An Uncanny Pilgrimage through the Wastescapes of W.G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*: Synchronic Time and Revenant Metaphorical Thinking

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Waste Studies as Grounding Theoretical Approach: "that dark Congolese secret within" (*RS*: 122)

Insights from the fields of Waste Studies and Vibrant Materialism can help illuminate the wastescapes of each novel. Waste Studies – a productive paradigm within the Environmental Humanities for analysing literature – expands established approaches of ecocriticism by fixing on decay, despoiled environments, and dystopic or toxic sites (see Morrison 2013; Morrison 2015). Waste occurs in literature as material agent, as metaphor, and through structure. The contingent approach of Vibrant Materialism questions 'the centrality of triumphant and exceptional humanism, which arguably has led to the trashing of the world as we now know it' (Morrison 2021: 239). Such an approach acknowledges that 'nothing has special status, but that everything exists equally' (Bogost 2012: 6). The materiality of waste matters not as 'passive stuff ... raw, brute, or inert,' but as a vital agent affecting the world (Bennett 2010: vii), activating human actors' sensitivity and sympathy to the slow decay of both organic and inorganic nonhuman actors.

W. G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* exemplifies both the horror of the narrator at the wastage humans have wrought – and continue to do so – as well as the narrator's ability to acknowledge the integrity of the nonhuman, whether organic or inorganic in nature. The novel braids a humble trek physically through East Anglia with memories of the destructive forces of history, as, for example, Belgian perfidity in the Congo. The first signal of a Belgian/Congolese underpinning starts with the initial epigraph stemming from Joseph Conrad, whose *Heart of Darkness* (1899) acts as a sinister backdrop to the haunted landscape of Sebald's literary topography, woven throughout his book through words and images. The black and white photographs that stud the novel not only commemorate Sebald's narration; sitting on the page like illuminations in a medieval manuscript, these images form a dialogue with the words (see Rodriguez 2018: 381). Sebald tells us the process of writing, where he begins 'to assemble my

notes' (*RS*: 5), in an act of amendment and revision. He recalls a colleague's 'virtual paper landscape' and 'paper universe,' where the vibrant 'paper had begun climbing from the floor' (*RS*: 8). His papers, too, construct an interconnected landscape of literary and artistic musings, from Borges to Flaubert and Stendhal; ecological observations, from swallows to the eruption of Mont Pelée; and historical oddities, emblemized by Thomas Browne's quincunx, a replica of which Sebald includes. This structure Browne identifies as being 'everywhere, in animate and inanimate matter….[O]ne might demonstrate *ad infinitum* the elegant geometrical designs of Nature' and serves as a model for Sebald's own work (*RS*: 20-1). The oddest minor detail – the meeting between Roger Casement and Joseph Conrad, then Józef Korzeniowski – bonds with Conrad's guilt 'which he had incurred by his mere presence in the Congo' (*RS*: 120) – and, by extension, even our work as readers and witnesses.

Korzeniowski/Sebald's disgust at Belgium's 'bombastic buildings, as a sepulchral monument erected over a hecatomb of black bodies' implicates us – for the volume we read would be impossible without 'that dark Congolese secret within [us]' (*RS*: 122). Sebald's work is obsessed with history, memory, and forgetting, questioning 'the very meaning of constructing a linear narrative and indict[ing] our insidious culpability with wartime horrors and atrocities' (Morrison 2021: 236).

What is that 'dark Congolese secret' lying at the heart of Belgium's seeming glory and, by extension, any human triumph? The Congo itself acts as a dynamic revenant of historical horror underlying Sebald's desolate meditation. As Véronique Bragard (2018) has pointed out concerning the Belgo-Congolese Sammy Baloji's mining photomontages, we can see the 'flattening of the distinction between past and present to critically engage with "the transgenerational haunting of injustices of the past that continues to inform the present" in the shape of dirt borders and invisible exploited labour brings together body, landscape, and dirt wastescapes that become traces of social history' (Bragard 2018: 288 qtd. Demos 2013: 10). That 'dark Congolese secret within' roots itself in waste and dirt, wherein 'perceptions of dirt were used by the colonial system to impose geographies of exclusion that have become invisible' (Bragard 2018: 273). Indeed, 'waste becomes the haunting ghost of (neo)colonial plundering of resources' (Bragard 2018: 274). Waste not only lands in garbage dumps, but makes that space become waste itself, along with those who occupy it or live adjacent to it. As the cultural model of waste is mapped onto humans, ethical dangers loom. Whoever cleans up waste is seen as

waste himself. Within the 'Belgian colonial system,' colonials were placed away from the 'dirt' of the colonized (Bragard 2018,: 276-7). The (false) 'designation of African people as dirty served to impose segregation and exploitation' (Bragard 2018: 277). Colonials were rhetorically promoted as 'clean,' amid as the 'waste of land resources and exploitation of labourers that sustained the mining economy which profited from them' (Bragard 2018: 279). Sebald's use of the Congo as refrain allows him to spook us with disconcerting associations between evident Belgian exploitation and treachery to those closer to home and in time. The Congo stands as revenant link between Belgian wasting and the countless acts of brutal wasting committed the world over since recorded history.

W. G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*: The Revenant Metaphor of Pilgrimage

The shadow of African plundering disturbs the novel from the initial epigram by Joseph Conrad. This moment – before we even read the chapter contents – evokes a constant and possibly hollow metaphor: that of pilgrimage. Conrad writes to Marguerite Poradowska:

> Above all, we must forgive the unhappy souls who have elected to make the pilgrimage on foot, who skirt the shore and look uncomprehendingly upon the horror of the struggle, the joy of victory, the profound hopelessness of the vanquished. (Sebald 1998: 43)[1]

Sebald's German original has a subtitle the English edition lacks: 'Eine englische Wallfahrt' ('an English pilgrimage'), which lends the novel a 'genre description' (Ryan 2009: 45), even before the reader turns a page. In the German edition of *Die Ringe des Saturn* (*RS*: 37), Sebald refers to Walsingham, near to where he taught at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, as a 'Wallfahrtsort' ('site of pilgrimage'), while this description does not appear in the English version (*RS*: 24, 25; Ryan 2009: 46). Just as Walsingham famously had a replica of the house of Annunciation, so, too, the Sebaldian narrator-avatar – 'a modern pilgrim' (McCulloh 2003: 25) – meets a farmer building his own 'model of the temple at Jerusalem' in Suffolk (Ryan 2009: 47; see Bale 2016: 208 and 231). Walsingham itself, an epicentre of medieval loss and destruction under Henry VIII, exists in tiered moments from bygone days. The pilgrimage metaphor suggests how the narrator's walk embodies what has been called 'fotminne,' a coined word to indicate 'foot memory' or 'foot-minded' (Ahlberg 2019: 63, 67). This term allows for 'a sense of how place undergoes change through time as people, livestock, and wildlife traverse it…. within

the context of deep history' (Ahlberg 2019: 65). In Sebald's novel, the 'deep history' of sixteenth-century devastation haunts the derelict shrine of Marian veneration as a sacred spectre amid profane ruin.

Pilgrimage as spent metaphor recurs throughout the book, at times flickering to life. After visiting an eccentric Irish family in their decaying estate, Sebald bids farewell to the daughter, Catherine, 'holding a broad-brimmed hat like a pilgrim's, the same red as her dress' (*RS*: 220). Years later in Berlin in 1993, time collapses. He witnesses her once more on stage, 'incredibly wearing the same red dress, holding in her hand the same pilgrim's hat, she or her very image, Catherine of Siena' (*RS*: 221). The montage of her appearance across location and time suggests both emotional and spiritual pilgrimage and layered, even synchronic, time where the past acts in a reanimated spirit. Along with the narrator, the 'reader is called into existence to retrace those routes of pilgrimage herself as though by deepening the old paths to those shrines of cultural knowledge, the past, and the self-reflexive contemplation that is possibly the only way out of the harmful, potentially destructive present' (Blackler 2007: 99). Other words sustain this peregrination vocabulary. Sebald records religious vestiges, from those of Thomas Browne (*RS*: 10) to those of 'ruined conical brick buildings, like relics of an extinct civilization' (*RS*: 30) (see also 'reliquary' *RS*: 90, 96). Relics were typically venerated saints' bones said to have the power to heal. Whether the narrator can heal himself in this journey remains an open question.

While on a trip to Amsterdam, he 'made notes on the stations of my journey' (*RS*: 86; see also 257), thus further weaving in pilgrimage metaphors to his humble trek, physically through East Anglia and mentally through the universe via a literary geography and synchronic chronology. Indeed, to 'read Sebald is to make a journey' (McCulloh 2003: 6; also see Blackler 2007: 127). While Sebald identifies this work as being in the pilgrimage mode, Kaup counters the 'idea of pilgrimage [which] implies a linear journey to a known destination, whereas the walks in *The Rings of Saturn* have none' (Kaup 2013: 690). Yet contingency remains an element from pilgrimage works rooted in the medieval period. Indeed, 'pilgrimage ecopoetics teaches us to contingently respond to unexpected encounters' (Morrison 2019: 41) – including encounters with the distant past as in Sebald's novel.

The trash and decay from bygone days form a tissue with connected – however distantly – epochs. The narrator, 'confronted with the traces of destruction' (*RS*: 3), interacts with human and nonhuman actors, leading him to touch distant moments in time and space, though, as he

acknowledges, 'Who can say how things were in ages past?' (*RS*: 84). The decline of East Anglia, once vibrant in the Middle Ages, even in its Victorian iteration, depresses the narrator, who muses and meditates on other decays and declines linked to this now remote edge of an island. Herring stocks crashed and, while 'natural historians sought consolation in the idea that humanity was responsible for only a fraction of the endless destruction in the cycle of life' (*RS*: 57), he exposes that human actors decimated nonhuman ones (see Sheehan 2012: 734). Still, 'the truth is that we do not know what the herring feels' (*RS*: 57). Sebald refuses to allow this presumption.

A narrative visualizes a 'world system' (Tally 2017: 480) with both the cosmological and abstract conception of space – those rings of Saturn – to the minute specificity of a local, vernacular place – East Anglia. Sebald speculates on celestial perspective: '[i]f we view ourselves from a great height, it is frightening to realize how little we know about our species, our purpose and our end, I thought, as we crossed the coastline and flew out over the jelly-green sea; (*RS*: 92). Almost cinematically, he swoops from his vast prospect to zero in on the diminutive:

> I saw a solitary mallard, motionless on the garish green surface of the water. This image emerged from the darkness, for a fraction of a second, with such perfect clarity that I can still see every individual willow leaf, the myriad green scales of duckweed, the subtlest nuances in the fowl's plumage, and even the pores in the lid closed over its eye. (*RS*: 89)

The cosmic and specific have their place in his ranging journey across landscape and history as he ambles from Nazi atrocities to Voyager II. This aerial view – and its ethical dimension – recurs. He links the Jerusalem replica to the dome of the nuclear reactor in East Anglia, Sizewell, 'which can be seen on moonlit nights shining like a shrine far across the land and sea' (*RS*: 248). Humanity sacralises – 'shrine' – unimaginable destruction in the form of nuclear power, hollowing out sacred transcendence. Time collapses, when, on a stroll, 'I felt as if I were in a deserted theatre, and I should not have been surprised if a curtain had suddenly risen before me and on the proscenium I had beheld' the battle between the Dutch and English on May 28, 1672 (*RS*: 76). His literal and figurative trek through a conjured paper landscape of physical detail, memory, and metaphor invents 'a treasure house that existed purely in his head' (*RS*: 271). Texts themselves are 'objects of memory' (Crownshaw 2010: 41).

The reader becomes stuck in the web of connections woven by Sebald's narrative. The narrator, himself 'a restless traveler,' pushes the reader 'into travels of her own' (Blackler 2007: 94). While reading in Southwold's musty Sailors' Reading Room from a patrol ship log, 'I am astounded that trail that has long since vanished from the air or the water remains visible here on the paper' (*RS*: 93) – and on our paper too, in the hard copy volume we cradle. His visit to Somerleyton Hall sparks connections ranging as far back as the Middle Ages to the bombing raids over Germany during World War II. The genetics of his writing emerge in this scene, where he speaks with a gardener about that violent past. Seamlessly and repeatedly, he switches from third to first person, as though the material encasing of the body of one man fades as the memories of the other emerge in his own voice. This erasure of border he observes with the home itself, famous 'for the scarcely perceptible transitions from interiors to exterior; those who visited were barely able to tell where the natural ended and the man-made began….all of it interacted in such a way that one had the illusion of the complete harmony between the natural and manufactured' (*RS*: 33-4). The gardener's voice retelling of past events merges with Sebald's manufactured narrative, as though he is there as time and distance recede. Later, he communes with his friend, the writer Michael Hamburger, 'as if it were not he who had abandoned that place of work but I' (*RS*: 183). This inspires him to ask, 'Across what distances in time do the elective affinities and correspondences occur? How is it that one perceives oneself in another human being, or, if not oneself, then one's own precursor?' (*RS*: 182). This seamless and peculiar affinity with others –whether human actors or nonhuman (bugs, ducks, landscape, paintings) – Sebald explores through space and time. '[W]e all move, one after the other, along the same roads mapped out for us by our origins and our hopes' (*RS*: 187).

Sebald's novel concludes on Maundy Thursday, a day when Christ washed his disciples' feet and is the feast day of various saints (*RS*: 294). It is also, Sebald reminds us, when countless events took place, only a few of which he can recount, such as Henry IV's Edict of Nantes, the first performance of *The Messiah*, the foundation of the Anti-Semitic League in Prussia, and the Amritsar massacre. It also is the day when his wife's father passed away. '[O]ur history…is but a long account of calamities' (*RS*: 295). Grief was once acknowledged sartorially through black. Then, even mirrors and paintings were draped, 'so that the soul, as it left the body, would not be distracted on its final journey, either by a reflection of itself or by a last glimpse of the land now being lost for ever' (*RS*: 296). The only commemoration that remains is through memorialization

in pilgrimage texts such as this. Pilgrimage acts to tie disparate observations together. Yet, at the same time, the invocation of a sacred metaphor in an era of secular malaise points to its revenant spectral power.

Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*: Spectral Metaphors

On seeing ruined military installations intended for mysterious destruction, Sebald's narrator thinks: 'I imagined myself amidst the remains of our own civilization after its extinction in some future catastrophe; (*RS*: 237) – devastation triggered by mankind's own selfish savagery. In *The Road*, that very catastrophe Sebald imagines has already taken place in the past, as another pilgrimage begins. Cormac McCarthy's novel, 'depicts "the wasteland" as a metaphor, a world in which metaphor has become fact, in which [T. S.] Eliot's spiritual "wasteland" is embodied in America as a "waste country"' (El-Sobky 2020: 70). Metaphor and simile provide elegiac laments for a lost world in this post-apocalyptic wastescape. They resiliently offer hope for the future despite the devastation of humanity and environment. Donna Haraway's assertion that '"making kin"' works as a 'life-saving strategy for the Anthropocene' applies linguistically through metaphors which make differing – often opposing – concepts, ideas, and images into kin (Oppermann 2017: 3, citing Haraway 2015: 160). In this famously post-apocalyptic world, metaphor acts as a gift from father to son, quickening imagination and memory in a deadened world. The man and his son endure hardships as they face the desolation of loss and deprivation. Their fortune, often quite good, allows them to bear the pain of the loss of a world that vibrated with animated nature.

Many scholars have pointed out the religious imagery inherent to this novel, which acts as an elegy to 'future environmental degradation' (Huebert 2017: 77). Lydia Cooper, laying out McCarthy's allegorical sensibility long observed by scholars, has eloquently and thoroughly traced the Grail motifs present in the novel. The power of imagery in contemporary narratives, Cooper shows, reflects 'concerns with violence and atrocity' in a world '"wounded" and "wasted" beyond recognition' (Cooper 2011: 220). Indeed, '[b]rutally shorn of referents no longer relevant, [the] very essence [of Grail symbols] has been revivified in order to bring insight to contemporary reality' (Cooper 2011: 234). Cognate to the Grail, pilgrimage acts as a powerful, yet suspect, revenant in this world of waste, as it did in Sebald's novel. Indeed, the allegory of pilgrimage grounds *The Road*. This anti-pilgrimage,[2] while ultimately taking on

sacred resonance, is invoked from the very opening page of the novel. ‘Like pilgrims in a fable swallowed up and lost among the inward parts of some granitic beast’ (*TR*: 3). The allegory that ensues carries vestiges of scriptural remnants. ‘Deep stone flues where the water dripped and sang. Tolling in the silence the minutes of the earth and the hours and the days of it and the years without cease’ (*TR*: 3). Water in a Christian context inevitably suggests baptism, while ‘[t]olling’ hearkens to bells ringing their own canonical hours. The land itself, ‘[b]arren, silent, godless’ (*TR*: 4), becomes both their holy haven and harrowing of hell. A religious calendar of festivals, marking the year in terms of Christ’s life, cannot make a presence here. ‘He hadnt kept a calendar for years’ (*TR*: 4). Why should he? The weather never indicates a change in season, liturgical or natural (*TR*: 29).

Yet the sacred seeps into their journey just as the water does in the cavern where they have sheltered. The man wakes from a dream with blessed overtones: ‘In the dream from which he’d wakened he had wandered in a cave where the child led him by the hand. Their light playing over the wet flowstone walls’ (*TR*: 3). The Biblical overtones – ‘and a little child shall lead them’ (*Isaiah* 11:6) – and luminosity suggesting a heavenly glow lend mystery to this profound meditation on love and survival. ‘He knew only that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke’ (*TR*: 5; see also 11-12). Even the ash that persists on invading their every vision, their every breath, can be understood in terms of the sacred: ‘A single gray flake sifting down. He caught it in his hand and watched it expire there like the last host of Christendom’ (*TR*: 16). Christ’s consecrated and cremated body melts away.

The Road stirs in the reader’s memory sacred murmurings, with pilgrimage as a spectral and archaic element. Any current hope remains impotent in a topography of despair and devastation. At a ruined city, they encounter ‘[t]he mummied dead everywhere’ (*TR*: 24). Compared to ‘latterday bogfolk,’ they can only be likened to ‘pilgrims’ through simile: ‘They were discalced to a man like pilgrims of some common order for all their shoes were long since stolen’ (*TR*: 24). ‘Discalced’ means barefoot or wearing sandals, as pilgrims walking in humble connection along the road. The comparison only works through simile, not direct equation, since pilgrims enacting place pilgrimage are, it seems, no longer possible.

Feet and shoes are a continual worry. At one point ‘[h]e’d wrapped their feet in sacking tied with cord’ (*TR*: 30). While ‘sack’ appears in English as far back as the Anglo-Saxon period, one of the earliest connotations suggests ‘material of penitential or mourning garments’ (“sack”

OED Online). A religious lexis leaches into the novel, largely from the man's perspective. He seems only capable of making comparisons given what his experience has taught him. Having lived through the pre-apocalyptic world, perhaps a world with God, he perforce constructs parallels linguistically using that archaic wordstock. A forest fire, ablaze in orange, moves him. 'The color of it moved something in him long forgotten. Make a list. Recite a litany. Remember' (*TR*: 31). A world of colour, so long past, provokes his recollection of other connection-making activities. Indeed, '[m]ake a list' initiates the list that follows, including the ritual speech of 'litany.' These constitute his memory.

> After the man kills a would-be murderer of the boy, they kneel in a river of ice and cold. This is my child, he said. I wash a dead man's brains out of his hair. That is my job. Then he wrapped him in the blanket and carried him to the fire….[H]e tousled his hair before the fire to dry it. 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. (*TR*: 74)

This profound series of events and reflection upon them suggests how the man makes new rituals of spiritual significance. While they can only be '*like* some ancient anointing' (my emphasis), that comparison alone thickens their weight and magnitude.

Sacred references function as revenants from some past world replete with hallowed moments. Like God in a world of decrepit destruction, the man breathes life upon new ceremonies. The boy sleeps. 'He sat beside him and stroked his pale and tangled hair. Golden chalice, good to house a god' (*TR*: 75). The 'golden hair' recurs when the man cuts the boy's locks (*TR*: 152) – a blessed nimbus thought of not as simile, but in a simple phrase. No verb realises it into an active sentence in this benumbed world. The man reassures the boy of his love and sacred duty. 'My job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God. I will kill anyone who touches you. Do you understand?' (*TR*: 77). A parent in this debased world fulfils his function by washing away a potential murderer's bodily fluids, in a tenderly perverse baptism. Human actions – whether compassionate or corrupt – are mutually influenced *by* and act *on* the environment. 'By aligning the death of the nonhuman world with the rise of inhuman humans, the novel enables – though it never says as much – an alignment of environmental disaster with the loss of (parental) care' (Johns-Putra 2016: 531). McCarthy typically invokes the

sacred and nature through simile – comparison of what something is or is not – or through phrases with no verbs, since the sacred and nature cannot be dynamically enacted.

> The names of things slowly following those things 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. (*TR*: 88-9).

Religious discourse relies on natural comparisons. McCarthy's linguistic splinters – incomplete sentences and similes that work only through comparisons to missing referent – act vibrantly to stave off annihilation and revive meaning, even love, from the past in the present (See Murphet 2012: 127).

Himself a remnant or revenant of a past world, the man stills reads allegorically, though symbols have proven spent and depleted. Have metaphors lost their vibrancy?

> I'll be in the neighborhood. Okay?
>
> Where's the neighbourhood?
>
> It just means I wont be far. (*TR*: 95)

The boy has lost – no, never even knew – this way of thinking. Yet the sacred past tenaciously persists in religious resilience. At a former slave plantation, where present-day slaves are imprisoned to be cannibalized, the man breaks into a padlocked hatch. 'He started down the rough wooden steps. He ducked his head and then flicked the lighter and swung the flame out over the darkness like an offering' (*TR*: 93). Offerings of sacred import no longer promise salvation, where they see the pitiable slaves in miserable physical shape. 'Jesus, he whispered….Christ, he said. Oh Christ' (*TR*: 110). No Jesus or Christ can enter this world to be cannibalized in the sacred ritual of the mass. Rather than the sacred consumption of a divine host, the anthropopaghy of this new world is literal. '[E]cological cannibalism ultimately bleeds into traditional cannibalism' (Huebert 2017: 69). Man and boy run away from the captors, 'Christ, he said. Run. Run' (*TR*: 111).

At one point while getting up in the dark, the man moves quietly so as not to wake his son. 'Following a stone wall in the dark, wrapped in his blanket, kneeling in the ashes like a penitent' (*TR*: 54). For McCarthy, 'like a penitent' is a simile. This new world cannot actualize penitence, only shadow the devout past. Perhaps he seeks absolution when he then says '[his

wife's] name aloud' (*TR*: 54). Nature only occurs in dead similes. 'He'd trained him to lie in the woods like a fawn' (*TR*: 118). The water he laves up slakes his parched memory. After this refreshment, '[t]hen they set out upon the road again, slumped and cowled and shivering in their rags like mendicant friars sent forth to find their keep' (*TR*: 126). Religion, like nature, exists in similes drawn as apparitions of a memorized past. They bear witness to 'a charred human infant headless and gutted and blackening on the spit' (*TR*: 198). No transubstantiation of sacred cannibalism thrives in this world of lifeless allegory and archaic metaphor.

Little reminders of the past haunt their journey, including 'small cairns in rock' (*TR*: 180) from the time just after the apocalypse occurred, when pilgrims existed without simile.

> Out on the roads the pilgrims sank down and fell over and died and the bleak and shrouded earth went trundling past the sun and returned again as trackless and as unremarked as the path of any nameless sisterworld in the ancient dark beyond. (*TR*: 181).

The earth itself was shrouded, like a dead body cared for by the living, mute and grim in the face of devastation and destruction. As pilgrims died, pilgrimage, too, passed away, only to be revived by the man and the boy in a relentless determination of survival and hope in 'other good guys' (*TR*: 155). For the boy, his faith remains: 'Yes I do believe [in you]. I have to' (*TR*: 184-5).

What little hope there is can be discerned in matter, itself a synchronic materiality. In McCarthy's '"wastescap[e]"' (Bragard 2013: 481), the man and boy 'establish a new relationship with the matter of objects and [avoid] categorizing them as waste. By breaking their form, viewers re-connect with their materiality, perceived as something neutral with agentic potential' (Bragard 2013: 484). Forced 'to re-connect with [objects'] textural and tactile materiality,' their senses are reawakened 'in a nostalgic framework of memorial re-connection, [which] is equally symbolic of the new ontology.' Indeed, redemption, Bragard argues in her Beckettian-inflected reading, can be found 'in the very vibrancy and agency of matter.' Though objects materially disappear, they 'are recreated in their minds via object metaphors;' characters 'are enmeshed in a physical and semiotic relationship with matter' (Bragard 2013: 485). This vital enmeshment with matter emerges, I argue, through the use of revenant metaphor. Over the course of the novel we see how the boy learns to remember and imagine through metaphors his father conveys to him from a past world of good guys and fertility. These vibrant metaphors, animating the boy's imagination, spark life in a deadened world. Whether God exists or not, the boy conjures His

existence up through ritual language he somehow knows through stories carrying traces of sacred memories from the past.

Metaphor ignites synchronic time through wraithlike comparisons from a past, dead in time, to a present lifelessness. Sometimes, as the boy sleeps, the man sobs. 'He wasnt sure what it was about but he thought it was about beauty or about goodness. Things that he'd no longer any way to think about at all' (*TR*: 130-1). Yet he can think of such things through similes triggered by memory, which 'here has the sacrificial force of the sacred' (Murphet 2012: 126). The pre-apocalyptic past roots the man's linguistic net, while the boy's lies purely in the present and in stories he has heard.

> Maybe he understood for the first time that to the boy he was himself an alien. A being from a planet that no longer existed. The tales of which were suspect. He could not construct for the child's pleasure the world he'd lost without constructing the loss as well. (*TR*: 154)

That loss manifests itself in literally dead similes, since all comparisons and allusions are to what no longer exists. He has to explain to the boy what some of what his comparisons mean.

> Well. I think we're about two hundred miles from the coast. As the crow flies.
>
> As the crow flies?
>
> Yes. It means going in a straight line. (*TR*: 156)

How could the boy know, if no more crows exist to fly? '*The Road* refers to the pastoral not to inspire its narrative with possibility but to haunt it with loss' (Johns-Putra 2016: 526). The invocation of an extinct nonhuman actor signals the gulf between the man's and boy's lived experiences.

> There's not any crows. Are there?
>
> No.
>
> Just in books.
>
> Yes. Just in books.
>
> I didn't think so. (*TR*: 158)

Still, even extinct metaphors can stir the boy's mind.

A map, only in pieces, proves useful to the man who has memorized 'the names of towns and rivers' (*TR*: 215), vestiges of a time when place and geography held weight. The boy charts his desire for sociability, his yearning for other peoples, when he plays 'in the sand. He had a

spatula made from a flattened foodtin and with it he built a small village. He dredged a grid of streets' (*TR*: 245). He even thinks to write 'a letter to the good guys' (*TR*: 245). His sociability serves as a sign of the wholesomeness of a past civilization, perhaps boding good for the future. Within David Alworth's paradigm, both the 'human but also the nonhuman other…helps to facilitate a bond' (Alworth 2016: 78). Here in the post-apocalyptic wastescape, 'material sites mediate sociality,' even 'sustain sociality' (Alworth 2016: 81, 120). We witness the boy's instinct toward sociality after they find the thief of their goods by the beach. They leave him naked in the road, whereupon the boy cries. The man reassures him, 'You're not the one who has to worry about everything.' But the boy disagrees. 'Yes I am, he said. I am the one' (*TR*: 259). He is. And he will be.

The Road and T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*: Cognates and Similes without Referents

Towards the end, the man observes the road and hears a sound he cannot quite place. 'A sound without cognate and so without description' (*TR*: 261). This new world has no associated equivalent, hence the inability to describe it beyond greyness, trash, and randomness. The old world had cognates as witnessed through similes which the man cannot help conjuring up from his memory, squeezing cans 'like a man checking for ripeness at a fruitstand' (*TR*: 261) – in a world with no more fruit stands, no more fruit. The boy expresses a conviction that stories are not true. 'But in the stories we're always helping people and we dont help people' (*TR*: 268). As the father points out, stories do not have to be happy. Miraculously, along the 'gray coast' where they study the map, where flotsam piles up randomly, they see 'pitted iron hardware deep lilac in color, smeltered in some bloomer in Cadiz or Bristol and beaten out on a blackened anvil, good to last three hundred years against the sea' (*TR*: 271). Or against a disastrous event that destroyed the earth that once was. McCarthy's sudden evocation of the colour 'lilac' – beyond white, grey, black, or the orange of fire – shocks the reader into remembering vibrant pigments in the greyed-out world. Colour blazes up with the scent of flowers no longer able to bloom, forgotten in the man's memory, never known to the boy.

Lilac carries additional resonance for *The Road*. The opening lines of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* famously intone, 'April is the cruellest month, breeding/Lilacs out the dead land' (Eliot 1970: 53). Lydia Cooper observes how McCarthy's insistence on Grail metaphors links this 'wastescape' to that of Eliot, itself replete with references to the Fisher King. While

connections between the waste of McCarthy's forbidding chronotope and Eliot's *The Waste Land* are apt – the rubbish, devastation, the bleak experiences – an additional path through Eliot proves parallel and resonant with McCarthy – that of pilgrimage. More than even *The Waste Land, The Road* accretes meaning with Eliot's *Four Quartets*, a poem infused with Dantean pilgrimage imagery, culminating with imagery from *Paradiso* with the rose and fire (Atkins 2014: 24). Eliot's meditation on time and memory resonates with *The Road*. As *Burnt Norton* suggests 'Only through time is time conquered' (Eliot, *Burnt Norton*, 1970: 178). Metaphor provokes moments from the past, fashioning a palimpsest to conquer time. The speaker in *East Coker* fails at language, '[e]ach venture/Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate/With shabby equipment always deteriorating…' (Eliot, *East Coker*, 1970: 189). In *The Road*, the man's words allude to a depleted world where '[w]e must be still and still moving/…Through the dark cold and the empty desolation' (Eliot, *East Coker*, 1970: 189-90).

After his father's death, the boy gingerly, apprehensively, takes a chance with a new bricolaged family with him echoing Christ in the Emmaus story. Bidding his father farewell, promising to talk to him daily, he joins his party, only to be embraced by the woman who speaks of the divine. 'She said that the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all time' (*TR*: 286), even in times of profane denature. The last paragraph of *The Road* in the second person suggests the voice of father, speaking even now of trout he had mentioned before. No similes this time. Only equivalences in the past. 'On their back were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes' (*TR*: 287) (Kunsa 2009: 68). Not '*like* maps of the world,' but *were* 'maps of the world.' This abandonment of similes suggests both the disappearance of making cognates with an extinct world, yet the emergence of life in the present, with hopes for a new ecosphere 'of mystery' to come (*TR*: 287). The physical pilgrimage transforms into 'a linguistic journey toward redemption' (Kunsa 2009: 58, 59). As in Eliot's poem, the man and boy use the past for their present survival into the future. 'This is the use of memory:/For liberation – not less of love but expanding/Of love beyond desire, and so liberation/From the future as well as the past' (Eliot, *Little Gidding*, 1970: 205). The patterns on the trouts' back exist still, or again, or are refashioned '[t]o become renewed, transfigured, in another pattern' (Eliot, *Little Gidding*, 1970: 205). The boy moulds this new pattern, one which hearkens to his father's past, for '[e]very phrase and every sentence is an end and a beginning' (Eliot, *Little Gidding*, 1970: 208).

One of the only remaining good guys, with his new kin cobbled together out of his father's love and rooted in the man's abiding devotion, the boy can act with resilience. '[T]he best thing was to talk to his father and he did talk to him and he didnt forget' (*TR*: 286). He embodies Julian of Norwich's compassionate and consoling wisdom as echoed by Eliot: '[a]nd all shall be well and/All manner of thing shall be well' (Eliot, *Little Gidding*, 1970: 209). Like lines from Eliot's meditative masterpiece – 'And the fire and the rose are one' (Eliot, *Little Gidding*, 1970: 209) – both McCarthy and Eliot recall that initial 'rose' of that first great pilgrimage poem of the fourteenth century (Dante, *Paradiso* XXXII.13-15). *The Road* contains dozens of uses of the word rose, typically in the sense of rising up, at the conclusion of the novel. The boy vows, 'I wont forget. No matter what. Then he rose' (*TR*: 286). This confirms Cooper's observation that, even in such a dark world, 'Where humans live, then, God also survives' (Cooper 2011: 229).

Revenant Metaphorical Thinking and Synchronic Linguistic Hauntings

When the man dies, so, too, do memories of a past that can emerge only through similes. In his final hours, the similes disappear and the boy acts with religious resonance. 'He watched him come through the grass and kneel with the cup of water he'd fetched. There was light all about him' (*TR*: 277). The kneeling, the baptismal water, the light – all images of salvation from a decayed sacred world – their only promise lies in this one boy, who carries the fire inside him (*TR*: 278-9). Before he dies, the father makes sure the boy can imagine he will still be there to talk with. 'If I'm not here you can still talk to me. You can talk to me and I'll talk to you….You have to make it like talk that you imagine. And you'll hear me. You have to practice' (*TR*: 279). If the father continues to communicate with the boy, his resilience beyond the grave can persist in purveying his similes from a past world. 'Survival of cultural traditions…depends on intergenerational remembering…. [H]uman survival means preserving knowledge beyond what can be remembered by individuals' (Ahlberg 2019: 70). If the boy reanimates such comparisons, then he will conjure up that dead world, resurrecting it in his imagination.

The 'melted window glass' in buildings of a city 'hung frozen down the walls like icing on a cake' (*TR*: 273). He can taste that cake in his memory, even if the boy has never eaten one. Tangled wires spill forth from wrecked buildings, 'garbled like knitting' (*TR*: 274), a craft long vanished. They trudge on, '[t]reading the dead world under like rats on a wheel' (*TR*: 273). In his

final days, he stops to gaze at his boy, 'and see him standing there in the road looking back at him from some unimaginable future, glowing in that waste like a tabernacle' (*TR*: 273). The sacred boy amid the waste offers a revenant redemption amid the filth of despair.

The simile or metaphor as revenant suggests the eerie power of what has occurred to – zombie-like – arouse dynamic thought. The metaphor of pilgrimage, spent in Sebald's degraded present and archaic in McCarthy's devasted future, still manages to act by organizing thoughts and emotions. Language itself awakens the past in synchronic linguistic hauntings, both creepy and poignant. Revenant metaphorical thinking conjures forth synchronic links between past and present to gesture ambiguously to a reanimated future, however nebulous that prospect may be. The wastelands of Sebald's and McCarthy's visionary inventiveness suggest not only despair at man's inhumanity to humans and nonhumans alike, but also the inherent promise of the past to ignite hope in the future.

Notes

[1] Translation from Karl and Davies 1983: 43. See also Blackler 2007: 128 on Conrad and pilgrimage.

[2] See Thompson 2015: 51, 57; Hillier 2006: 58, 53; Vanderheide 2008: 107-120; Snyder 2008: 70; Metress 2001: 149; Cooper 2011: 222, and Kunsa 2009: 59.

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