

‘The True Life is not Reducible to Words’: The Disintegration of Language in Post-Millennial American Fiction

RUTH DALY, School of English, University of Leeds
enrd@leeds.ac.uk

‘For last year’s words belong to last year’s language
And next year’s words await another voice.’

T.S. Eliot, ‘Four Quartets’¹

Don DeLillo’s *Point Omega* and Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* are set in the shadow of two great atrocities. Their respective plots engage imaginatively with the aftermath of the Iraq War following the terror attacks of 11 September 2001, and an unnamed apocalyptic event. The nature of the atrocity, an event which diminishes the individual’s language of description, might best be described in terms of a ‘limit event’.² This is an event of such enormity and overpowering violence that ‘its effects rupture the otherwise normative foundations of legitimacy’.³ Consequently, the role of language becomes problematised in the wake of atrocity. This has been compounded by Theodor Adorno’s famous statement in 1949 that ‘to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric’ calling instead for a cultural silence in its wake.⁴ A linguistic representation of a traumatic event poses the risk of ‘[reproducing] and [participating] in its horror’ and thus the silence Adorno and his proponents beseech is a preferable solution for some.⁵ This essay will begin by examining how the counter-narratives of both DeLillo and McCarthy offer another solution to this problem of representation than that suggested by Adorno. Both *Point Omega* and *The Road* conform to the notion proffered by novelist Tom McCarthy that the role of the novel is not about representing or criticising the world of which we are a part. Rather, its role is found in its ‘surrendering to a vertigo that can never be mastered, to an abyss that can never be commanded, or excavated, or filled in.’⁶

Both novels are particularly intricate and complex in their treatment of the void, the ‘black hole’ that appears in the wake of atrocity, theorisations of which are inextricably linked to the theory of trauma.⁷ While in-depth exploration of psychological trauma is out of the scope of this discussion, it is important to draw attention to its psychological effects on the individual. A complex phenomenon, trauma can be etymologically understood in the sense of a ‘wound’ the after-effects of which see a

1 T.S. Eliot, ‘Little Gidding’, in *Four Quartets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1944), p. 44.

2 Kristiaan Versluis, *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), p.2.

3 Simone Gigliotti, ‘Unspeakable Pasts as Limit Events: the Holocaust, Genocide, and Stolen Generations’, in *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, vol. 49 (2003), pp. 150-180, here p. 164.

4 Theodor Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. by S. and S. Weber (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981), p. 34.

5 Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (London: Profile, 2009), p. 3.

6 Andrej Gsiorek and David James, ‘Introduction: Fiction since 2000: Postmillennial Commitments’, in *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 53 (2012), pp. 609-627, here p. 622.

7 Don DeLillo, *Point Omega* (London: Picador, 2010), p. 34.

person's ability to cope impoverished, often rendering them powerless.⁸ Traumatic events 'are extraordinary, not because they occur rarely, but rather because they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life'.⁹ Primarily concerned with the trauma or rupture of language, this essay will continue on to explore the ways in which their respective narratives, permeated by obfuscation, allow for an exploration of the ways in which language itself performs the very anxieties, distresses and indeed acts of violence that 'circulate within the apocalyptic imagination'.¹⁰ DeLillo and McCarthy do not focus on the 'event', the pared-back prose contained within their novels representative of their respective discussions of the intangible, that which defies speech. By fully imagining the breakdown of language itself, their works of fiction enact the implosion of consciousness brought about by the rupture of preconceived notions of identity and security in the wake of catastrophe. In considering the liminal position occupied by language as it transitions from the 'old concrete' world into the 'formless music for the age to come' both novels paradoxically engender new ways of being through which civilisation can potentially exist.¹¹ This signifies a critically important perspectival shift from that of the trope of the heroic survivalist that abounds in much post-apocalyptic fiction.

DeLillo and McCarthy's staging of the breakdown of language will be better understood once situated in the context of postmodern theories of deconstruction and post-structuralism. Hence, this essay will briefly trace the theorisation of language beginning with the work of post-structuralist and semiotician Roland Barthes. Situating *Point Omega* and *The Road* within the theoretical framework of postmodernism will reveal how linguistic disintegration in both novels works to thwart the readers 'effort to construct a detailed vision' out of their abstruse narratives.¹² Both narratives shift the emphasis on to that which cannot be seen. DeLillo reminds the reader that

it takes close attention to see what is happening in front of you. It takes work, pious effort, to see what you are looking at [...] to see, the depths of things so easy to miss in the shallow habit of seeing.¹³

The insistence that it is 'only the closest watching' that yields perception is also echoed in *The Road*, the narrative of which manoeuvres around a series of gaps and omissions.¹⁴ This results in a structural absence in the framework of the novel, and just as the man and boy must navigate their way through 'the dark and the cold of the night,' so too must its reader navigate McCarthy's fragmented, aporetic prose.¹⁵ The lack of apostrophes, quotation marks and indeed names throughout the novel leave the reader with

8 Roger Lockhurst, *The Trauma Question*, (London: Routledge, 1st ed., 2008), p. 2.

9 Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, (London: Pandora, 2nd ed., 2001), p. 33.

10 J.J. Masters, 'Metalinguistic Discourse in the Contemporary Apocalyptic Novel', in *Literature Interpretation Theory*, vol. 23 (2012), pp. 113-118, here p. 114.

11 Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (London: Picador, 2007), p. 4; p. 81.

12 Kevin Kearney, 'Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and the Frontier of the Human', in *Literature Interpretation Theory*, vol. 23 (2012), pp. 160-178, here p. 167.

13 DeLillo, *Point Omega*, pp. 16-17.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

15 McCarthy, *The Road*, p. 1.

'[n]o tracks' to guide him or her, mirroring the sense of displacement felt by its protagonists who '[stand] listening in the utter silence' before setting 'out along the road through the gray slush'¹⁶

Roland Barthes' anti-essentialist theory corresponds to that posited by Ferdinand de Saussure in his seminal work *Course in General Linguistics* (1916) that '*the linguistic sign is arbitrary*'.¹⁷ According to Barthes, signs are mediated by language and even non-linguistic signs and actions carry linguistic meanings: 'language is the exemplary formal mechanism whose generative capacities are without limits. There is nothing that cannot be said and it is impossible to say nothing.'¹⁸ Deconstruction theorist Jacques Derrida launched an attack on the Saussurean tradition of semiotics instead emphasising the ways in which systems and structures break down. The traditional hierarchical oppositions of 'inside/outside, mind/body, literal/metaphorical, speech/writing, presence/absence [and] form/meaning' that have structured western thought are dismantled by deconstructionists, exposed as mere constructs.¹⁹ That is to say that it is given a different structure and functioning. The idea that 'the centre cannot hold' then is central to deconstruction and it is representative of the inherent chaos and disruption in language and structures.²⁰ This is brought about by an 'event' which Derrida refers to as a rupture in his 1966 lecture 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences'.²¹ The unnamed cataclysmic 'event' that takes place in *The Road*, set in a nuclear winter of post-apocalyptic America, ruptures the world of the novel and indeed language itself in much the same way Derrida's 'event' signifies the epistemological break with structuralist thought. The barren expanse scattered with 'charred and limbless trunks of trees' haunts the shape of the novel in the form of McCarthy's paratactic style; as civilisation collapses, words begin to falter as do all articulations and representations of language in the novel:

He'd had this feeling before, beyond the numbness and the dull despair. The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things slowly following those into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true. More fragile than he would have thought. How much was gone already? The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality. Drawing down like something trying to preserve heat. In time to wink out forever.²²

McCarthy's use of neologisms such as 'parsible' here and at other points in the novel is indicative of his need to illustrate the resounding horror and disarray that subsumes the father and his son. Here we witness the activation of a new language which emerges in the post-apocalyptic world of *The Road*, building on that which has gone before. McCarthy's novel identifies the tendency of history to disguise

16 Ibid., pp. 79-80.

17 Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. by Roy Harris (London: Duckworth, 1983), p. 68.

18 Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1991), p. 41.

19 Jonathan D. Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997), p. 169.

20 This is a line from W.B. Yeats 'The Second Coming'. Written in the aftermath of the First World War, Yeats discusses the need for a violent reversal to take place in order for the restoration of balance to occur. This line also features as an epigraph to Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) in which it signifies the chaos that arises with the collapse of a system.

21 Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 353.

22 McCarthy, *The Road*, pp. 6, 93.

itself as progress when in essence it is merely a process of senseless accretion. The terror inherent in language's ultimate inexpressiveness and its futility in the face of human annihilation is repeatedly performed on a textual level.

The rupture, or 'event', central to *Point Omega* differs somewhat and is perhaps best discussed in relation to Derrida's concept of *différance*. In his 1963 essay 'Cogito and the History of Madness' Derrida introduces his theory of *différance*, 'a simultaneous process of deferment in time and difference in space' which assists in highlighting the mobile, fragmented and paradoxical nature of language.²³ The array of meaning that results from the movement and deferment of signifiers to one another implies that there are no parameters on signification, its play limitless. Derrida's theory essentially throws knowledge-making into a state of 'play' which calls attention to the infinite possibilities of language. This is embodied in the very title of DeLillo's novel which is a reversal of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's theory of the Omega Point. This speaks of the complex consciousness toward which the universe is evolving and can be described as 'an end point of maximum organised complexity, a state of ideal love and reason beyond that which can be known'.²⁴ A point of spiritual singularity free from the constrictions of time and space, Teilhard states that

by the very nature of Omega, there can only be one possible point of definitive emersion – that point at which, under the synthesising action of personalising union, the noosphere will reach collectively its point of convergence – at the end of the world.²⁵

DeLillo's reversal of Teilhard's theory illustrates the 'free play' of language discussed in Derrida's 'Structure, Sign, and Play' by bringing the undecidability of language to the fore 'dislodg[ing] the principle of a single final meaning' in the novel.²⁶ We are left to consider whether DeLillo's Omega Point is one of horror or one of sublimity. Whether it is apocalyptic or whether it is symbolic of the mythological birth of creation. Whether it is 'the repressed "lost object" itself – the "abominable real", the unnameable "thing" (*das Ding*) which is the other face of that paradise we lost when we entered the world of egos and others'.²⁷

Deconstruction is invested in exposing the instability of meaning inherent in language that arises out of the endless chain of meanings that each word is capable of generating, whether archaic, its modern connotations and denotations or its ever changing implications in permuting contexts. Indeed, the postmodern uncertainty embedded within the narrative further emphasises the Derridean notion that there exists no fixed meaning or certainty, 'the true life is not reducible to words':

"Whatever the intended meaning of this term, [the Omega Point] if it has a meaning, if it's not a case of language struggling toward some idea outside our experience."

23 Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, *Literary Theory: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2nd ed., 2004), p. 258.

24 Paul Giaimo, *Appreciating Don DeLillo: The Moral Force of a Writer's Work* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2011), p. 176.

25 Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (London: Collins, 1959), p. 272.

26 Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory* (London: Prentice Hall Europe, 2nd ed., 1999), p. 249.

27 Richard Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 91.

“What idea?”

“What idea. Paroxysm. Either a sublime transformation of mind and soul or some worldly convulsion. We want it to happen.”

“You think we want it to happen.”

“We want it to happen. Some paroxysm.”²⁸

At no point in the novel does DeLillo resolve his ambiguous plot lines, again emphasising the impossibility of ‘seeing too much’ for ‘the less there [is] to see, the harder [one must look], the more [one will see]’.²⁹ Thus, he also breaks down the archaic notion that it is the responsibility of the writer to convey meaning, assisted by the cinematic ekphrasis in the novel.³⁰ This nesting of the visual within the written that is central to cinematic ekphrasis creates a decentring effect, which thrusts the image out of a controlling aesthetic form and into personal and public discourse. Readers interested in finding meaning must plough the landscape of language and so it is fitting that the novel’s characters retreat to the desert, a place where one goes to repair, simplify and purify, to get back to the source. Ultimately, in centring his novel around the discussion of a core that is epistemologically and ontologically unavailable, for to access it equals death, is illustrative of the inaccessibility of the ‘real’ for humanity. Elster’s speculations in the desert can be said to be ‘a denial or mockery of Teilhard’s thinking’ exposing his philosophy as one of wishful theology.³¹

Derrida also challenges logocentrist theory, a theory which positions the act of speech as central to the development of language and thus marginalising the act of writing. His espousal of this theory succeeds in rupturing the notion of an all-governing secure intellectual and moral foundation, arguing that ‘every definition “deconstructs” itself – that is, it tends to unravel when one probes deeper into its foundational assumptions and literary gestures’.³² He maintains that systems and structures are wholly fictitious constructs and thus cannot be said to accurately develop meaning, or create order. Indeed, the very notion of seeking out an ‘order’ is incongruous with post-structuralist thought which posits that no unified truth exists. The absence of an ontological centre is crucial to poststructuralism and ‘in place of the centre, but not in its place, there is alterity, otherness, a multiplicity and dispersal of centres, origins, presences’.³³ When examined from this frame of reference, the convergence of art, film, and literature in *Point Omega* is of particular interest. DeLillo’s ekphrastic novel engages artistic and cinematic elements,

28 DeLillo, *Point Omega*, p. 21; pp. 91-92.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

30 Ekphrastic works of literature are usually referred to as those that incorporate visual works of art. Cinematic ekphrasis diverges from the traditional conception in its ability to surpass the purely verbal ekphrasis of the novel. For a more detailed discussion of cinematic ekphrasis, see Laura M. Sager Eidt’s *Writing and Filming the Painting: Ekphrasis in Literature and Film* (Rodopi, 2008) and André Bazin’s *What is Cinema?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967).

31 David Cowart, ‘The Lady Vanishes: Don DeLillo’s *Point Omega*’, in *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 53 (2012), pp. 31-50, here p. 47.

32 Ben Agger, ‘Critical Theory, Poststructuralism, Postmodernism: Their Sociological Relevance’, in *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 17 (1991), pp. 105-131, here p. 112.

33 Bennett and Royle, *Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, p. 256.

namely the conceptual art piece *24 Hour Psycho* which works to suspend time in a manner that language is incapable of doing.³⁴ In keeping with the idea that DeLillo does not seek to represent or criticise the world in this novel, it is worth recalling Jean-François Lyotard's assertion that the role of art is found in its ability to 'bear witness...to this aporia of art' [...]. It does not say the unsayable, but says that it cannot say it.³⁵ DeLillo's jarring and unnatural use of syntax in the novel mirrors the looping effect of film where 'the slightest camera movement [creates] a profound shift in space and time' bringing the reader into a state of mind that resembles Henri Bergson's concept of duration (*la durée*).³⁶ Bergson critiqued mechanistic theories of time claiming that it superimposed spatial concepts onto time, leading to its misperception as a sequence of unconnected, detached and spatial constructs. Bergson instead argued for duration (*la durée*) where there is no juxtaposition of events and no mechanistic causality. That is to say, 'our awareness of temporal unfolding is in terms of its various rhythms. We have complexity rather than multiplicity.'³⁷ Consequently, the structural elements of *Point Omega* essentially serve to remove the machinery of mediation that structuralists such as Barthes and his predecessors refer to.

Temporal and spatial disintegration and the consequent 'absence' of language

Our organisation of time into a linear construct and space into geographic mappings is made impossible by 'black hole[s]' which essentially break down time and space.³⁸ In his discussion of the Omega Point, DeLillo brings the reader ever closer to a gravitational singularity. As a singularity that structured material around disintegrating spatiotemporal reality, the black hole reflects our inconsequential material reality back to us: 'We want to be the dead matter we used to be. We're the last billionth of a second in the evolution of matter.'³⁹ Omega Point parallels the detonation of the first atomic bomb, an occurrence which opened the door for an apocalyptic event worldwide. Elster's character mirrors that of the real life Oppenheimer, while the shadow of the killer in Hitchcock's *Psycho* mirrors the real life shadow of those who were nearest the blast; all that remained of them.⁴⁰ Hidden within the fissures of DeLillo's text lies the sublime terror of annihilation; the reality of our own Point Omega. This image articulates the horrors of trauma on a level that language alone is incapable of doing: 'the true life is not reducible to words'.⁴¹

The black hole or void is also explored in *The Road* where the absence of humanity following on from the apocalyptic event is explored via the absence of language. Kevin Kearney asserts that 'the "real" cause of the apocalypse exists as a hole in the text that parallels a potential hole in human existence: the

34 *24 Hour Psycho*, an art installation created by Douglas Gordon in 1993, is a slowed-down version of Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960). Gordon's work sees the original film slowed down to two frames per second, resulting in the creation of a 24 hour film.

35 J. F. Lyotard, *Heidegger and 'the Jews'*, trans. by A. Michel and M. Roberts (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), p. 47.

36 DeLillo, *Point Omega*, p. 5.

37 F. C. T. Moore, *Bergson, Thinking Backwards* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1996), p. 64.

38 DeLillo, *Point Omega*, p. 34.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 64.

40 See Appendix. Within a certain range from the site of detonation, the heat was so extreme that people were vaporised. In Hiroshima, all that was left of some humans who were sitting on nearby stone benches was their outlines.

41 DeLillo, *Point Omega*, p. 5.

complete absence of human futurity and the absence of life itself.⁴² Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's discussion of the relationship between language and power proves useful here. Bourdieu maintains that

language, by virtue of the infinite generative but also *originative* capacity – in the Kantian sense – which it derives from its power to produce existence by producing the collectively recognised, and thus realised, representation of existence, is no doubt the principle support of the dream of absolute power.⁴³

That the prose contained in both novels is that of a postmodern disturbance works to subvert the notion of language as absolute power. Indeed, the 'blackened books that lay in pools of water' in the 'charred ruins' of a library is suggestive of the destruction of art and literature which historically signify possibility and transformation.⁴⁴ They are now dismissed as artefacts of a bygone era. Similarly, there is the discovery of the last can of coke, a universally recognised sign in a capitalist society, which is now extinct. This further throws the idea of ontological security into disarray, which is exemplified by McCarthy when his unnamed protagonist walks out into the gray light and experiences something akin to Elster's 'enveloping nothing.'⁴⁵

[seeing] 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 [...] Borrowed time and borrowed world and borrowed eyes with which to sorrow it.⁴⁶

The trope of the 'fall of man' is a recurring feature within much post-millennial American fiction and it is echoed in the end of language that is imagined in *The Road*. The inextricable relationship between the ontological nature of words and the notion of divinity in the novel calls forth the story of 'The Tower of Babel' in the *Book of Genesis*. Mythologically speaking, Babel represents the birth of language. It also corresponds with the birth of confusion and miscommunication: 'Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other'.⁴⁷ In this biblical tale humanity is punished for arrogance and defiance by means of the confusion of tongues upon attempting to build a 'tower that reaches to the heavens'.⁴⁸ The associations of a capitalist ideology invoked by this myth bring to mind Fritz Lang's employment of the trope in his 1927 German expressionist film *Metropolis*. His frightening, dystopian epic envisions a controlled, repressive, and unjust future that is dominated by technology and devoid of humanity. The allegorical commentary within the film is delivered via the character of the socially conscious Maria:

42 Kevin Kearney, 'Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and the Frontier of the Human', in *Literature Interpretation Theory*, vol. 23 (2012), pp. 160-178, here p. 161.

43 Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, p. 42.

44 McCarthy, *The Road*, p. 199.

45 DeLillo, *Point Omega*, p. 118.

46 McCarthy, *The Road*, p. 93.

47 Genesis 11.7.

48 Ibid.

‘We shall build a tower that will reach to the stars!’ Having conceived Babel, yet unable to build it themselves, they had thousands to build it for them. But those who toiled knew nothing of the dreams of those who planned. And the minds that planned the Tower of Babel cared nothing for the workers who built it. The hymns of praise of the few became the curses of the many – BABEL! BABEL! BABEL! – Between the mind that plans and the hands that build there must be a Mediator, and this must be the heart.⁴⁹

McCarthy appropriates this trope in a manner not entirely dissimilar to Lang. A reading of *The Road* from the perspective of Baudrillard’s system of simulacra illuminates the ways in which McCarthy positions the father’s language as one belonging to the old epoch, obsessed with consumption. In *The Illusion Of The End* Baudrillard outlines the slippage into the hyperreal, an endless chain of representation that has laid claim to and thus rendered the human imaginary unproductive making post-apocalyptic rebirth virtually impossible, ‘for hyperreality rules out the very occurrence of the Last Judgement or the Apocalypse or Revolution’.⁵⁰ Postmodern hyperreality is thus incapable of imagining a meaningful ‘end after the end’.⁵¹ The father and son in the novel are struggling to find a sense of linguistic meaning in this post-apocalyptic world that envisions the end of humanity. It is notable that the language of the father is analogous to that of the pre-apocalyptic, post-capitalist epoch that Baudrillard maintains is ‘rooted, or perhaps un-rooted’ in consumption as opposed to production.⁵² While the father, who had carried his wallet about ‘till it wore a cornershaped hole in his trousers’⁵³ does attempt to disengage from his memories of the past by discarding money, credit cards and other symbols of the ‘civilised’ era, he remains a product of a hyperreal postmodern world, governed by simulations of other simulations.⁵⁴ However, the son, who is not of the pre-apocalyptic world and thus symbolic of the new, is suggestive of the possibility of a linguistic redemption.

Early on in *The Road* the son is enthusiastic and curious about language but as time progresses we witness his retreat away from speech into silence. At several points throughout the narrative, the father insists that his son engage in speech with him, variations on the phrase ‘You have to talk to me’ repeated numerous times. Their discourse has fallen into a numbness of frozen silence and he retreats deeper into himself as his father’s morality corrodes. Here we are reminded that the respective ideologies of the boy and his father, that of potential and that of the old, cannot coexist. The boy grows increasingly weary of his father’s discussion of ‘the good and the bad guys’ as is illustrated in the following passage:

Can you write the alphabet?

I can write it.

We don’t work on your lessons anymore.

49 *Metropolis*, dir. by Fritz Lang, (Paramount Pictures, 1927).

50 Jean Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), p. 8.

51 Masters, ‘Metalinguistic Discourse’, p. 115.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 117.

53 McCarthy, *The Road*, p. 52.

54 Masters, ‘Metalinguistic Discourse’, p. 116.

I know.

Can you write something in the sand?

Maybe we could write a letter to the good guys. So if they came along they'd know we were here.
We could write it up there where it wouldn't get washed away.

What if the bad guys saw it?

Yeah.

I shouldn't have said that. We could write them a letter.

The boy shook his head. 'That's okay, he said.'⁵⁵

The novel for the most part is narrated through the consciousness of the father and is consequently tied to his linguistic patterns which are attached to the old world. It is only towards the end that the son's voice becomes more prominent 'almost as if he is wresting linguistic power – and a way of seeing – from his father'.⁵⁶ The son's articulation of this power is thrust upon the father:

You're not the one who has to worry about everything.

The boy said something but he couldn't understand him.

What? he said

He looked up, his wet and grimy face. Yes I am, he said.

I am the one.⁵⁷

This assertion of linguistic power is bound up with the recurring imagery of the 'carrying [of] the fire' throughout the novel. A crucial element of the story is found in the way in which the 'fire' takes the form of a story which the father weaves and so it is inextricably linked to language from the outset.⁵⁸ The fire figuratively burns out of language thus suggesting the promise of regeneration via the son. He finds himself in this place inhabited by dead objects, 'but like the "rock city", the "limbless trunks" and "sagging hands of blind wire ... whining" elicits a world that lives on what is left behind'.⁵⁹ The final image in the novel is one of perfect symmetry which harks back to the beginning of time. It is worth quoting in full for it reveals how the boy's repossession of a system of language 'where word and referent

55 McCarthy, *The Road*, p. 262.

56 Masters, 'Metalinguistic Discourse', p. 117.

57 McCarthy, *The Road*, p. 277.

58 Kearney, 'Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and the Frontier of the Human', p. 162.

59 Ibid, p. 164.

are reconnected is made possible by his birth in post-apocalyptica, his dying world offering us a glimpse of what we have lost in our own time'.⁶⁰

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.⁶¹

Both *Point Omega* and *The Road* reveal how the unfathomable nature of catastrophic events causes disintegration at the most elemental level, namely that of language. Their counter-narratives do not engage in the replication and participation of events of horror that is a predominant feature in much post-millennial American fiction. They do not seek to represent; rather, they surrender to the abyss that cannot be mastered. This is illustrated on a thematic level but is also embedded in the very form and structure of their respective narratives. This works to convey how a rupturing of structure filters down to the most molecular of levels of literary composition; essentially, it reveals how the absence of ontological certainty is inextricably linked to linguistic arbitrariness. Careful consideration of the liminal position occupied by language at a time of transformation in the respective novels results in a paradoxical engendering of new ways of being through which humanity can potentially exist.

⁶⁰ Masters, 'Metalinguistic Discourse', p. 117.

⁶¹ McCarthy, *The Road*, pp. 306-307.

Appendix

Photographic evidence of the aftermath of the Hiroshima bombing referred to on page 6 of this essay.



Image 1: This photograph shows the stone steps leading to the entrance of Sumitomo Bank. With temperatures reaching well over 1,000 degrees centigrade, the individual was incinerated on the stone steps, <http://www.gensuikin.org/english/photo.html> [accessed 26.05.2014].



Image 2: This photograph shows the shadow made by the heat rays. This place is about 800 meters from the hypocenter, and the unshielded asphalt surface was scorched, while the surface shielded by the handrail appears as a white shadow, <http://www.gensuikin.org/english/photo.html> [accessed 26.05.2014].

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