pure species of intelligible things [so that one could] intuit them with the mind's eye, as divine grace and the help of the reason work together in the heart of the wise believer" (qtd. in Eco 104). McCarthy's use of a mysterious light that bathes the child in the father's eyes is certainly an arresting image, and whether we read the light as divinely-inspired or as a familiar neuroaesthetic trope in near-death experiences, the symbolism—in conjunction with the father's deeds—offers readers some hope amid the darkness. Although the father has had his moments of doubt and despair, he has continued to struggle to believe—after all, that's "what the good guys do. They

keep trying. They don't give up" (116). Imparting last instructions to the boy, the father tells him to keep the fire with him at all times, but the boy responds by questioning the father's meaning. "Is it real? The fire?" The father's answer is decisive: "Yes it is. . . . It's inside you. It was always there. I can see it" (234). Guardianship, sacrifice, beauty, light, a sacred container, and the metaphysical fire synonymous with goodness cohere in this liminal scene as inextricably linked elements fundamental to the narrative design of the novel.

Structurally, the father's final vision repeats the novel's first visual episode, the dream vision of the blind slobbering beast in the cave. This time, however, the child carries the light from "a candle which the boy bore in a ringstick of beaten copper," a light that marks "the point of no return which was measured from the first solely by the light they carried with them" (236). The passage is enigmatic, refusing to hold either to a purely negative or positive reading, but the son's previous immersion in light suggests at least a potential for salvation. The father's succeeding conversation with the boy (whether part of the death vision or his last words to his son) also posits some type of beneficence at work in the world, for the father tells him that "Goodness will find the little boy. It always has. It will again" (236). And in the textual world of *The Road*, he seems to be right—the comment certainly does prefigure the man "in a gray and yellow ski parka" (237) who appears, *deus ex machina*-style, right out of the blue, as if on cue after the father's death during the night. In the end, the father becomes a still life himself in the literal sense of the French *nature morte*, or dead matter, his body wrapped in a blanket, and laid out in the woods. Although the father's end can be seen as tragic and suffering, an ugliness that seems all too at home in this apocalyptic landscape, it is the father's deeds that remain beautiful, that engender in the reader a sense of moral goodness and trenchant humanity that makes *The*

*Road* McCarthy's most spiritually-concerned text.

It is fitting that the final passage of the novel mimics so many other still life elements, the description of the trout the father has told the boy of through stories. Fish, whether dead or alive, have been a staple of still life iconography for generations.<sup>14</sup> The block of text itself, coming after the characters' departure from the novel, frames itself as an image to be viewed and contemplated beyond the narrative's temporal dimension. The text says "[o]nce," and seems to indicate the past, and could be the father's memory existing in a non-physical timeless space, and yet it also resembles the conventional storytelling opening, and could be the boy relating the father's story to a new audience in the future, replicating the father's actions of filling others' heads with goodness. We cannot be sure. But the passage does leave us with a final image to consider, despite its torturous ambiguity. Even though the world may "not be made right again," the brook trout, beautiful in the amber current, live in "deep glens where . . . all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery" (241). The image is, of course, a staple of Christian iconography, but the fish is also a synecdoche for the planet itself, the life-sustaining ball that has served as the stage for humankind's actions throughout the ages, a world shaped by a mystery far superior than mortal human life, the passage suggests. The father's actions in the novel, along with the various still life imagery, register a number of crucial concerns—ecological, ethical, philosophical, spiritual—that offer a thinly-veiled political stance on human stewardship of the physical world as well as the codes of human conduct.

In this regard, *The Road* reads as one of McCarthy's "moral parables," as Arnold has called them, for, as Stephen O'Leary has argued, there are two options for protagonists in apocalyptic narratives, the tragic or the comic. The tragic protagonist "has little to do but

choose a side in a schematically drawn conflict of good versus evil” and whose actions are “likely to seem merely gestural in the face of eschatological history” (Garrard 87). However, the comic protagonist “conceives of evil not as guilt, but as error; its mechanism of redemption is recognition rather than victimage, and its plot moves toward sacrifice and the exposure of human fallibility” and the attendant human responsibilities implied in such moral recognition (O’Leary 68). McCarthy seems to be offering a darkly-rendered *caveat* for the contemporary age, a call to recognize the dangers implicit in human violence and the will to power, concerns readers increasingly face in contemporary 21<sup>st</sup> century geo-politics. The filling of the boy’s head with stories of moral goodness is an attempt by the father to shape the child’s ethical vision, a strategy that seems to have worked if we consider the several episodes where the boy’s thoughts and actions reveal a moral consciousness superior even to the father who had first inculcated these values in his son. The narrative seems to strike a utopian note here, the hope for a new breed of humanity surviving in a brutal world but unyielding in their adherence to a higher morality. Despite the novel’s bleakness, McCarthy (who dedicated the book to his own young son, James) offers the potential for hope in this final movement, but it is a qualified position, for the austere conclusion ultimately yields little certainty as to what will become of the boy or his newfound protectors. And yet, McCarthy’s nameless father has seemed to construct an ethical roadmap for the future, for the boy’s thoughts, like the beautiful trout in the stream and the photographic object study of earth seen from outer space, serve as an icon of fragility, wonder and goodness, qualities that offer us subtle entrée into the novel’s philosophy regarding the fate of humanity and the ethics of that future possible existence.

Notes

1. Other features of Apocalyptic narrative that have particular resonance for a reading of *The Road* include “the extreme moral dualism that divides the world sharply into friend and enemy; the emphasis upon the ‘unveiling’ of trans-historical truth and the corresponding role of believers as the ones to whom, and for whom, the veil of history is rent” (Garrard 86). At first glance, both features seem to correspond to *The Road*’s dramatic philosophy, where the father and son are constantly on the lookout for enemies. And yet, Ely may or may not be a foe. The same could be said for the “lightning-struck” man, and the man in the ski parka and his female companion in the conclusion seem to be some of the “good guys,” but we cannot be sure. Similarly, the father and son, as the protagonists, seem to play the role of the believers, although the father is more conflicted about this than the boy.
2. Robert Jarrett has compared McCarthy’s Appalachian landscapes to nineteenth-century Luminist painting of the Hudson Valley School of painters who used large-scale canvases and a “sublime” light to infuse the paintings with a sense of spiritual grandeur. For ecocritical and postmodern readings of McCarthy’s landscapes, see K. Wesley Berry’s “The Lay of the Land in Cormac McCarthy’s Appalachia,” and David Holloway’s extensive treatment of landscape in chapter four of *The Late Modernism of Cormac McCarthy*.
3. The traditional definition of ekphrasis is “the verbal representation of a visual work of art,” a genre that dates to classical times and which posits comparisons between the temporal and spatial arts. Simonides’ proclamation “ut pictura poesis” has been translated “as in painting, so in poetry,” and has been treated as positing a one-to-one correspondence that overlooks many of the crucial differences. For the history of ekphrasis, see Wendy Steiner *The Colors of Rhetoric*.
4. Skulls and dessicated human heads are, of course, littered throughout *The Road* as ideologically-opposed counterparts to the civilizing nature of still life and its attendant elements. Intriguingly, these skull passages also evoke the metaphor of vision and (eternal?) blindness. See, especially, the “frieze of human heads, all faced alike, dried and caved with their taut grins and shrunken eyes” (76) and “a human head beneath a cakebell at the end of the counter. Dessicated. Wearing a ballcap. Dried eyes turned sadly inward” (155).
5. The still life scenes in *The Road* are mainly minimalist and, for the most part, eschew the extensive cataloguing of sensory details one finds in more florid still life scenes in the writings of Virginia Woolf or Marcel Proust, for instance. And yet, this makes McCarthy’s use of the genre even more fundamental and semiotically-loaded in that the pleasurable and class-based values are stripped away to focus on the ancient origins of the genre with its emphasis on mortality and a potential afterlife as the primary concerns of humanity.
6. The binoculars are a material sign of technological vision, as the machine enables the human eye to see beyond its normative biological limits. As a survival tool, the father is able to view

the landscape before exposing himself to its dangers. However, along with the brass sextant the father finds in the Spanish sailboat, the binoculars also function as a metaphor for limited vision  
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and misplaced trust in material objects and for the failure of technology to provide true insight or direction. In one scene, the father scopes the outlines of a city and sees no signs of human life, but when the boy looks he sees thin wisps of smoke. This scene, coupled with the boy's role as "God's own fire-drake" (26) suggests that his vision outstrips the father's, and by extension, all the other "bad guys" as well.

7. Corn and Appalachian history enjoy a common history that goes back thousands of years. In addition to the Cherokee's use of the crop, mountain families were known to make a staggering amount of dishes from corn, including many varieties of homily and, of course, corn mash for drinking.

8. The pistol is a miniature of the ultimate destructive weapon, the bomb, and performs on the level of still life with regard to scale. While the planetary catastrophe remains unnamed, most reviewers see the blackened ash as suggestive of a nuclear winter, especially when coupled with the line: "The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions" (45).

9. According to Edmund Burke, "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the Sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling" (76).

10. Busts, particularly classical ones, have been used as familiar elements in still life paintings over the ages, and echo the grinning skulls of the *memento mori* compositions but with a telling difference. While the *vanitas* tradition foregrounds death and the brevity of physical life, the "head as fate," according to Davenport, can take on various meanings, either "as the ancient seat of a noble nature and a stoic rectitude of behavior" or as a sign indicative of "cunning and intellectual sharpness" (33).

11. Philosophic conceptions of beauty are historically-grounded and ideologically-encoded. Many Classical and Medieval thinkers linked the beautiful with the moral, and its apprehension a strategy for the mind's entrance into a higher consciousness. This position was generally upheld until the twentieth-century, when beauty was exiled from art and considered a charming bourgeois illusion instead of a fundamental element of human consciousness. McCarthy's use of both the beautiful and the sublime in *The Road*, coupled with his emphasis on ancient still life and morality, suggests he is self-consciously working against this dominant discourse and reintroducing beauty as necessary for human goodness. For more on this aesthetic debate, see Umberto Eco's *History of Beauty*.

12. In many ways, *The Road* rewrites *Suttree* in this manner: the tortured father Suttree mourns for the death of his infant son but must keep on living, while *The Road*'s nameless father protects his son until he draws his last breath. Although readers may sympathize with Suttree's largely

self-inflicted problems, *The Road's* conclusion offers a more cathartic effect on a grander scale and may be seen, in effect, to function “beautifully” according to reader response.

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13. Although the majority of McCarthy’s religious images reflect Catholic and Protestant Christianity, scenes such as these reflect a larger theological canvas. The “God as Light” maxim would hold true, for instance, in Christian theological terms as well as for the Semitic deity Baal, the Egyptian deity Ra, and the Persian deity Ahura Mazda, among others.

14. Examples of still lifes featuring fish as an integral element are replete throughout art history, and are also obviously connected to Christian symbolism where they function as a sign of “life” itself, specifically the redeemed life of pure spirituality. The tortuous ambiguity of this unstable sign is amplified if we read the “beginning” of the novel as commencing at 1:17 with the “series of low concussions,” numbers that send us to *Revelation* 1:17: “And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as dead. And he laid his right hand upon me, saying unto me, Fear not; I am the first and the last.”



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