

Chris Walsh

University Of Tennessee, Knoxville.

The Post-Southern Sense Of Place In *The Road*

Cormac McCarthy's most recent novel makes another significant contribution to his imaginative construction of the South. His work has always had a complex relationship with the foundational cornerstones of Southern literature, such as his interest in myth, history and community, his attachment to (and depiction of) place, which is such a pronounced theme of the region's literature, and so on. Far from signaling an exhaustion of such characteristically Southern and, for that matter, American mythic and imaginative categories, I maintain that *The Road* succeeds in re-invigorating them, albeit in keeping with the dystopian ideological moment of the novel's composition and publication.

As ever, *The Road* is a typically paradoxical McCarthy novel in that it both invites and frustrates interpretation, operating on various aesthetic, ideological, allegorical and stylistic levels. I must also address a glaring irony which arises out of attempting to frame a post-apocalyptic, dystopian novel in such potentially mythic terms. The dystopian and ideological determinants for such an imaginative vision are simply too vast to be addressed in this paper, but there are causes aplenty – the bleak sensibility prevailing in post-September 11 America, the sorry mess of a war in Iraq which represents a grim note in the history of American exceptionalism, the specter of global warming and ecological disaster, and the implications of economic globalization and trans-nationalism. And yet in *The Road* McCarthy reclaims a sense of mythic *space* for Southern and American literature, especially in regards to how he re-inscribes the myth of the frontier.

In order to establish the mythic concerns of *The Road*, I will focus on the work of Brian Jarvis who, in *Postmodern Cartographies*, explores the continued geocentric preoccupation of much American literature. I will also model my discussion of post-Southernness around the definition of the term provided by Martyn Bone in *The Post-Southern Sense Of Place In Contemporary Fiction*. Far from suggesting an exhaustion with the fundamental mythic concerns of Southern literature, Bone reveals how many contemporary [post] Southern novelists are deeply concerned with them, and that they go on to offer complex meditations on such ideas. In order to further explicate such concepts, I'd like to offer a comparative analysis of a novel which conforms to the post-Southern paradigm which Bone offers, namely Richard Ford's *The Lay Of The Land*, the final installment of the Frank Bascombe trilogy.

In his seminal study *Postmodern Cartographies*, Jarvis is essentially concerned with establishing whether the traditional geocentric concern of much American literature, film and cultural theory in the postmodern phase represents a decisive break or rupture with previous imaginative and critical offerings. Jarvis maintains that space is and always has been of paramount importance to the American imagination, and this spatial concern is mirrored by an increasing emphasis on geographical analysis within the academy, as evidenced in the work of such figures as Jean Baudrillard, Frederic Jameson, David Harvey and Edward Soja (all of whom Jarvis deals with).

Jarvis maintains that America's literary offerings therefore mirror the utopian or dystopian sensibility of their time, and he goes on to note that although 'the lenses may have altered considerably...all subsequent observers have been obliged to observe American landscapes through some kind of ideological eyeglass.' (2)

Jarvis explores how much American literature has always had a deep fascination with space, even during the post-industrial phase where this mythic sense of space has been colonized, fenced-off and commodified. As Jay Ellis has so insightfully acknowledged, much of McCarthy's fiction details this transformation of American physical and imaginative terrain from boundless space to confining *place*, a crucial distinction. Somewhat ironically perhaps, *The Road* actually reverses this process, going from a distant, settled sense of place to a new mythically terrifying sense of space following the global disaster that has occurred. This is very much in keeping with Jarvis' notion that the history of the representation of space in American fiction tends to 'gravitate towards utopian and dystopian extremes. It was the best of places, it was the worst of places, but always the land itself loomed large in the imagination of America.' (1) Jarvis goes on to observe the following:

What is essential...is a recognition of the following: the central role that geography plays in the American imagination and the way in which that imagination bifurcates towards utopian and dystopian antipodes. Many of the key words in the discourses of American history and definitions of that nebulous entity referred to as 'national identity' are geocentric: the Frontier, the Wilderness, the Garden, the Land of Plenty, the Wild West, the Small Town, the Big City, the Open Road. The geographic monumentality of the New World inspired feelings of wonder and terror. (6)

Although Jarvis fails to mention the South at all in his categorization of the geocentric entities that have been the focus of much American fiction, it is clear that McCarthy's latest effort can be read within such conventional patterns of mythic American cultural

narratives even if, as one should expect of his work by now, they are problematized throughout. Although one must always be careful in applying such reductive genre-readings to his fiction, I believe that *The Road* is fundamentally concerned with many of the mythic cornerstones of the American imagination. It has a savage other haunting the woods and trails, it is unsettled and thoroughly undomesticated, it is as violent and bloody as the landscapes McCarthy has explored in his western works, as the father and son forge out into a new, unknowable terrain; they may not ride on here, but they do keep trudging on with their shopping cart. In keeping with its dystopian ideological moment, this is not some Arcadian, pristine landscape, and the novel lights out not for the west but for the *South* this time, a crucial distinction, in terms of the pattern of McCarthy's novelistic conclusions and for the mythic narrative of the frontier itself. Finally, and as indicated by the novel's title, the work is another unsettling road narrative, with the road itself representing one of America's 'mythological heartlands,' (176) as Jarvis outlines. It is clear then that *The Road* exhibits a concern with the geocentric and mythic narratives which are uniquely American. What, though, of the South in all of this? What kind of relationship with place or non-places does McCarthy maintain throughout the narrative? Can we even attempt to claim the novel as a Southern work, especially when one considers that this is, after all, a world in which everything is 'uncoupled from its shoring.' (McCarthy, 11).

To help us address these questions, I'd now like to turn our attention to the work of Martyn Bone, a critic who explores how such concerns play out in contemporary Southern letters. Bone's primary concern, especially in his recent study *The Postsouthern Sense Of Place In Contemporary Fiction*, is related to establishing how contemporary

Southern literature establishes the traditional aesthetics or sense of place. Specifically, Bone examines how contemporary writers such as Richard Ford adhere to or deviate from the practice or literary *construction* of the south as outlined in Agrarian philosophy, especially in relation to how ‘the Agrarians increasingly conceived southern place as agricultural real property, apotheosized in the subsistence farm.’ (viii)

Much like Jarvis, and Jay Ellis when it comes to McCarthy scholarship, Bone charts the passage from a pronounced (and perhaps entirely imagined) sense of space in southern literature to the depiction of Percyean non-places in what he refers to as post-Southern fiction. As Bone goes on to state, he is attempting to ‘try to understand how people live in a world in which the usual platitudes of ‘place’ – whether as precapitalist proprietary ideal, or literary-critical image – no longer hold.’ (50) The traditional sense of place has therefore been subsumed by the ubiquitous non-places of post-industrial America, where all organic connections to place have been ruptured and entirely commodified, and where it is virtually impossible to return to or imagine a sense of the foundational south.

Post-Southern novels therefore have an intense relationship with *place*, as opposed to mythic *space*, a crucial distinction. Perhaps no where is this better highlighted than in Richard Ford’s series of Frank Bascombe novels, which concluded with the final installment *The Lay Of The Land*, which was nominated alongside *The Road* for the 2006 National Book Critics Circle Book of the Year award.

The opening and closing Bascombe novels conclude at opposite ends of the continent, one in Florida, the other in the Midwest, both of which are suitable Percyean non-places; one famed for its Baudrillard-like simulated tourist locations, the other renowned for its robust and decidedly anti-pastoral industrial output. Yet as with *The Sportswriter* and

Independence Day Ford, through Bascombe, continues his self-reflexive inquiry into the South as a grounding historical centre, familial and imaginative refuge, and cultural and economic space.

Bascombe can be read as the nemesis of Agrarian thought, the aggressive land speculator who likes nothing more than the ‘view of landscape in use.’ (36) Bascombe offers a neatly sealed off and commodified version of the corrupted pastoral dream, located in suburbia, secure in its tax base and zoning district, and a million miles away from the small tenant farmer whose subsistence is a form of resistance against the encroaching forms of late industrial capitalism. Such a dream was long cherished by the Agrarians, and it is one that, to an extent, McCarthy has also explored as ossifying and disappearing, especially in *The Orchard Keeper* and *Child Of God*.

Although he returns again and again to his Southern history and the sense of place and the attendant melancholia it bestows, Bascombe never suggests that the South could represent an alternative, counter-hegemonic spatial potential, as the father does in *The Road* for example. Instead it is held up for continued ridicule and scorn, as captured in one conversation with his daughter where he states the following; ‘Do you ever think that you were born in New Jersey and thank your lucky stars, since you could’ve been born in south Mississippi like me and had to spend years getting it out of your system?’ (126)

In one of the most striking examples of what Scott Romine calls ‘conspicuous southernness’ Bascombe outlines how a wealthy Kentucky-based horse breeder relocated to a prosperous New Jersey suburb, bringing with him his mock-plantation style home. Furthermore, Bascombe’s knowledge of the real estate deal hints at a vast nexus of transnational capital exchange which is completely absent from McCarthy’s novel:

But the Koreans instantly cashed in the lot for two million to a thoroughbred breeder from Kentucky with big GOP connections. In a year, he'd put up a lot-line to lot-line three-quarter size replica of his white plantation-style mansion in Lexington, complete with fluted acacia-leaf columns, mature live oaks from Florida, an electric fence, mean guard dogs, a rebel flag on the flagpole and two Negro jockey statues painted his stable colors, green and black. 'Not Furlong' is what he called the place, though the neighbors have found other names for it. (48)

Yet despite his skepticism about the potential for the South to offer a counter-narrative or alternative space materially or culturally, and despite his repeated ironic depictions of the region, his deepest yearning is that he will be able to find such a space. As we leave Bascombe at the novels close as he is flying into America's post-industrial Midwestern heartland he speaks on behalf of the other cancer-ridden patients on his flight when he states that 'None of us would mind that much if our ship went down or was hijacked to Cuba or just landed someplace other than our destination – some fresh territory where new and unexpected adventures could blossom, back-burnering our inevitables till later.' (470) This longing for fresh territory, for a sense of boundless, uncontaminated space gets to the very heart of the geocentric urge of Southern and American literature, and it means that we can frame both Ford and McCarthy within such overriding mythic narrative paradigms.

Bone is quite right when he states that 'although Richard Ford's fiction critiques the production of postmodern capitalist geographies, it never returns to a foundational 'South.' (135) However, it is exactly this foundational, mythic south that McCarthy returns to in *The Road*, as we follow an unnamed father and son as they journey through

an ashen and savage wasteland, along the blacktop of the novels title that is one of the mythological cornerstones of the American cultural and literary imagination. The landscape traversed here is not some pastoral sanctuary, nor is it one of the ‘gardens of the world,’ but it is a bleak, lifeless and threatening post-apocalyptic horror-scape which is entirely in keeping with the ideologically dystopian moment of the novel’s composition and publication.

The landscape traversed in the novel is one in which Bascombe would be completely stranded in. We have learned that Ford’s narrator likes nothing more than to view the landscape in use, and one of the most noticeable differences between the two novels is the sheer *absence* or lack of materiality in McCarthy’s text. Phone books, maps, states and even nations have no signifying purpose in the fictional world presented to us here, and road signs advertising the tourist attraction of Rock City stand isolated where all signifiers of previous order, place and supposed security lack any kind of signifying purpose. Aside from the relatively minor benefit of the child not knowing what the once global force of Coca-Cola is, this is a world that is ‘shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities.’ (McCarthy, 88).

Unlike the epilogue to *Cities Of The Plain*, McCarthy *does* present us with an otherwise here. One of the most symbolic themes of the novel is that the south – as physical space, imaginative entity and narrative focus – acts as a redemptive agency when all else seems to have vanished. The motivation behind this may be that the father believes that the climate will be marginally better there or that some kind of life may have prevailed, but it is also heavily influenced by a Southern, pastorally sublime memory from the father’s childhood. Recalling a day spent fishing with his uncle, the father remembers that this

was ‘the perfect day from his childhood. This the day to shape the days upon.’¹ (13)

Furthermore, the scene where the pair bathe in a waterfall and find morels growing nearby (most probably located in North Carolina, as Wes Morgan has so insightfully pointed out) is perhaps the closest approximation of a pastoral or sublime moment in the whole novel.

In this utterly dystopian setting, the South not only functions as a physical frontier and goal, but also as an imaginative refuge; quite simply, the father starts to tell, and the son longs to be told, *about* the South. Narrative and story-telling is perhaps all that these two have left, and from an early stage in the novel the son pleads with his father to read him a story (7), and the father obliges, recounting ‘old stories of courage and justice as he remembered them.’ (41) At one stage the child starts to develop his own fantasies about ‘how things would be in the south,’ (54) where he even dares to imagine a community of sorts, perhaps one including other children. The father even falls back on the heroic stoicism that we find in some of McCarthy’s other Southern characters, as he implores his son to keep trying as ‘this is what the good guys do. They keep trying. They don’t give up,’ (137) all the while trying to stave off the knowledge and reality of the ‘crushing black vacuum of the universe,’ (130) which perpetually threatens to destroy these two sorry pilgrims.

One can even locate a handful of examples of Romine’s ‘conspicuous southernness’ in the novel, although they are free of the ironic and knowing treatment offered by Bascombe.

In one instance the father and the son wander through the ruins of a plantation house replete with their ‘tall and stately white Doric columns,’ (105) failed pretensions to order and stability from another era. Elsewhere McCarthy evokes the gothic and grotesque

sensibility evident in his earlier Southern works, especially when we learn that the ‘long concrete sweeps of the interstate’ on the approach to Knoxville resemble ‘the ruins of a vast funhouse,’ (24) which is reminiscent of the grotesque and carnivalesque descriptions of the city one finds in *Suttree*. We learn that the city is populated with ‘the mummied dead everywhere,’ appearing as ‘shriveled and drawn like latterday bogfolk,’ (24) whilst McCarthy continues to employ such grotesque imagery later on in the narrative as we encounter ‘figures half mired in the blacktop, clutching themselves, mouths howling,’ (190) pitiful figures that resemble victims of the devilish triumvirate in *Outer Dark*.

In conclusion, we can see how *The Road* is a novel deeply concerned with the geocentric myths and narrative patterns that have long been the domain of much American literature, especially literature from the South. The dystopian view it offers is very much in keeping with the ideological eyeglass, so to speak, of its time of composition and publication, yet it also re-habilitates the myth of the frontier in the American literary imagination.

In *No Place For Home: Spatial Constraint And Character Flight In The Novels Of Cormac McCarthy*, Jay Ellis notes that each of McCarthy’s novels end in a linear westward pattern, as each of his protagonists light out into the frontier in an attempt to counter its ‘dissolution into the realities of history.’ (37) Much of the profound melancholy generated by McCarthy’s work can be attributed to the fact that history catches up with and supersedes myth for his characters, rendering their existence obsolete. Ellis also makes the hugely insightful point that this is due to the transformation of the American landscape from boundless space to confining place, and there seems to be no remedy for the ‘dwindling sense of space’ that haunts his characters. (315)

However, I believe *The Road* offers something of a corrective to this pattern, and it does so by freeing itself of the knowing, self-reflexive enquiry into ‘conspicuous Southernness’ that we located in Richard Ford’s archetypal post-Southern novel *The Lay Of The Land*. Whilst Bascombe appears to revel in his role as the nemesis to Agrarian thought, safe in his role as a realtor in the suitably Percyean non-place of New Jersey, we learn at the close of the narrative that he yearns for a sense of boundless space that one can find in McCarthy’s novel. That he cannot locate such a space accounts for the tragic element that prevails at the close of the novel, as we leave Bascombe longing for a sense of the foundational myths of the South, as Martyn Bone would put it, which we have identified as functioning in *The Road*, and which could potentially rescue Bascombe from his classically Southern melancholic introspection.

Although ashen, wasted and ostensibly dystopian, *The Road* succeeds in reviving the most cherished geocentric American myth of the frontier, of a new physical, imaginative and spatial beginning. In what is a hugely symbolic gesture McCarthy re-inscribes this national myth and, in doing so, reverses the spatial movement of his own characters in a westerly direction, and we leave the boy as he continues to carry his light into the south.

ⁱ I'd like to clarify my position here, especially in light of a question I was asked following my presentation of the paper during the conference itself. Wes Morgan has painstakingly and very diligently established the most likely physical route journeyed in the novel, which is continuously southward. Indeed, Wes' reading stands as a corrective to some early reviewers of the novel who situated it in the southwest/western section of the USA. It was put to me that a biographical reading of the passage in question would suggest that the father stands in for McCarthy here and, therefore, McCarthy is reminiscing about a childhood vacation he spent as a child himself in Rhode Island. As the passage in question mentioned 'birchtrees' it could not be set in the south, specifically East Tennessee or its immediate environs, as birch trees are not indigenous to this corner of the south.

I maintain that the narrative functions first and foremost on a mythical level. However, the website of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park confirms that four types of birch can be found in the region – the Yellow Birch, the Heart-Leaved Paper Birch or Mountain Paper-Birch, the Black or Sweet Birch and the River Birch. Further details can be found at <<http://www.nps.gov/grsm/naturescience/trees-shrubs-list.htm>> Furthermore, in *Trees And Familial Shrubs Of The Great Smoky Mountains* Steve Kemp confirms that, of all of these species, the river birch is perhaps the most likely, as it grows 'in wet areas, near the banks of larger streams and rivers.' (48) Although not specified in the passage discussed above, I believe that the River Birch is the tree alluded to in this passage, therefore making it possible that the scene did indeed take place in the south, and which provides another motivating factor for the father to take his son in a southward direction.

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