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Published on: 01 Jun 2014 - Arcadia (Walter de Gruyter GmbH)

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Gabriella Blasi

Reading Allegory and Nature in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*: Towards a Non-Anthropocentric Vision of the Language of Nature

Abstract: This ecocritical reading of nature images in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* draws on Walter Benjamin's conception of allegory and interprets the novel's vision of nature as an allegory about a finite material reality that is subordinated to a vast cyclic cosmic order. Allegories are central for interpreting both nature and the mother figure in *The Road*, and their importance is underlined by repeated allusions to Plato's Allegory of the Cave. However, close textual analysis of specific passages reveals allusions to the movement of the stars and of the earth; such allusions indicate a suppressed and non-anthropocentric vision of the earth and its long cycles. This opens possibilities for interdisciplinary appreciation of the novel's enigmatic ending.

Keywords: Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*, Allegory, Ecocriticism, Walter Benjamin, Nature

DOI 10.1515/arca-2014-0006

Kate Rigby's considerations on the role of the ecocritic suggest that ecocritical readings of texts – and the consequent insights into culture and the natural environment – demand not only open-mindedness but also openness to interdisciplinary analyses of their meanings: "...[w]hereas, in the past, literary critics might have leant on history, philosophy or the social sciences in framing their readings of particular texts, ecocritics need to draw also on geography, ecology and other natural sciences" (7). Cormac McCarthy's tenth novel, *The Road*, presents many obscure and veiled passages that can be interpreted as a range of theoretical, philosophical and scientific references. In this article, *The Road* is read as a complex twenty-first-century allegory wherein postmodern cultural theory, science and philosophy compose an organic discourse, opening possibi-

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lities for a new kind of fiction, one that acknowledges this century's awareness of the function of language, engages it and moves towards a non-anthropocentric vision of nature's language. Via its setting – a land barren of beautiful and sublime nature – McCarthy's novel challenges symbolic and romantic visions of the natural world. The grey land is covered in ashes, and the biosphere is mysteriously “drying from the earth” (279). Yet the novel's elegiac ending, with its image of the “maps and mazes” on the brook trout in the “deep glens” (307), suggests a deeper and even optimistic vision of nature in the face of ruins and death.

In what follows, *The Road* is contextualized as an allegory. Walter Benjamin's theory of allegory provides a framework by which to interpret dead nature as allegorical *facies hippocratica* of secular history. Allegory is manifestly self-reflexive, as Jeremy Tambling has noted: “[r]ealism as a literary technique no longer seems so much to be a ‘natural’ form of writing ... The assumption that it is an artificial device no longer seems so problematic” (2). Indeed, McCarthy's oeuvre is hardly a new reflection of the power of language, and Linda Woodson has termed his self-reflexive discourse on language, representations and texts “a thread of metadiscourse or discourse theory” (86). In the barren, grey landscape of *The Road*, postmodern understanding of the function of language is given as a fact:

... the world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things one believed to be true ... The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality. (93)

However, the novel also presents unexplored inter-textual references to the natural sciences. This article presents a close textual analysis of one of the work's most obscure passages, one which reveals clear allusions to notions of the planet's movement in space. From an ecocritical perspective, these allusions cannot be interpreted as literal and scientific *tout court*; rather, they should be read in conjunction with an allegorical interpretation of the novel's setting and characters. Drawing on poststructuralist and postmodern insights, the textual association of the father figure with disorientation in impenetrable darkness is here interpreted as allegorical impossibility against processing and articulating a sidereal space associated with death. Similarly, lifeless nature and the suicide of the mother figure radically undermine any idealisation of the semiotic, nature or feminine. The text arguably reframes the extra-linguistic as cold *cosmic* alterity. This reading will illuminate the novel's final, enigmatic image as a new and unexplored openness to a non-anthropocentric language of nature.

***The Road's* apocalypse**

McCarthy's novel narrates the struggle for survival of a father and son in the aftermath of an unknown apocalyptic event. The social and economic structures of civilisation have collapsed, the beauty of the natural world has disappeared, and the few human survivors roam the land in daily search for food. The novel presents no contraposition between the natural world and the constructed world of late capitalism, or any dualism between consumerist societies and lost natural beauty. The unnamed father and son push a shopping cart through "the wasteland of Emerson's pastoral America" (Edwards 59), as well as through the wasteland of global consumerism. In this post-apocalyptic space, both nature and civilisation are in ruins:

On the far side of the river valley the road passed through a stark black burn. Charred and limbless trunks of trees stretching away on every side. Ash moving over the road and the sagging hands of blind wire strung from the blackened lightpoles whining thinly in the wind. A burned house in a clearing and beyond that a reach of meadowlands stark and gray and a red mudbank where a roadworks lay abandoned. (6)

The novel breaks traditional contrapositions between signs of an endangered archaic beauty and signs of an all-devouring advancing civilisation. The catastrophic event *per se* is not given prominence; the central action concerns the consequences of the apocalypse and its effects on the lives of a father and son.

McCarthy's novel evades mimetic and dystopian readings; in doing so, however, it raises myriad questions yet offers no definitive answers about the causes of the catastrophe. Only a few words describe the apocalyptic event:

The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions. (54)

Critical readings of the novel interpret this apocalypse as ranging from an environmental and post-nuclear disaster to an eschatological end-of-time. Ecocritical perspectives tend to favour the nuclear weapons hypothesis (Edwards; De Bruyn; Gruber Godfrey; Lawrence). Cant dismisses this hypothesis as unrealistic, because "ubiquitous radioactivity, especially in the ash and dust, would have long since killed everybody" (186), not just the vegetation and the wildlife. Carl James Grindley, on the other hand, opts for an eschatological hypothesis, interpreting the signs of nuclear winter as a novelisation of the effects described in Revelation 1:17. But *The Road's* setting, devoid of flora and fauna – indeed, of any other form of life, with the exception of a few humans and a dog – complicates realistic interpretations of the catastrophic event. Significantly, the text opens *in medias*

res and with clear allusions (as will be discussed) to two of the greatest allegorists of the Western tradition, Dante and Plato (1–2). For the moment, it is important to stress that McCarthy’s text is concerned neither with the concrete realism underlying the external causes of an apocalyptic event nor with the effects that such an event would have on human and non-human life. Rather, the narrator utilises the apocalyptic mode as an allegory of epochal change.

Allegorical Nature

In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Walter Benjamin clarifies the distinction between allegories and symbols of nature:

Whereas in the symbol destruction is idealized and the transfigured face of nature is fleetingly revealed in the light of redemption, in allegory the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history as a petrified, primordial landscape. Everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face – or rather in a death’s head. And although such a thing lacks all ‘symbolic’ freedom of expression, all classical proportions, all humanity – nevertheless, this is the form in which man’s subjection to nature is most obvious ... [b]ut if nature has always been subject to the power of death, it is also true that it has always been allegorical. (Benjamin 166)

In such an allegorical way of seeing, death is accepted as pervading nature. Allegorically, nature is death’s face, an image already in decomposition that evades any transcendence. Thus, the allegorical way of seeing precludes redemption of worldly things and confronts the reader with finitude.

In *The Road* the disappearance of the biosphere is allegorically defined as the “salitter drying from earth” (276). Salitter, according to Thomas Schaub (161), is a term that was first used in the early seventeenth-century in the work of Jakob Böhme. In his detailed analysis, Schaub defines the enigmatic phrase as the withdrawal of the mystical “divine sap” – the divine immanence of nature, that which Thoreau celebrates in nature, its transcendental potential. Thus, in McCarthy’s novel human transcendence through nature is precluded. Indeed, as Tim Edwards notes, images of Emersonian pastoral and transcendental beauty of nature are evoked in the text, “though in a startlingly debased and *mutated form*” [emphasis added] (59). In mutating Emersonian imagery, the novel’s allegorical setting reveals the lack of immanent divine essence *in images* of nature, in their death faces, because “death digs most deeply the jagged line of demarcation between physical nature and significance” (Benjamin 166). In this view, the “drying out” of the “salitter” results not simply in evocation of a waning transcendental force; in the allegorical barren and blackened landscape, nature is re-

vealed as *facies hippocratica*, as a literally petrified, primordial landscape. McCarthy's novel forces the reader to contemplate nature well beyond the appearance of its many forms.

The universe and its natural laws in *The Road*

He walked out in the grey light and stood and he saw for a brief moment the absolute truth of the world. The cold relentless circling of the intestate earth. Darkness implacable. The blind dogs of the sun in their running. The crushing black vacuum of the universe. (138)

In a grey world without nature and civilisation, the father contemplates “the absolute truth of the world”: a circling planet in a remote region of the universe. This passage emphasises the absence of light, as if the lost relation of humanity to the universe could emerge only in a world deprived of the illusory power of simulacra. The uncomfortable relation of nature to the universe is a thematic thread within the novel and underlines the ontological subordination to the cosmos and its becoming. The following passage is explanatory and representative of this condition:

The blackness he woke to on those nights was sightless and impenetrable. A blackness to hurt your ears with listening. Often he had to get up. He rose and stood tottering in that cold autistic dark with his arms outheld for balance while the vestibular calculations in his skull cranked out their reckonings. An old chronicle. To seek up the upright. No fall but preceded by a declination. He took great marching steps into the nothingness, counting them against his return. Eyes closed, arms oaring. Upright to what? Something nameless in the night, lode or matrix. To which he and the stars were common satellite. Like the great pendulum in its rotunda scribing through the long day movements of the universe of which you may say it knows nothing and yet know it must. (14)

The passage is representative of the fragmented and essential style of the novel. However, the effect is arguably reinforced by the use of scientific words: “vestibular”, “calculations”, “skull”, “declination”, “matrix”, “pendulum”, “rotunda”. Such terminology choices reinforce the instability and discomfort of the image of a man tottering in the dark, particularly when the description proceeds to the *mechanics* of the inner ear: “the vestibular calculations in his skull crank[ing] their reckonings”. This juxtaposition of scientific language with poetic effect is further developed in the final lines of the passage. In the impenetrable blackness of the night the vestibular calculations in the inner ear seek the upright position, upright to “something nameless” to which the man and stars alike are a “common satellite”. McCarthy's narrator describes this with a peculiar simile: “[I]like the great

pendulum in its rotunda scribing through the long day movements of the universe of which you may say it knows nothing and yet know it must". The image of the swinging pendulum echoes the image ("An old chronicle") of the man's great steps into the nothingness and his return as described earlier in the passage – a chronicle being, something recorded in time, related to time – *kronos* – itself. McCarthy's narrator establishes the subordination of humanity to the blackness of the universe in the first words of the paragraph, but the unfamiliarity of the final simile "like the great pendulum" demands further interpretation.

Anthony Warde maintains that the pendulum alludes to Léon Foucault's Pendulum, a simple device that demonstrates the rotation of the earth.¹ In McCarthy's text the allusion to Foucault's Pendulum provides an answer to the question "Upright to what?": the wire of the pendulum, fixed to a point on the ceiling, does not rotate with the building but instead aligns itself with an unmovable fixed point. Warde notes that the pendulum signifies the desire "to locate a fixed point in the universe that would provide spatial – as well as religious or scientific – certainty" (5); he concludes that the pendulum "figures as an anachronism, as a symbol of a time when belief in absolutes, both spatial and spiritual, was both possible and apparently provable" (6). However, the text defines this fixed point with the very unfixed and enigmatic words "something nameless in the night, lode or *matrix*" ("matrix" derives from the Latin term for womb). While Warde's conclusion applies to a reading of the association of the pendulum with the father figure, the passage opens possibilities for further interpretive analysis.

Yet, the allusion to Foucault's Pendulum does not fully explain the reference to the "great pendulum" made in McCarthy's text. The latter pendulum describes a circle, a "rotunda"; Foucault's Pendulum, however, oscillates on the same plane and its movement is described as a series of radiant ellipses. Moreover, Foucault's Pendulum describes only the 24-hour daily movement around its axis, whereas McCarthy's text refers to "long day movements of the universe", suggest-

1 A poetic description of Foucault's Pendulum is found in Umberto Eco's novel of the same title: "That was when I saw the Pendulum. The sphere hanging from a long wire set in the ceiling of the choir, swayed back and forth with isochronal majesty ... I knew the earth was rotating and I with it and Saint-Martin-des-Champs and all Paris with me, and that together we were rotating beneath the Pendulum, whose own plane never changed direction, because up there along the infinite extrapolation of its wire beyond the choir ceiling, up toward the most distant galaxies lay the only Fixed Point in the Universe, eternally unmoving ... The copper sphere gave off pale, shifting glints as it was struck by the last rays of the sun that came through the great stained-glass windows. Were its tip to graze, as it had in the past, a layer of damp sand spread on the floor of the choir, each swing would make a light furrow, and the furrows, changing direction imperceptibly, would widen to form a breach, a groove with radial symmetry – like the outline of a mandala or pentaculum, a star, a mystic rose." Eco, *Foucault's Pendulum* 5.

ing a longer period of time than that marked by Foucault's Pendulum. A possible explanation of the textual analogy with a "great pendulum" is that the passage alludes to the phenomenon of the precession of the equinoxes. The imaginary axis of the earth indeed describes a complete precessional "rotunda"/circle in a "long day" movement of 26,000 years. The text would seem to confirm this allusion: "An old chronicle. To seek out the upright. No fall but preceded by a declination". In the course of the precessional movement, the earth's axis slowly changes inclination and returns to the "upright"/perpendicular position after an excursion of 23.5 degrees. The allusion also appears to be confirmed by the peculiar specificity of the wording "preceded by a declination", terminology specific to the field of astronomy. In fact, for an observer on earth the slow precessional wobbling movement of the planet's axis determines a change of the apparent ascension and declination of the stars.

The allusion to the precession of the equinoxes would expand on Warde's reference to Foucault's Pendulum and clarify certain incongruencies of the connection, such as the text's reference to the "long day movements of the universe" and the phrase "preceded by a declination". However, the allusion is especially important for what an ecocritical reading can illuminate about its meaning in connection with the father's disorientation in impenetrable darkness.

The Mother and Death in *The Road*

Per the conventions of the allegory genre, characters are interpreted as personifications of complex ideas. An allegorical reading of the mother figure from *The Road* would illuminate the significance of her suicide. As Andrew Hoberek (494) notes, "the wife committed suicide ... not because she is a weak woman but because she succumbed to a deadening coincidence between the imagination and reality". In other terms, what the mother experienced between imagination and reality is the subject's inability to verbalise and create a 'syntactic and categorical understanding' (Kristeva and Moi 98) of an obscure reality associated with death. The coincidence between imagination and reality is, therefore, the deadening coincidence between the imaginary and the real realms, a condition that occurs in the text through the destruction of civilisation, symbolic law and social order. In relating the mother's words, McCarthy's narrator gives particular emphasis to the function of language:

We used to talk about death, she said. We dont anymore. Why is that?
 I dont know.
 It's because it's here. There's nothing left to talk about. (60)

An allegorical interpretation of the text can clarify the mother's suicide and cold behaviour: 'death' is there, and in this coincidence with the real she is unable to make verbal and categorical understanding of it. McCarthy's narrator further refers to language in connection with the mother's suicide:

She would do it with a flake of obsidian ... And she was right. There was no argument. The hundred nights they'd sat up arguing the pros and cons of self destruction with the eagerness of philosophers chained to a madhouse wall. (60)

The unconscious pull of the semiotic order drives the mother to suicide, as she is unable to translate the semiotic into language, to explain death in the symbolic order of language: she follows the unconscious pull of the death drive.² The father states, "She was gone and the coldness of it was her final gift" (60). An allegorical reading of the mother figure as embodiment of the extra-linguistic clarifies not only her suicide, but also her textual association with coldness and death. In this regard, it is important to stress that, per Kristeva, the semiotic is not simply concerned with an idealised feminine realm but with the "non-gendered pre-Oedipal phase, and exists prior to the symbolic order" (Morris 145), that is, prior to language. Without symbolic law, allegorically embodied by the father figure, the child would probably follow the same drive:

I wish I was with my mom.
... You mean you wish that you were dead.
Yes.
You musnt say that.
But I do.
Don't say it. It's a bad thing to say. (56)

Here, it is the father who translates and makes meaning of the child's wish ("you mean you wish that you were dead") and then represses any articulation of such a wish in the symbolic order – in language – in the moral/ethical order of language, where death is a "bad thing to say".

In McCarthy's post-apocalyptic world, the mother and father experience the deadening coincidence of the imaginary and the real; they both fail to produce signification; and the mother, associated with the pre-Oedipal semiotic, succumbs

² According to Beardsworth the key to Kristeva's notion of the semiotic is Freud's theory of the death drive. Indeed, according to Kristeva, the signification process in language is "always acted upon by the relation to the other dominated by the death drive and its productive reiteration of the 'signifier'". See Beardsworth 44.

to the death drive.³ She says: “As for me my only hope is for eternal nothingness and I hope it with all my heart” (59). In a world deprived of its symbolic laws, the mother follows the entropic, unconscious desire of the semiotic: in the text, death is “a lover” (58) that can give the mother what the father cannot.

The text presents an allegorical collapse between the real and the imaginary; however, a new signifying *space* is produced. If the mother follows the unconscious pull of the death drive, the father, shielded by symbolic law, resists it. Yet the father fails to process and articulate this new space and cannot see beyond the fixed symbolic law; thus he is unable to live and to verbalise meaning beyond the embodied vision of the pre-apocalyptic world. Indeed, the father experiences only disorientation, cold and darkness in the post-apocalyptic space: “Darkness implacable ... The crushing black vacuum of the universe” (138). An ecocritical reading of the allegorical significances of *The Road* reveals that *cold* and *darkness* are invested with deep significances that concern the repressed investigation of the relation of humanity to the universe and death. In this light, the allusions to the movement of the stars and sun are essential components for a comprehensive ecocritical analysis of the text's allegorical significances.

Out of the Cave: the subversion of cultural metanarratives in *The Road*

Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* presents a subversion of some of the foundational metanarratives of the Western Humanist tradition. The allusions to Dante and Plato in the opening lines not only signal the allegorical mode but also invite further analysis of their philosophical implications. The text opens with the father waking in the dark of the woods (1). The Dantean allusion to an allegorical journey is reinforced by the fragmentary recollection of a dream reminiscent of Plato's Cave:

In the dream from which he'd wakened he had wandered in a cave where the child led him by the hand. Their light playing over the wet flowstone walls ... Deep stone flues where the water dripped and sang. Tolling in the silence the minutes of the earth and the hours and the days of it and the years without cease. Until they stood in a great stone room where lay a

³ In her analysis of Kristeva's feminism, Morris notes that Kristeva actually warns against the powers of the semiotic, because “rejecting the symbolic order which sustains social identity ... leaves ... unprotected and open to the full force of unconscious desire, of which the most powerful is always the death drive”. See Morris (48).

black and ancient lake. And on the far shore a creature that raised its dripping mouth from the rimstone pool and stared into the light with eyes dead white and sightless as the eggs of spiders. (1–2)

In McCarthy's revisiting of Plato's allegory the beast is a metaphor of humans' physical means of perception. Carole Juge provides an explanation of the beast's behaviour according to the classic allegory: "The creature has indeed ... looked out towards the exit of the cave. However, ... the creature cannot bear the sight of light, therefore cannot bear the vision of truth and decides to go back to darkness, i.e. the Cave and its shackles" (18). While the passage emphasises the creature's monstrous appearance, it then describes the monster's body as transparent, revealing the inner organs, "its alabaster bones ... Its bowels, its beating heart. The brain that pulsed" (2). Despite the creature's monstrous appearance, the transparency of its body provides an uncanny resemblance with those human organs, especially the heart and brain, that connote characteristics supposedly distinct to humans (such as emotion and intelligence).

Critical analysis of the allusion have underscored the reversal of certain fundamental Platonic tropes, such as the Simile of the Sun. As Alex Hunt and Martin M. Jacobsen explicate, the sun "expresses the concept of absolute reality as Socrates explains to Glaucon [Plato's brother] the fundamental need for illumination beyond human perception"; however, in McCarthy's novel the sun is metaphorically absent, "[f]rom the first page we learn that light and truth are fading. We learn that the world of *The Road* lacks not only valid human perception but, even more disturbingly, the greater truth that makes it possible" (156–57). The allusion's subversion and "perversion" (157) of the Platonic myth can be further discussed for its contemporary philosophical implications.

Linda Woodson connects McCarthy's allusion to Plato's allegory with postmodern understandings of language within the narrative, "the Platonic cave allegory ... forms one of the Lyotardian metanarratives by which the story of human experience has previously been told" (90). The allusion to Plato, in a narrative journey that occurs with a "postmodern understandings about language" (89), arguably figures as an anachronism. However, this is not the only anachronism McCarthy utilises in the novel. As Lydia Cooper notes, in one of the novel's many references to the absent sun, it is poetically described in its "archaically geocentric image" (233), apparently circling the earth "like a grieving mother with a lamp" (McCarthy 28). This poetic but scientifically inaccurate simile obviously relies on an incorrect, pre-Copernican vision of the sun circling the earth. Thus, the subversion of Plato's allegory arguably assumes the relevance of a post-Copernican revisiting of it. Metaphorically, however, the sun does not provide metaphysical hope in *The Road*. The universal light is absent; it is described as "a grieving

mother" (28) that the novel – quite emphatically – mourns. Yet, *there is* light in McCarthy's text, namely the "fire" that the son carries within, and which the father can literally see glowing "like a tabernacle" just before dying (296, 298). Significantly, the allusion to Plato's Cave is further explored at this point via a sensorial *pre-mortem* experience of the father:

He woke in the darkness, coughing softly. He lay listening ... Drip of water. A fading light. Old dreams encroached upon the waking world. The dripping was in the cave. *The light was a candle which the boy bore in a ringstick of beaten copper.* The wax spattered on the stones. Tracks of unknown creatures in the mortified loess. In that cold corridor they had reached the point of no return which was measured from the first solely by the light they carried with them. [emphasis added] (299–300)

In McCarthy's revisiting of Plato's Cave, the metaphoric light is not a geocentric and anthropocentric vision of the sun, but a delicate candle that the boy carries with him. In postmodern terms, this philosophical shift signifies the impossibility of illuminating/explaining human experience through external metanarratives. As Woodson emphasizes, in this revisiting of Plato's allegory "the experience of the cave is their own, not that supplied by the puppeteers using signifiers of the real, and their understandings are their own" (90). However, an ecocritical reading of the allusion in connection to the father's death would expand this vision and situate McCarthy's *The Road* in an uncharted literary territory beyond postmodernism.

In the allegorical register of the novel, "the fire" – and its sacred connotation ("glowing as a tabernacle") – is interpreted as an immanent life principle beyond religious and sacred language. As Shelly L. Rambo's analysis suggests, in the post-apocalyptic setting of *The Road* sacred and secular language evade redemption, because "the language of redemption is exposed *as a remnant of an irrecoverable world*" [emphasis added] (101). Thus, for the ecocritic, and following Benjamin's theory of allegory, McCarthy's use of redemptive language is – indeed – allegorical and not symbolic. An ecocritical reading of the text and its figurations reveals secular and sacred language as *allegorical* of an immanent life principle that manifests itself and *speaks out* in the many transient appearances of nature, of which the human is only a part.

"Maps and Mazes": beyond postmodernism

Linda Woodson and Ashley Kunsu have each posited *The Road* as a new kind of fiction beyond postmodernism. However, their respective definitions of what follows postmodernism differ radically. Kunsu reads *The Road* as an argument for

a return to Humanist values, or a return of those “rigidly human qualities ... very much not ‘post’: love, hope, courage”(68); whereas Woodson sees the novel as uncovering new, deeper layers of meaning beyond language, as “an assertion that language does have the power to evoke that which can be known beyond [it]” (94). *The Road* ends with an ambivalent image that illustrates the complexities of its ecocritical significances beyond language:

Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains ... On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery. (307)

McCarthy’s revisiting of the map symbol – loaded with postmodern significances – suggests a deeper understanding of the nature of the world, of its images and allegorical “death’s faces”, and a renewed and regenerated connection with a deeper life principle, one beyond fixed forms. In this passage, the map is also a *maze* and its referents are the unfixed patterns on the backs of the brook trout. Kuna interprets these patterns as “forms that suggest an inherent order and underlying purpose yet undiscovered” (63). The passage, however, clearly explains the nature and quality of this ordering principle – the maps and mazes’ signifier – with the following veiled and evasive words:

Maps and mazes. *Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again.* In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery. [emphasis added] (307)

The passage suggests a way of making meaning of death and/or change in nature – something which can “not be put back”– beyond Humanism and fixed cultural forms. The same latent and evasive reference to an unimaginably vast order is evoked in the “lode or matrix” to which the father and the stars “are common satellites” (19), and in the reference to “the cold relentless circling of the intestate earth” (138). The inter-textual allusion to the long count of “the minutes of the earth and the hours and the days of it and the years” (1), the long precessional movement of the earth’s axis, operates as a non-anthropocentric vision of the planet, a vision well beyond humans’ 24-hour-day cycle and short-sighted way of interpreting life on earth. Far from giving straightforward or scientific explanations of ordering principles and underlying purposes, the final image of *The Road* can be explained in light of the suppressed human relation to finite material reality. Yet, in the allegorical blackened and barren landscape of the novel the concluding image provides hope that a non-anthropocentric vision of nature’s language remains possible.

Acknowledgements: I wish to thank Warwick Mules, Kate Rigby, Vivienne Muller and Clare Archer-Lean for their encouragement in pursuing and expanding the ideas developed in this paper.

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