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The New Apocalypse: Articulating Postmodern Nightmares in Paul Auster's In the Country of Last Things *and Cormac McCarthy's* The Road

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ABSTRACT

The cultural and philosophical effects of postmodernism have transformed the fictional representations of apocalypse in a decisive—and unprecedented—way. This study focuses on how two contemporary post-apocalyptic novels, Paul Auster's *In the Country of Last Things* and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, combine the traditional ethos of the subgenre with the consequences of the new postmodern condition. As a detailed analysis evidences, both narratives show the displacement of the End to a Godless and meaningless world—an Eliotian physical and emotional waste land—where characters face metaphysical orphanage and epistemological uncertainty. This master dissertation contends that both works explore which is the position of language for a group of survivors doomed to inhabit the resulting post-apocalyptic and poststructuralist abyss. Ultimately, both novels introduce the notion of trauma to give new relevance to the communicative aspect of language —a fact which poses an idea of universal resonance: that, in this new postmodern Armageddon era, only dialoguing and connecting with others can lead to survival.

1-INTRODUCTION

The apocalyptic narrative and its fantastic visions of divine revelation and promised order have been a recurrent element in Western literature, and American literature is no exception; as vehicular structures of deeper human anxieties and longings they have fascinated readers, authors and critics alike. Like any other myth, they have been interpreted like a mutable expression of the desire to find a pattern of order and meaning behind the apparent random and chaotic nature of the world. As Frank Kermode explains in his seminal work *The Sense of an Ending,* the human being, born *in medias res*, needs "fictive concords with origins and ends" (7), even if in the Twentieth Century the apocalyptic myth has evolved into something remarkably far from its Christian origins. These decisive statements partially clarify the appeal (post)apocalyptic fictions have for the human imagination and reveal the multiple possibilities and meanings that—culturally and literary—this narrative subgenre can offer in contemporary literature, meanings that seem to be more relevant than ever in the light of the abrupt re-emergence of apocalyptic imagery. Something in the state of the historical and cultural moment has moved fiction writers in the USA to engage with the vision of the ending in

a new and intense way that has to be critically analyzed. What Cole defines as "the growing sense that […] the end of the world is approaching" (6) is recently—and paradoxically—being crystalized in the intriguing form of post-apocalyptic narratives which focus not only on the representation of the end, but also on what lies beyond it, in landscapes and characters which incorporate the postmodern human condition and unravel its consequences, while still maintaining the rich and intricate configuration of the myth.

This master dissertation centers on the contrastive analysis of two contemporary post-apocalyptic novels separated by a small lapse of time. Paul Auster's *In the Country of Last Things* (1987) and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) present an apocalyptic nightmare whose thematic structure and narrative devices reflect this combination of old apocalyptic preoccupations with the end and new anxieties about what might lie beyond such end. In spite of their differences, a detailed study of both texts allows to identify a series of parallelisms in their narrative worlds focused around three elements: the need to find meaning in an increasingly meaningless world, the role of language in this quest, and the possibilities of triumph or overcoming of the difficulties the human being has. The centeredness of these issues in both works is articulated through the combination of

the apocalyptic landscape with a quest—in the form of a survival journey—of multiple layers, which are an echo of the changes the apocalypse myth has suffered in the present era. Auster's and McCarthy's characters inhabit universes of postmodern lack—reflections of the lack of God—where faith in the capacity of gaining knowledge, in the existence of a purpose in life and in the means to do this gaining—through language—has no place. This lack finds expression in their narratives in the adoption of an Eliotian iconography for the quest and its background, and in the exploration of narration, the means to advance in that quest, from a poststructuralist perspective. On the one hand, and using the reflection about narration that the form of apocalypse in itself implies, Auster and McCarthy crystalize these lacks by presenting the characters of both novels as inhabitants of hellish worlds, twisted replicas of *The Waste Land*, protagonists involved in a quest with mythic echoes which is hindered by a landscape which reflects a condition of deprivation: a land whose elements disappear into nothingness to echo the fading of meaning—God—and of knowledge—language. On the other hand, the novels seem to exploit the link that critics have established between postmodern and trauma studies to highlight how the survival of the protagonists in their journey depends directly on their capacity of accepting the paradoxical relationship between language

and trauma. The acceptance of the non-referential nature of language, and thus of the unattainability of truth, and the capacity to live with this uncertainty determinates in this fictional world which characters die and which survive. This determination seems to depend in both novels on the use of language, a use which in the case of McCarthy's work takes the form of the acceptance of a mythic understanding of life while in Auster's text appears as a disposition to maintain faith in storytelling. The rejection of these circumstances is associated in both novels with the definitive ending of the human being, death.

The critical theorizations about apocalyptic narrative, based on Kermode's identification of the nature of the genre as teleological (37), permit to see why inevitably this type of narrations had to be affected by the cultural shift of the second half of the Twentieth Century. Kermode's remark that the End is a reflection of the present anxieties of men (18) must be taken into account together with notions like that of Parkinson Zamora, who acknowledges a parallelism between literary and apocalyptic fiction because,

> Como el Apocalipsis, la mayoría de las tramas de ficciones literarias pueden describirse como una teleología de palabras y episodios, como estructuras comprensibles de acción, interrelacionadas en un todo legible. (…) las obras literarias apocalípticas enfocan la naturaleza

> misma de la finalidad—histórica y narrativa—mucho más explícita y categóricamente que la mayoría de los relatos. (26)

The strong relationship of apocalyptic fiction with literary fiction, however, has not been immune or blind to the cultural and philosophical shift of the last century. When Heffernan recognizes first that there has been a "shift from God's plan for humanity to secular dreams" (4) and then that the "faith that the end will offer up revelation has been challenged by many twentieth-century narratives" (5), she is describing precisely the cause and the result of the double anguish which underlies the narrations analyzed.

The disappearance of God means the disappearance of the aspiration to discover any absolute meaning in the human existence and the renunciation to the quest that led to that discovery (Young 197). Such a renunciation reverberates through two central issues for the postmodern being: the denial of the "possibility of comprehensive positivistic or metaphysical meaning" (Wiese 49) and "the legitimacy of narrative as a cognitive mode" (Wiese 48). Between them, amplifying this crisis of lacks appears the trace at the core of poststructuralist theory, which can be found in Derrida's seminal works and becomes the basis of the crisis of representation depicted in Auster's and McCarthy's novel; it is the notion based on what Richards has summarized as "how the

signified leads us to just more signifiers" (15). What is implied in this statement is that "Derrida says that we can't get beyond or behind the text to a referent […] that is outside language" (Smith 38). Language is always mediating our knowledge of the world, and the most despairing consequence of this realization is again that the human being has to face existence in a world marked by "the impossibility of finding truth" (Berlatsky 101). *In the Country of Last Things* and *The Road* confront their characters with this painful discovery, the perpetual deferral of meaning along the chain of signifiers, the last resort the human being could have counted on.

2-THE ELIOTIAN LANDSCAPE

It has been stated above that the first and primal absence of both apocalypses, God and meaning, emerge thematically in the landscape of the novels, but this does not mean that the issue is not explicitly addressed in both texts. Divine absence, the lack of the primordial Logos, is positioned as central in both narratives by the frequent reflections the characters make about it, and the existential anguish it creates in them. In the middle of the hellish landscape, the nameless man of *The Road* searches solitude to address God and questions his existence (McCarthy 11); in the middle of her journey, Anna

Blume declares herself an atheist and faith as something she gave up as a child (Auster 96).

But the land also replicates the banishment of a creator, mainly in terms of natural—not far from spiritual—imbalance and unnatural disturbances, and both texts coincide to a large extent in this respect. Both Auster and McCarthy leave to the imagination the origins of the disaster that has ended with the world of their protagonists, but they situate a series of patterns highlighting the importance of its consequences, which at the same time are consequences of the greater philosophical and symbolical disaster. The patterns' resemble one of the most important apocalyptic visions of the Twentieth Century, T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, a fundamental point in this process of mirroring layers of fading and lack. The city in which Anna wanders and the country which the man and the boy of *The Road* cross are plagued by resonances extracted from Eliot's failed quest. The introduction of the reference to Eliot's poem in itself is, according to Worton and Still's theorization about intertextuality, a trigger of the "awareness of infinite deferral and dissemination of meaning" (11). Yet deferral and dissemination are two terms that can serve to describe more than that, because that is precisely what the configuration of the apocalyptic landscape does: to disseminate and

replicate the lack of order and purpose that fractures these worlds. Bloom's statement that if "*The Waste Land* can be thought of as having a plot, it is that God has died and mankind, in consequence, has become barren and the earth is a waste land," (47) is revealing at this respect, as well as his identification of perpetual decay as the predominant state in the poem (29). The same process takes place in Auster's and McCarthy's novels, where the deterioration of natural and artificial elements is almost complete and in a way, inexplicable: at the beginning of her letter Anna recounts that when she arrived to the city "it felt as though we were entering an invisible world, a place where only blind people lived" (Auster 18), and that when arriving at the point of the meeting with her brother, "It wasn't that the office was empty or that the building had been abandoned. There was no building, no street, no anything at all" (Auster 18). As Shiloh remarks, the city is plagued by the disappearance of "all the aspects of human civilization" (148). In these worlds bleakness reigns, above all as regards the sense of sight, a characteristic that the narrator of *The Road* repeats endlessly through its references to ashes and the greyish aspect of the landscape. The main symbols of life—water—and renewal—fire—of *The Waste Land* (Sarker 125) frequently appear in both novels as elements of death and destruction: in the city several fires are responsible for

the destruction and nothingness of the landscape (Auster 91), just like in the country that father and son cross in *The Road* mysterious fires are "still burning" (McCarthy 30), and water is almost always mentioned as the bringer of death by freezing. Unnatural sounds arise from nowhere in both novels (Auster 22; McCarthy 261), and the reader experiences an overpowering feeling of irreversibility about the whole situation when the parallelisms with T.S. Eliot's poem reach further issues and symbols.

This is the case of the impossibility of regeneration—or resurrection—expressed by the total sterility of sex, a notion that was already a recurrent feature of *The Waste Land* and that has also been interpreted as a symptom of the definitive lack of *telos* of its world (Tucker 93). In the case of Auster's novel this symptom appears first when Anna Blume affirms that there are no newborns in the city (Auster 7) and second when sexual activity is repeatedly depicted as lacking the redemptive renewal or birth which Blooms mentions: Anna's first sexual activity in the city is masturbation (Auster 62); her pregnancy ends in a traumatic accidental abortion, and she finally states that although her sexual relationship with Victoria is fulfilling, she "was not made whole again" (157). In the case of *The Road*, infertility appears as a result of the role of the

father as the Fisher King of McCarthy's world, which allows Cooper to argue that the boy is the only element that can be read as a life force (226), which makes of him the single image of fertility of the novel.

The connections with Eliot's poem are also relevant to address the question of the limits of human knowledge, the immediate lack that appears as a result of the absence of divine order. When faced with the experience this wasteland offers, Anna and the man are forced to be in contact and be conscious of the limits of the human capacity to acquire any sound knowledge, to discover any sense of meaning. The symbolical landscape analyzed above gives form to this contact. There are multiples references to a darkness fused with nature, which makes difficult to see the world clearly, or to see just shapes of it; taking into account the relationship between sight and the acquiring of knowledge (Pocock 385), the meaning of this recurrent motif seems to be clear.

In these unsettling and disturbing remains of the world, the union of senses and reason is useless: "it is easy to get confused, to be unsure that you are really seeing the thing you think you are looking at," Anna recognizes before stating than she has now realized that trying to make connections about the truth leads only to madness (Auster

26) and that in her world "the shifts are too abrupt, what is true one minute is no longer true the next" (25). For Durán Cid the way in which nature "seems to act by its own will, far beyond from man's control" creates "a void of urban nothingness" that leaves the protagonist Anna Blume in an immense feeling of loss and desperation (n. pag.). A similar process takes place in the mind of *The Road*'s protagonist when the narrator says that "He walked out in the gray 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 […] And somewhere two hunted animals trembling like ground-foxes in their cover" (McCarthy 130). Moreover, the narrative voice makes a similar appreciation during one of the final incidents with a boat: "One vast sepulcher. Senseless. Senseless" (McCarthy 222).

Once the first lack is established as central for both narratives, the renunciation mentioned by Young (197) starts to influence the protagonists of these apocalypses until they acquire a terrible similarity to those of the suspicious inhabitants of postmodernity sketched by Wiese (49): the layers of the apocalyptic architecture of both novels are designed to superimpose a poststructuralist consciousness on the characters' reflections and the narrative structure. At this level, the use of traumatized voices as narrators of

the novels and the formatting of the characters' quest as dependent on the overcoming of trauma replicate the second great lack of these wastelands, the lack of trust in language.

3-TRAUMA AND THE ESCAPE OF MEANING

Language—above all in the form of narration—is the only resource characters can repeatedly rely on during their journeys, but paradoxically—and in line with what Wiese comments about narrative—their relationship with this resource is a problematic one, essentially as a consequence of, as it was previously been stated, the notion of deferral that presides their universes.

The relationship between the postmodern and trauma studies, debated since the coining of the first term, is an interesting one to apply to literature, specially, remarks Mortimer, as formulated by Lyotard. As she explains, the French critic applied the Freudian seduction theory to postmodern traumatic texts, "to describe the postmodern as an event; as a trauma in itself" (3). Lyotard arrives to this idea using the temporal structure of trauma. As argued by Mortimer,

> [W]hen a happening occurs, it becomes an 'event' precisely because it comes too soon in the development of that person or society's knowledge for it to be

> understood as it happens […] The condition of understanding the postmodern is therefore, for Lyotard, essentially severed from those who live in conditions of postmodernity while it exists as an event […] To cease to be a traumatic event, however, there needs to be an understanding of the event. This in turn is assumed, in literary uses of trauma, to arise through an understanding and re-reading of the event's origins (4).

The relevance of Mortimer's argument for this analysis is found on the importance she gives to the impossibility in this case of reaching that understanding and on the way she connects it with Baudrillard's hyperreal, where "reproduction loses contact with the origin of the real" (5). This notion shows a remarkable similarity to poststructuralist theory in the preeminence they give to the idea of the deferral of meaning—Derrida himself pointed out that "signs, even as they emerge from the desire to repair a sense of loss, stand in for a presence and thus necessarily testify to the absence of that presence" (Heffernan 47). Thus, this notion suggests that the appearance of trauma in postmodern fiction requires an examination of the attitude that fiction exhibits towards the issue of poststructuralism, especially in the case or post-apocalyptic narratives (Heffernan 44).

The idea of trauma in *The Road* and *In the Country of the Last Things* has received critical attention since their respective publications, but the similar significance of this element in the novels emerges when the reader identifies the expression of

trauma and the nature of its relationship with language as something existing at the structural core of both texts in spite of the differences they present at the narratorial level.

The basic elements of *The Road*'s structure can be described as the voice who narrates and the narration, but a key fact is highlighted when critical attention is given to the way this telling takes place. As Philips recognizes, it is impossible to attach the label of minimalism to the novel for too long (183), even if the epic of the novel comes from the main qualities of this style (García Landa 1). There are two elements in the style of narration that make difficult its classification and which can be related to the notion of trauma manifestation and treatment. The first one is the blurring of narrative levels that occurs when the narrator suddenly addresses a mysterious "you" during the course of the narration; the simple and ambiguous style of narration allows to interpret these intrusions as something more than just an effect of focalization: "Freeze this frame. Now call down your dark and your cold and be damned" (McCarthy 19).

The most important effect of these narratorial interferences is that the reader is made conscious of the fact that there is someone who is narrating all the time, an effect paradoxically obtained by minimalism, by definition a realist mode of narration. The

reasons to openly and frequently attract the attention to the narration seem to become clear when Collado's description of the narrator as "a traumatized mind that cannot express itself with sufficient coherence" (62) is kept in mind. A traumatized mind fragmentarily telling a post-apocalyptic and disturbing tale seems to respond to the scheme of a kind of patient in the process of working through trauma, and calls attention to a quite concrete notion, that of the healing power of storytelling (Wright 45). From this point of view it makes sense that the narration suffers two drastic changes, that is, the change of focalizer from the father to the boy and then a final change at the enigmatic end, when narration suddenly becomes third person and omniscient.

This progression from a very fragmented narration to an almost conventional one seems to be indicating that in the case of the narrator, trauma is being at least "worked through" (see Oliver 7); the return to a traditional way of narrating seems to be a sign of the recovery from the trauma, or at least, to point to an evolution of the traumatized mind through narration, through the use of language.

In the case of *In the Country of Last Things*, the relationship of the narrator with trauma is a much more direct and clear one, both in the attitude of the narrator to its

narration and to the quality of it. The narration is supposed to be a letter specifically addressed to Anna's friend (Auster 3), although the reader is openly told that it is improbably she will ever get to read it (3). At the beginning, Anna does not understand why she is writing it, except she needs to do it to survive (3); it is only by the middle of her tale that she realizes writing it "is the one thing that matters" to her (Auster 79). Thus, the narration's origin can be located on Anna's necessity to deal with or work through her trauma, but the first person narration gives the prism of traumatic symptoms a different quality. The gaps in the memory that Whitehead identifies as traumatic symptoms (140) appear explicitly: Anna recognizes several times that her mind is "slower," that "blurs" events and that she is trapped between "the same desire to forget and then not to forget" (38). She even recognizes the possibility of transmitting the trauma to her addressee (Auster 184), in a reference to what trauma researchers like LaCapra have described as the process of 'transference' (141).

However, this traumatic condition is not just a prerogative of the narrators, as the twisted quests of Anna, the father and the son prove; the motif of the journey itself becomes a pattern to expose the particular relationship between trauma, language, and survival. The first of these three elements is a recurrent presence which appears in the

symptoms that dominate the behavior of father and son in *The Road*. Collado refers to trauma as spread "to all the existing survivors" in the novel (63), and Philips speaks of a "cast of characters too small and too traumatized" (183) due to their living conditions in the grayish hell of their fictional world. It is worthwhile to analyze how the two protagonists express their psychological condition: both suffer nightmares repeatedly, a behavior that responds to Boheemen's description of the symptoms of trauma: "In trauma, experience may be stored in the body without mediation of consciousness, and return as flashback, or keep insisting through a compulsion to repeat" (19). However, the most relevant effect of their condition from a psychological point of view is how trauma menaces their relationship with language: a menace that can be found in the refusal to speak that the child shows after traumatic events, as a it occurs once the father has killed one of the cannibals, and the inability to talk the father suffers after encountering a corpse and remembering the mother—"He tried to think of something to say but he could not. He'd had this feeling before, beyond the numbness and the full despair" (88).

The analysis of Anna's journey invites to reach a similar conclusion, although she is frequently trying to verbalize her condition. The continual emotional losses she

experiences keep her sunk into what Wright identifies as melancholic suffering, in which the person "loses all interest in words and actions, in life itself" (42). At the very beginning of her adventure, she describes herself by saying: "I was so miserable that my mind seemed to stop working. I became dull inside, all instinct and selfishness" (42). When Isabel, her protector, dies, she is unable to think clearly and becomes unable to cry (80); when she is informed that her baby had died and that Sam, her lover, has died, she considers that life "from now on would be aftermath—a dreadful, posthumous sort of life, a life that would go on happening to me, even though it was finished" (Auster 137). Other characters of the novels show quasi-replicas of these symptoms: Ferdinand—Isabel's husband—has fallen into an autistic passivity after being beaten (47); Sam also suffers nightmares and crisis of anguish (107); after the forced exhumation of his grandfather, Willie is "never really the same. (178)." In all these cases, the relationship of the traumatized with language changes: they become lost in silence or directly reject narration; the problem for Anna is essentially the same as it is for McCarthy's man: "Your mind seems to balk at forming the words, you somehow cannot bring yourself to do it. For the thing before your eyes is not something you can very easily separate from yourself" (19).

These symptoms, as part of the pattern that connects apocalypse—the most traumatic event of the novel, of which we know nothing—with a Derridean suspicion about language itself, highlight that throughout their respective journeys, the protagonists of the novels do not deal only with the drama of material survival, but also with inhabiting a world in which they see "the names of things slowly following those things into oblivion […] How much was gone already? The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality" (McCarthy 88). Anna also recognizes this process in her world (see Shiloh 152)—"Words tend to last a bit longer than things, but eventually they fade too, along with the pictures they once evoked" (89)—, which does not only make her wonder how much her words have left out of the letter (182), but also to state about the process of writing: "I don't believe there is any way this letter can reach you. It's like calling out into the blankness, like screaming into a vast and terrible blankness" (183).

This dramatic contact with the ultimate lack of the postmodern individual is voiced almost with the same frequency the protagonists find—or destroy—illegible or damaged books and linguistic signs: mimicking the transformation of the land, both narratives emphasize that language itself has become another type of fading wasteland.

Father and son bring forth the issue several times: “There’s not any crows. Are there? No. Just in books. Yes. Just in books” (McCarthy 158). The gravity of this suspicion and its consequences can be seen in what the father expresses in one of the most heart-breaking reflections of the novel: “There were times when he sat watching the boy sleep that he would begin to sob uncontrollably but it wasn’t about death. He wasn’t sure […] but he thought it was about beauty or about goodness. Things that he’d no longer any way to think about at all” (McCarthy 129). Similarly, Anna Blume also reflects about how human beings “have become like children again. It’s not that […] anyone is really conscious of it. But when hope disappears […] you tend to fill the empty spaces with dreams, little childlike thoughts and stories to keep yourself going” (9).

In the end, the presentation of the characters’ quest as more than mere replicas of this contact with postmodern—traumatic as well as linguistic—deferral makes possible to read a certain statement about the irreversibility of the whole situation and the human need to come to terms with it. The survival of the characters to their quest is employed to establish a difference between those who continue to use language—through a mythic understanding of life or through narration—to overcome trauma and those that embrace death.

In *The Road* the perspective created on trauma and language becomes more complex in the light of an analysis like that of Collado, who identifies these persistent reflections as a sign of the novel's lack of faith in the healing power of mythmaking (64). The quest of father and son, however, seems to point out not to an assertion or a negation of the reality of that power, but simply to the necessity of building a mythic understanding of life in order to survive. The evolution of the main characters can easily illustrate this point. The mother, a haunting presence confined to the memories of the father and the son, provides an example of the effects of trauma and the absolute rejection of language because of its non-referential nature when she states: "There is nothing left to talk about […] It's meaningless. You can think of me as a faithless slut" (McCarthy 57). What is more, she has rejected in the same conversation the mythic narrative the father has invented to survive—"We're not survivors. We're the walking dead in a horror film" (McCarthy 55)—, which results in her giving up hope and committing suicide. In contrast, the father and son's journey to the south is full of hardships, but they manage to avoid desperation by believing in the role of the father as a protector—"I was appointed (…) by God" (McCarthy 77)—and in the role of the son as the new messiah—"Yes I am, he said. I am the one" (McCarthy 259)—and they

finally reach the sea in what Gwinner acknowledges as "a more elevated justification for persisting" (148). Additionally, the novel leaves room for further differences between the two main characters: the father's priority beyond survival is to avoid further trauma to the child, as it proves his repeated order to his son of not looking at the apocalyptic ruins around him because "the things you put into your head are there forever" (McCarthy 12). However, in doing so he is accepting the irremediable perpetuation of his condition as a traumatized victim subjected to Boheemen's account of trauma symptoms (19); and in giving priority to their role as survivors and not as questers he is exposing his son to the dangerous traumatic horrors he wanted to save him from, as happens in the thief's incident. The immediate consequence to this event is once more the silence of the child —"I didn't want to kill him, he said. But the boy didn't answer […] and after a while the boy said: But we did kill him" (McCarthy 259). The reader is forced to compare his behavior with that of the child, who not only admits that those things are already "there" (McCarthy 191), stating thus that the father's effort was hopeless, but who is depicted as a character less trapped by memories than the father: he exhorts the man to escape his trance at the house of his childhood, abandons the flute the father makes for him and even forgets his own toys (McCarthy 35). For

him their role as “carriers of the fire”—a role clearly related to myth-making— means not just to survive, but also to talk, to help and trust others, an attitude that allows him to be reunited with the family at the end of the novel and consequently to increase his possibilities of surviving.

The opposition between death and survival that undergoes Auster’s novel involves a greater number of characters, the role of mythmaking is replaced, as it has been explained, by the role of narration, and it is the act of writing or storytelling what determines the survival of the characters. If Varvogli’s statement that starvation is one of the major themes of the novel (88) is taken into account, the inhabitants of the city seem to be in a perpetual relationship with the act of narration; as Shiloh describes, the consistent identification of words as replacement for food can be traced back to the Old Testament and has a psychoanalytical basis (142), but it also clarifies both the behavior of the characters that cannot bear the idea of suffering this hunger and the behavior of those who give up trying to escape it and try to live with it. The characters in the former group can be seen as the ones who reject the use of storytelling to overcome their traumatic experiences; as Anna reveals, “food is a complicated business, and unless you learn to accept what is given to you, you will never be at peace with yourself” (3). Thus,

in the former group it is possible to situate the people whom Anna considers questers for death, such as the Runners (Auster 11), the Leapers (13) or the users of the Euthanasia Clinics (13), whose objective is to accelerate their own ending.

In contrast to them, Auster's novel situates characters whose rejection of language is openly—not just symbolically—linked to not talking, which is the case of Ferdinand, his wife, and ultimately the young Willie. Ferdinand's incapability to talk about his beating leads him to losing his humanity (Auster 62), which causes his death presumably at the hands of Isabel. The wife's refusal to talk about it (75) is connected by Anna to the fact that "she was never really able to take advantage of living without Ferdinand" (76). The loss of her voice seems in this way connected not only to her illness, but also to her melancholic feelings. This is also the case in the description of Willie's refusal to speak—which precedes his mysterious banishment from the world: "The order of things had been smashed, and no amount of talk […] would ever set it right" (178).

On the opposite side, the reader encounters not only Anna herself, but also Sam, who constitute the best examples of characters ready to live with their hunger, that is, to keep telling stories to survive. Sam's awareness of the issue is shown to be similar to

the protagonist when he declares that the book he is writing "is the only thing that keeps me going. It prevents me from thinking about myself and getting sucked up into my own life" (Auster 104). Later on, the loss of the book becomes also the loss of Anna and their child—after all, both take place on the same afternoon (Auster 129). And once he finally renounces his project, he finds comfort in his role as a doctor, which is described in terms of talking and listening to the stories of other survivors, as well as of feeding them: "He made people feel better […]. People were given food, but they were also given hope" (Auster 165).

4-CONCLUSION

This dissertation has dealt with some of the issues that apocalyptic fiction has experienced in the last decades of the Twentieth Century, giving special attention to the combination of innovation and tradition that appears in two contemporary post-apocalyptic novels, Paul Auster's *In the Country of* Last *Things* and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. The study of both texts allows to remark the existence of a substantial similarity in terms of narrative structure and thematic development between them. Both books respect the original obsession of apocalyptic fiction with the final

destruction of previous civilized life, the existence of some survivors, and their search for meaning in human life, while simultaneously they incorporate to their fictional worlds the most relevant issues of the cultural era that has preceded the apocalyptic turn: postmodernity and its distrust of any final, sound meaning. Auster and McCarthy's worlds show this disintegration of meaning by means of displacing the story to an post-apocalyptic period and staging there three main postmodern—and interrelated lacks: the absence of God, the inability to perceive meaning in human existence and to acquire knowledge in the new world, and the collapse of the role of language as a crystalline means of accessing the requested meaning. The representation of these deprivations is organized in both novels around two elements: the apocalyptic landscape and the quest of the main characters. The former displays a Godless and naturally unbalanced land dominated by Eliotian references which highlight the meaningless nature of postmodern reality and the metaphysical and epistemological orphanage in which the human being has sunk. The latter, sensitive to the weight deferral has gained in this orphanage, is configured to join poststructuralist theories with trauma studies in order to reveal the dilemma that has replaced the traditional Revelation at the end of the world: characters

have to choose between reluctantly accepting the precarious capacity of language to render some real meaning or rejecting it.

Both novels pose this problem in similar terms: the postmodern becomes the key traumatic notion among the apocalyptic survivors; the process of the deferral of meaning in their traumatic experience becomes a symbol of the universal condition of the human being. The fighters that overcome trauma are the only truly survivors of the postmodern apocalypse; in this way, Auster and McCarthy's narratives seem to support an acceptance of the poststructuralist awareness and questioning of the role of language and to point out to the notion of human empathy as the main way out to bear such apocalyptic awareness.

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