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The Frailty of Everything – Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* and Modern Disaster Discourse

ISAK WINKEL HOLM

“All of this like some ancient anointing. So be it. Evoke the forms. Where you’ve nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them”.

Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* 74.

According to British environmentalist George Monbiot, Cormac McCarthy’s 2006 novel *The Road* is the most important environmental book ever written. McCarthy’s fictional thought experiment, Monbiot writes, “exposes the one terrible fact to which our technological hubris blinds us: our dependence on biological production remains absolute. Civilisation is just a russetting on the skin of the biosphere, never immune from being rubbed against the sleeve of environmental change” (Monbiot 294). Monbiot’s claim poses a crucial question about the relationship between fictional and factual disasters. *The Road* tells the story of a father and a son trying to survive in the aftermath of a huge disaster that has wiped out most of the planet’s biosphere. In what way is this story of an imagined environmental disaster important to our management of very real environmental disasters in the age of climate change? Monbiot’s answer is that McCarthy’s novel exposes a vital fact about man’s embeddedness in the natural environment; hence, the importance of the novel is to be assessed by the same standards as, for instance, Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* and Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth*. This would mean focusing on *The Road*’s rhetorical ability to compel us to open our eyes to an inconvenient fact. “Six weeks after finishing *The Road*, I remain haunted by it,” Monbiot confides. There is no doubt that disaster fiction can function as a kind of wake-up call. However, this can only be a part of the answer to the question about the relationship between fictional and factual disasters, and in the case of *The Road* it is probably a relatively small part thereof. What fictional works about disasters expose, I suggest, is not just the facts of disaster, but also the forms through which we perceive these facts.

As several researchers of disaster discourse have noted, our repertoire of cultural forms relating to disaster is surprisingly small and unexpectedly stable (Dupuy; Kermode; Rozario). A handful of default cognitive schemes determine the imagination of disasters in Western culture, the most frequent ones being disaster as trauma, as judgment, as calculable risk and as legal collapse. The quotation from Monbiot's essay above draws on another frequent pattern for imagining disaster when he writes that civilisation is just "a russeting on the skin of the biosphere, never immune from being rubbed against the sleeve of environmental change." In the vocabulary of modern disaster research, what is at stake here is the *vulnerability* of a human society. But Monbiot does not use the technical term; instead, the russeting skin and the sleeve form a metaphor that stands out as a poetic alien in his otherwise rather prosaic and polemic essay.

On the following pages I will examine the literary imagination of vulnerability, not in Monbiot's essay but in McCarthy's novel. The disaster itself is only mentioned cursorily in the narrative: "The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions" (McCarthy, *Road* 56). In its place, the novel offers a meticulous description of a vulnerable human society – made up just by a single father and a single son – trying to survive in the ashen wasteland of Eastern America, where human beings have nothing to eat but the sparse remains of canned food and each other. The unspecified disaster exposes the frailty of the human world:

In those first years the roads were peopled with refugees shrouded up in their clothing. Wearing masks and goggles, sitting in their rags by the side of the road like ruined aviators. Their barrows heaped with shoddy. Towing wagons or carts. Their eyes bright in their skulls. Creedless shells of men tottering down the causeways like migrants in a feverland. The frailty of everything revealed at last. (28)

Like the Greek word *apokaluptein*, the word "reveal" originally meant to draw aside a veil or a curtain. In this case, though, the revelation does not expose a robust divine order but the utter frailty of the social order. Frail and fragile are recurring adjectives in the description of the son, their makeshift tarp tent and the world of ideas that the father and the son share. From the perspective of the novel, the disaster does not *produce* human vulnerability, it rather *reveals* an inherent vulnerability that was there all the time.

The World Trade Center, the war in Iraq, Abu Ghraib, Katrina – *The Road* was written in an epoch where American society was all of a sudden forced to imagine itself as vulnerable, not just to 'evil' forces coming from the outside, but also to internal breakdowns of its own civilisation.

The novel thus gives literary form to a contemporary experience of the “frailty of everything”. In fact, it is a common feature of all McCarthy’s novels that they explore a liminal landscape on the fringe of civilisation in which vulnerable human bodies and vulnerable human societies are exposed to violence and chance. What interests me here are not the facts but the forms of human vulnerability. I will not delve further into the political history – from the Vietnam War onwards – that produced this particular experience of vulnerability. Instead, I will examine the cultural history that supplied the discursive forms of vulnerability. These historical patterns of imagination function as conditions of possibility when we understand and express an experience of vulnerability. One branch of Western disaster fiction focuses not on disaster itself but rather on the way human society is able or unable to cope with disaster. To name but a few examples, this genre of disaster fiction spans from Heinrich von Kleist’s short story “The Earthquake in Chile”, Richard Wagner’s *Twilight of the Gods* and José Saramago’s *Blindness* up to and including the recent wake of post-apocalyptic movies – and, I would like to add – Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*.

Vulnerability

Disaster research emerged as a branch of sociology during the Cold War, which was probably why the definition of disaster was shaped after the mushroom cloud. An important definition from 1961 describes a disaster as an event impacting an entire society and preventing “essential functions of society” (Perry and Quarantelli). Classical disaster research imagined disaster as an event striking a peaceful society from the outside, just like a bomb dispatched by a foreign superpower. During the last twenty to thirty years, however, disaster research has shifted its focus from the *impact* on human society of an external event towards the *contribution* of human society to disaster, or at least to the severity and duration of disaster. As in McCarthy’s novel, the important thing is not the apocalyptic event itself; rather, it is the “pre-disaster conditions” determining the way human society is able or unable to cope with disaster (Oliver-Smith and Hoffman 4). The antonyms “vulnerability” and “resilience” have become the catchphrases for this paradigm shift. To quote an influential definition, vulnerability is “the characteristics of a person or group and their situation that influence their capacity to anticipate, cope with, resist and recover from the impact of a natural hazard” (Wisner 11), whereas resilience, in the words of The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, can be defined as “the ability of a social or ecological system to absorb disturbances while retaining the same basic structure

and ways of functioning, the capacity for self-organisation, and the capacity to adapt to stress and change” (IPCC 880).

Sociologists tend to see vulnerability as an objective fact that one can send out a team of researchers to measure in the field. However, this sociological notion of vulnerability is a “pot-pourri of terms” covering a frustratingly heterogeneous collection of ecological, technological, economic and social phenomena (Kasperson and Kasperson 252). Recently, the philosopher Judith Butler has reminded us that vulnerability should be seen not as an objective fact “out there” but rather as a discursive fact. The way we figure our own vulnerability – and, importantly, the way we react to it politically – is shaped by “the normative schemes of intelligibility” that determine what we mean by being human and by society (Butler 146).¹

Even if the technical term of vulnerability is relatively recent, the discursive schemes of vulnerability go back a couple of hundred years. To be more precise, the idea was invented by Jean-Jacques Rousseau after the first modern natural disaster, the famous Lisbon earthquake in 1755. The cultural shockwaves of the earthquake were interpreted through the concept of theodicy, an artificial word at the time newly coined by the German philosopher Gottfried Leibniz by combining *theos* and *dike*, the Greek words for ‘God’ and ‘justice’. *Si Deus est, unde malum?* If God is almighty and good, how come the world is full of evil and meaningless events such as earthquakes?

One side of the theodicy debate was taken by the Church, according to which the earthquake was a just punishment for the sinful citizens of Lisbon. On the same side of the debate, one also found enlightened theist philosophers who, like Leibniz, argued that there was a rational providential order hiding behind apparently disorderly events like earthquakes, and thus that the world was the best of all possible worlds. On the other side of the debate was Voltaire, who wrote his famous poem on Lisbon only a couple of weeks after the quake, and who made fun of the optimistic Leibniz and Alexander Pope in his satirical novel *Candide*, published in 1759. As Voltaire wrote in a letter, the Lisbon poem was “a kick in the rear of Providence” (Gouhier 76). According to Voltaire, there was no meaningful order to be found behind the tragic events in Lisbon, neither as diverse

1 Butler’s focus is the “corporeal vulnerability” of the individual subject, whereas the focus of modern disaster research is the *systemic* vulnerability of a whole society or social group. However, her insight into the discursive formation of vulnerability is still relevant: “If vulnerability is one precondition for humanization, and humanization takes place differently through variable norms of recognition, then it follows that vulnerability is fundamentally dependent on existing norms of recognition if it is to be attributed to any human subject” (Butler 146).

punishment nor as diverse rationality; there were just the crazy contingencies of the natural disaster.

Provoked by Voltaire’s poem, Rousseau wrote a letter to Voltaire in which he struggled to find a middle position between the two sides of the theodicy debate. On the one hand, he wanted to defend the concept of providence against Voltaire’s attack, while on the other he did not want to save providence simply by blaming the citizens of Lisbon, like the traditional Christians did. In his effort to solve this problem, Rousseau stumbled upon the concept of vulnerability:

[...] the majority of our physical misfortunes are also our work. Without leaving your Lisbon subject, concede, for example, that it was hardly nature that there brought together twenty-thousand houses of six or seven stories. If the residents of this large city had been more evenly dispersed and less densely housed, the losses would have been fewer or perhaps none at all. Everyone would have fled at the first shock. (Rousseau IV, 1061)

Rousseau defends providence by claiming that the sufferings of the citizens of Lisbon are not accidental; there is, indeed, an order behind the apparent chaos – but this order is sociological rather than theological. The residents of Lisbon have themselves contributed to the disaster, not by being vile sinners but simply by building tall houses too close to each other. As Susan Neiman writes in her brilliant history of the theodicy debate, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* from 2002, Rousseau defends God so well that God Himself is made superfluous (Neiman 55).

With this radical change of perspective, Rousseau turns the whole theodicy debate around. Before Rousseau, there was only a vertical theodicy, arguing the pros and cons of a metaphysical order behind the contingencies of the finite world. Rousseau made it possible to imagine a horizontal theodicy posing the question about a human order – according to Rousseau a social and political order – behind the sufferings of human beings. This secularised theodicy was soon to play a major role in the German philosophy of history, as well as in modern disaster discourse. In Rousseau’s letter on providence, we attend the birth of vulnerability out of the spirit of theodicy (Dynes).

Theodicy without *Theos*

In a paragraph of intense nostalgic beauty from *The Road*, the father remembers what the world was like before the biosphere collapsed and before his wife committed suicide in post-apocalyptic despair:

He remembered waking once on such a night to the clatter of crabs in the pan where he'd left steak bones from the night before. Faint deep coals of the driftwood fire pulsing in the onshore wind. Lying under such a myriad of stars. The sea's black horizon. He rose and walked out and stood barefoot in the sand and watched the pale surf appear all down the shore and roll and crash and darken again. When he went back to the fire he knelt and smoothed her hair as she slept and he said if he were God he would have made the world just so and no different. (219)

The father's utterance at the end of the paragraph is an answer to the theodicy problem. The historical model for this judgment about the justice of the world is the Spanish King Alfonso X (1221–1284), one of the recurring figures of the theodicy debate. In his day, the king of Castille was known as "el Sabio" (the Wise) due to his impressive contributions to astronomy, poetry, law and chess theory; however, it was not his merits as an intellectual that made him famous but one single remark that legend has him saying: "If I had been of God's counsel at the creation, many things would have been ordered better." This remark was enough to make him notoriously famous as a blasphemer for the following five hundred years. Medieval commentators list the real and imagined troubles of Alfonso's life in order to prove that God is keen on punishing this kind of arrogance: the king's son rebelled against him, he died in a civil war and on one occasion he even became a disaster victim when a terrible thunderstorm ignited the king's and the queen's garments – only to diminish when he kneeled down and retracted his blasphemy.

Pierre Bayle introduced King Alfonso into the theodicy debate in his *Historical and Critical Dictionary*, published in 1695–97. In the article on "Manicheans", he argued that, considering the undeniable evils of this world, God was either not good or not almighty (the Manicheans opted for the latter). In the *Dictionary's* article on King Alfonso, Bayle defended the king for making his critical remark about the goodness of the world. Maybe the hard-working astronomer just wanted to express his understandable frustration over the gap between his Ptolemaic system and his astronomical observations, Bayle suggested. Leibniz' essay on *Theodicy* – to a large degree a reply to Bayle's article on the Manicheans – defends the ways of God by ridiculing King Alfonso. "You have known the world only since the day before yesterday, you see scarce farther than your nose, and you carp at the world" (Leibniz 248). According to Leibniz, it was only a matter of time and research funding to establish the basic rational order of the world.

The father in McCarthy's novel would have made the world "just so and no different", whereas King Alfonso would have created a world that was "ordered better." Still, they both imagine themselves present at the creation and use this divine perspective to pass judgment about the good-

ness of the world. To be sure, King Alfonso is not the only theodicy motif in *The Road*. Among the classical *topoi* of the cultural history of theodicy, one finds the deep misery caused by a sick child (250), the wish to never have been born (169) and the rage against God (11, 96, 114). Like Job – in the most important biblical text about the theodicy problem – the father is sitting “among the ashes” in the cauterised post-apocalyptic world.

The theodicy motif is conspicuously present in several of McCarthy's novels, most explicitly so in *The Crossing* (1994), McCarthy's most important and most impressive piece of disaster fiction before *The Road*. A whole segment of *The Crossing* tells the story of a man who loses his child and his trust in the world in a Mexican earthquake and spends the last years of his life as a witness in a trial against God. In *Blood Meridian*, discussions between the murderous Judge Holden and an ex-priest about the contingencies of the Mexican desert and the possible “hand of a cynical god” behind them sound like a modernised and radicalised theodicy debate (McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* 153). Perversely, Judge Holden plays the role of the Spanish king when he experiences a deep harmony with the desert around him: “Then he sat with his hands cupped in his lap and he seemed much satisfied with the world, as if his counsel had been sought at its creation” (*Blood Meridian* 140).²

In *The Road*, the network of erudite allusions to King Alfonso, Job and the justice of the world are found in a fictional universe in which God is blatantly absent. The father and the son are travelling through a one-dimensional world, an ashen immanence stripped of transcendent phenomena, be it sunlight, planets, stars or even birds in the air or trout in the brooks. The universe of the novel is a “crushing black vacuum” (130), the landscape a “barren, silent, godless” (4) and “coldly secular” (274), the darkness “without depth or dimension” (67), the planets “blind dogs of the sun” (130), the winds “bleak and temporal” (11), and so on. In this universe of brute contingencies, there are no traces left of God's providence, or in McCarthy's great phrase: “No lists of things to be done. The day providential to itself” (54). The immanent ashen desert of *The Road* equals the immanence of the Mexican desert in *Blood Meridian*, as described in a classical essay by Steven Shaviro: “There is no transcendence, and no possibility of standing out from Being. There is no stance by which subjectivity might fold back upon itself, thereby affirming and preserving itself, or at

2 Earlier in *The Crossing*, Billy, the young protagonist, has a vision of the wolves as beastly King Alfonsos moving around in a world that is “as perfect to their use as if their counsel had been sought in the devising of it” (McCarthy, *Border* 338). Some pages later, this way of thinking is called “the sin of orgullo” (McCarthy, *Border* 355).

least attenuating the shock of those multiple, fatal encounters that mark its inherence in the world” (Shaviro 16).

One can wonder what the old question about God’s justice is doing in a fictional universe where God is irrevocably dead. As I see it, *The Road*’s theodicy motifs are not some kind of phantom pain in a missing theological limb; rather, I propose that we read the novel as an heir to Rousseau’s horizontalisation of the theodicy debate. *The Road* does not pose the vertical question about a divine order behind the world but the horizontal question about a secular order *in* the world. As the German historian of philosophy Hans Blumenberg has taught, the secularisation of theological motifs is a matter of form rather than content (Blumenberg). The Rousseauian secularisation of the theodicy debate clears out the classical theodicy themes from their original theological content and transforms them into empty cultural forms. Subsequently, these cognitive schemes can be used for shaping and organising the experience of vulnerability. Tousing the son’s hair before the fire to dry it, the father makes a reflection that is presumably not only about drying hair, but also about writing novels: “All of this like some ancient anointing. So be it. Evoke the forms. Where you’ve nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them” (74).

Admittedly, God is evoked in person in the pre-apocalyptic beach scene quoted above, and the father also kneels down as if in prayer. But he kneels down to his wife, and the deep, beautiful order described in the paragraph is a worldly order. The paragraph is not praise to a divine order but, rather, a hymn to a cosmic order. The whole passage is about the complicated interrelations and interactions between things and names in a landscape: the onshore wind making the driftwood fire pulse, the steak bones attracting the crabs, the pale surf reaching the shore, the wife made visible by the light of the fire and the stars.

A world that should be made “just so and no different” is a world that is okay. The word “okay” is repeated close to two hundred times in the dialogues between the father and the son, which make up the bulk of the novel: “‘Come on,’ the man said. ‘Everything’s okay. I promise’” (135). Saying that something is okay is more than saying that something is. When a specific action or event is judged as being okay, it is not just there, but also in accordance with a meaningful order in the world. In this sense, the word “okay” is a minimal theodicy. When Candide, in Voltaire’s satirical novel, experiences the Lisbon earthquake on his own body and is lying covered in rubbish from the demolished houses, his friend Dr. Pangloss is ready with an optimistic explanation: “‘This concussion of the earth is no new thing,’ said Pangloss, ‘the city of Lima in South America, experienced the same last year; the same cause, the same effects.’” Like a radicalised and agonised

Dr. Pangloss, the father in *The Road* asserts that everything is okay, even if the world after the disaster could hardly be less okay.

Nevertheless, McCarthy's novel is not, like Voltaire's, a satire about stupid people making theodicies. The father claims that everything is okay, not because he has read bad philosophical books but out of sheer existential necessity. "Don't lose heart," the father repeatedly says to himself (177), and one way of not losing heart is assuring each other that everything is okay. Without the minimal theodicy of the word "okay", it is impossible to continue the sad and scary journey through the ashen desert: "'Come on,' the man said. 'Everything's okay.'" The alternative is exemplified by the mother of the son who, before the beginning of the novel, one day exclaims "I don't care. It's meaningless," and walks off to commit suicide (56).

The pre-apocalyptic scene by the beach is contrasted by several scenes where the father watches the son sleeping under the tarp in the "cold autistic dark" (15):

He lay listening to the water drip in the woods. Bedrock this. The cold and the silence. The ashes of the late world carried on the bleak and temporal winds to and fro in the void. Carried forth and scattered forth again. Everything uncoupled from its shoring. Unsupported in the ashen air. Sustained by a breath, trembling and brief. If only my heart were stone. (11)

To support and to sustain are two roughly synonymous words, but in this passage everything is simultaneously *unsupported* and *sustained*. The apparent contradiction can be explained, I suggest, by distinguishing between two different kinds of support, namely external and internal. Everything is unsupported because there is no external order in the world on which the father and the son can lean. Contrasting the beach scene, there is no longer a cosmological web of interrelations between the things of the landscape, as there is only "uncoupled" matter drifting around in the void. This is Voltaire's cold vision of disaster in its most radical incarnation.

But even if everything is unsupported by an external order, it is still sustained by the breath of man. In order to continue their journey through the desert, it is an existential necessity for the father and the son to assert that everything is okay. To himself, the father calls the son "his warrant" (5), and, inversely, he knows that his job is to take care of the son by warranting the meaning of the world (77). In the absence of any external warrant for the meaning of the world, minimal theodicy has shrunk to a single performative sentence, a human breath making a linguistic promise: "'Everything's okay. *I promise.*'"

In the vocabulary of Continental philosophy, the father's predicament is similar to the problem that the late Friedrich Nietzsche diagnosed in his

texts on the eternal recurrence, which is in fact another idea that originates in the classical theodicy debate (Neiman 206ff). If everything keeps going around in the same loop, there can be no external narrative order supporting the meaning of life. Hence, man alone is responsible for justifying the world by saying Nietzsche's famous "Ja!" – which is, of course, the German word for "okay".

In the vocabulary of modern disaster research, a "trembling and brief" heart that is not made of stone is a vulnerable heart. Unlike theology, McCarthy's secularised theodicy does not question a divine infrastructure behind the world; unlike sociology, it does not explore the vulnerability of a social infrastructure within the human world. What is at stake in the novel is the basic vulnerability of what could be called an existential infrastructure, making it possible for a human being to feel at home in the world. The father's heart is trembling and the son's breath is "frail" (14); nonetheless, they are burdened with the heavy task of justifying the world. After the death of God, Susan Neiman writes, theodicy survives as a question about "the most basic trust in the world, the grounds that make civilisation possible" (Neiman 1).

Cosmodicy and Anthropodicy

My existential perspective on the theodicy debate is in line with several McCarthy studies. In a recent reading of *The Road*, John Cant asks how the father and the son are able to confront the wasteland. "McCarthy's favoured answer, expressed in each of his texts to a greater or lesser extent, is that of the inherent vitality of the ardenthearted, for whom the significance of life is asserted existentially and in defiance of mere reason alone" (Cant 187). In other words, Cant finds the answer in a notion of existential resilience. However, vitality and ardentheartedness alone do not solve the theodicy problem. Fundamentally, theodicy is a trial in which human reason accuses or defends the goodness of the creator, and in a trial one needs proof and rational arguments. Even a heart, be it ardent or frail, is in need of good reasons for acknowledging that the world is okay. The father cannot urge the son to continue down the road just by saying, "Don't lose heart" and "Come on"; he has to figure out some reasonable argument in order to convince the son that the world is, in fact, worth trusting.

The argument for the goodness of the world runs along two lines in the novel, the first concerning man's relation to the landscape and the second concerning man's relation to other human beings. In McCarthy's work, secularised theodicy comes in two versions which could be named, respec-

tively, *cosmodicy* and *anthropodicy*.³ Whereas *cosmodicy* is a question about the goodness of the world, *anthropodicy* is a question about the goodness of man.

We have already seen the question of *cosmodicy* answered in the affirmative in the pre-apocalyptic scene from the beach. Here, the feeling that the world should be made “just so and no different” is based on an experience of a coastal landscape: the wind, the driftwood fire, the steak bones, the crabs, the surf, the stars and the woman echo each other in a complicated network of things and names. Apparently, everything is okay when the father experiences himself as a part of the landscape’s dense web of relations. This is probably why the technology of orientation plays a major role in the novel: a brass sextant, a flare pistol, a telephone directory, a list of things to be done and, first of all, a map that is in fact just “the pieces of the map” on which the names of the cities no longer match the reality of the carbonised world.

Another pre-apocalyptic recollection, in many ways similar to the beach scene, connects the feeling of a spatial order directly to the idea of justification. Here, the question of *cosmodicy* is answered by a feeling that everything is in its right place, and this feeling is mediated by a map:

He’d pored over maps as a child, keeping one finger on the town where he lived. Just as he would look up his family in the phone directory. Themselves among others, everything in its place. Justified in the world. ‘Come on,’ he said. ‘We should go.’ (182)

It is this feeling of *cosmodicy* – that everything is in its place – that the nameless disaster has shattered. In *The Crossing*, a blind man explains how his sudden blinding has influenced his relationship to his native Mexican landscape: “The bonds that fixed him in the world had become rigid” (McCarthy, *Border* 591). A couple of pages later the blind man sums up: “Ese mundo es un mundo frágil” (*Border* 603).

Anthropodicy, on the other hand, is not about the relation between man and place but between man and man. In the novel, the exploration of *anthropodicy* is structured by the distinction between “good guys” and “bad guys”, a kind of rhetorical trick the father uses to motivate the son to go on, for instance when he is in need of an argument to find out what is hiding behind a locked door:

3 The word *cosmodicy* (“Kosmodicee”) was coined by Friedrich Nietzsche in a letter to Erwin Rohde February 1872 (Nietzsche 294). The word *anthropodicy* took shape in European philosophy during the twentieth Century.

[...] I know you're scared. That's okay. I think there may be things in there and we have to take a look. There's no place else to go. This is it. I want you to help me. If you don't want to hold the lamp you'll have to take the pistol.

I'll hold the lamp.

Okay. This is what the good guys do. They keep trying. They don't give up.

Okay. (137)

In the post-apocalyptic world, human society has collapsed into a violent state of nature peopled with groups of bearded and tattooed cannibals with "reptilian calculations" in their "cold and shifty eyes" (75). In this barbarous world, the father has made up the fiction that he and the son are "carrying the fire" of humanity and goodness (83). It soon becomes clear, however, that the distinction between "good guys" and "bad guys" is not stable. On the one hand, the son – mysteriously – adheres to the moral ideals of the world before the disaster. On the other hand, the father has to be cynical and egoistical in order to survive in the war of all against all. Each time the father and the son meet someone on the road – a dog, a little boy, an old man, a thief, etc. – the event triggers a rudimentary political negotiation about how to behave: whether they should help or whether they should just make reptilian calculations about surviving themselves, i.e. whether goodness is really relevant for the way human beings act or whether it is just an out-dated word. Anthropodicy takes the form of an ongoing negotiation of the scope and quality of the moral infrastructure of human life.

To sum up, the cultural forms of the theodicy debate give shape to two different versions of human vulnerability in *The Road*. Cosmodicy poses the question about the vulnerability of the bonds that fix man in a landscape, whereas anthropodicy questions the vulnerability of the social bonds that bind human beings together in a moral order.

Mystery

The last paragraph of the novel is another nostalgically beautiful pre-apocalyptic scene, but also an astonishing literary image of vulnerability:

Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. 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. (286)

Throughout the novel, the trout in the deep glens have been developed as an image of the obscure depth of the cosmos, as opposed to the flat post-apocalyptic earth without shadow or depth. The father and the son pass a pool where “once he’d watched trout swaying in the current, tracking their perfect shadows on the stones beneath” (30). A little further down the road, they cross another river: “He’d stood at such a river once and watched the flash of trout deep in a pool, invisible to see in the tea-colored water except as they turned on their sides to feed. Reflecting back the sun deep in the darkness like a flash of knives in a cave” (43).

It goes without saying that these trout are ripe with allusions. In Plato, shadows and caves are used to illustrate the relation between the world of ideas and the world of phenomena (Hunt and Jacobsen). In Christian theology, the fish is an image of the saviour. And in American literature, from Thoreau to Hemingway, the act of fishing is a commonplace practice that connotes redemption and spiritual recovery (Schaub). Still, I will argue that the trout do not illustrate philosophical or religious ideas. In this final paragraph, the trout and their halo of connotations (meaning, depth and redemption) function as cultural forms that shape the basic theme of the novel. In other words, the moss-smelling trout in the hand is a literary image of vulnerability. As every trout fisher knows, the sensitive skin of the trout cannot stand more than a brief moment outside water. In fact, this image of vulnerability is very similar to Monbiot’s metaphor with the russeting skin of the biosphere.

The word “mystery” carries considerable weight as the final word of the novel and as the only occurrence of this word in the novel. “Mystery” is, of course, another Christian theme, designating God’s plan that has been kept secret for many an age but is now partly disclosed (Rom. 16: 25–6). However, I will argue that McCarthy uses this Christian idea in the secularised context of vulnerability. In the perspective of cosmody, the humming mystery of the trout is the intricate web of relationships between the things and names that make up a landscape: the fish smelling of moss, the water looking like amber, the patterns on their backs looking like tracks of worms (“vermiculate”) and so on. An image of this network of echoes is visible on the backs of the trout as maps and mazes. In the perspective of anthropody, on the other hand, the mystery is the inherent but inexplicable goodness of the son that even the persons he insists on helping do not understand (“Why did he do it?” 173). The residual goodness of the son is the last sign that there is still, perhaps, a hidden moral order in human life.

A vulnerable world is a world where this double mystery has become impotent. The novel uses the cultural forms of the theodicy debate to pose a question about the status of this mysterious hidden order. In *Blood Meridian*, Judge Holden, the satanic killer of the Mexican desert, denies the

dream of a hidden meaning: “Your heart’s desire is to be told some mystery. The mystery is that there is no mystery” (*Blood Meridian* 252). In an important essay from 1992, Leo Daugherty suggests reading *Blood Meridian* as a “Gnostic Tragedy”. When the novel describes the band of the scalp hunters’ “mindless violence” in the Mexican desert, we are in fact dealing with traces of Manichean Gnosticism, an early version of Christianity according to which the world was created by an evil demiurge. In this perspective, Judge Holden is a demiurge who denies any mysterious godly order in the material world. I find Daugherty’s reading convincing, especially if it is stressed that these Manichean ideas are part of the wider theodicy debate, a perspective he only alludes to: “So, whereas most thoughtful people have looked at the world they lived in and asked, How did evil get into it?, the Gnostics looked at the world and asked, How did *good* get into it?” (Daugherty 162).

Nevertheless, the main claim of Daugherty’s essay – that “Gnostic thought is central to Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*” – needs qualification. In my view, Gnostic thought is central to McCarthy, not as content but as form, and this cultural form is filled up with the stuff of human vulnerability. In *Blood Meridian* as well, human vulnerability is twofold, seen from the perspective of either cosmodycy or anthropodycy. On the one hand, it is a question about the relation between the group of scalp hunters and the landscape they exploit, while on the other it is a question about the relation between the scalp hunters themselves as a fragile society “beyond men’s judgements,” where “all covenants were brittle” (*Blood Meridian* 106).

As I have tried to show in this essay, *The Road* is not referring to the religious substance of the theodicy debate but is rather recycling the traditional theodicy themes as empty cultural forms. This does not mean, of course, that the theodicy motifs should be discarded as religious décor in an overtly erudite novel. On the contrary, this particular subset of cultural forms plays a central role as a condition of possibility for the novel’s imagination of human vulnerability. Without the long history of the theodicy debate, human vulnerability could not have been made visible like this. Neither does it mean that the theodicy ideas are the only cultural forms at work in the novel, as a comprehensive cultural archaeology of the novel would have to take into consideration, among other things, the genre conventions of science fiction as well as the classical American imagination of the wilderness. The surprising thing is, however, that the European history of theodicy plays a crucial role in McCarthy’s otherwise very American imagination of disaster vulnerability.

Modern disaster discourse is an ensemble of cultural forms – cognitive schemata, scientific concepts, narrative plots, metaphorical images, rhetori-

cal questions, etc. – framing the way we see disasters and the way we remain blind to them. Since the Lisbon earthquake, Western disaster fiction has revealed and reworked the cultural frame through which we perceive disaster. Thus, disaster fiction not only depicts the brute facts of disasters, fictional or factual, but also the cultural forms through which these facts become visible to us. *The Road* is indeed an important environmental book – not because it expresses one terrible fact about disaster but because it exposes the deep grammar of our collective imagination of disaster.

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