The American (Post-)Apocalyptic Novel. Cormac McCarthy – A Case Study

Ovidiu MATIU

Este artículo es una presentación sucinta de una zona bastante oscura de la literatura estadounidense, que se ha denominado a menudo como un mero subgénero de la ciencia ficción en un intento de demostrar que el (post-)apocalíptico es un género en sí mismo, que se expande más allá del área cubierta por la muy conocida ciencia ficción. En apoyo del argumento principal, el artículo aporta una descripción de las cuestiones terminológicas, un breve resumen de las críticas en esta área de estudio, y varios ejemplos de novelas (post-)apocalípticas, incluyendo un estudio de caso centrado en la novela de Cormac McCarthy, La carretera.

Palabras clave: teología y literatura, (post)apocalíptico, ciencia ficción, Cormac McCarthy.

Terminological Issues

This paper is a succinct presentation of a rather obscure area of US literature, which has been often referred to as a mere subgenre of science fiction. The American post-apocalyptic novel, however, has emerged as a distinct type of fiction, which expands beyond the area covered by the well-known science fiction, across what has been termed as the land of a believable likelihood where the sacred plays an important part.

One of the major challenges in the study of (post-)apocalyptic fiction is undoubtedly finding a feasible definition of the 'apocalyptic' and, subsequently of the 'post-apocalyptic', with or without a clear-cut distinction between the two[1]. The Apocalypse Group of the Society of Biblical Literature defined the apocalyptic genre as a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative structure, in which the revelation is transmitted by a mundane person to another human being, unveiling a transcendent reality that is both temporal – as it refers to eschatological salvation – and spatial to the extent to which another supernatural world is involved:

[1] From this point on, the term 'apocalyptic' literature will refer to works of fiction dealing with or touching on the theme of the Apocalypse, as described in religious writings; the term 'post-apocalyptic' literature will refer to a branch of 'apocalyptic' literature drawing upon motives related to what major religions define as the situation of the known world after the end of the world as we know it. Essentially, both can be safely gathered under the first major category, i.e. apocalyptic fiction.

BDD-A19545 © 2015 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 21:50:30 UTC)

"*Apocalypse* is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world"[2].

This definition was extended in the mid-eighties by David Hellholm, who supplemented it with: "intended for a group in crisis with the purpose of exhortation and/or consolation by means of divine authority"[3] and who came with up with 31 characteristic features of the apocalyptic in literature which he calls *semes/noemes*, organized in three categories: "Content—Propositions and Themes (text-semantic aspect), Form—Style (text-syntactic aspect), and Function—Communication function (text-pragmatic aspect)"[4]. In his article "The New Apocalyptic: Modern American Apocalyptic Fiction and its Ancient and Modern Cousins", Wesley J. Bergen uses Hellholm's 'semes' to interpret the *Left Behind* series as an example of Christian apocalyptic fiction which both influences and is influenced by secular culture[5].

Hellholm's rather technical observations on the *semes/noemes* identified by biblical scholars and listed by him in order to prove the existence of a literary genre, reveal aspects which are useful for our discussion on the (post-)apocalyptic novel in US literature. First, he argues that the *semes/noemes* are not connected only to the complex concept of Apocalypse, "as is the case with *semes/noemes* of simple concepts." According to Hellholm, not even those items in his list which are usually described as strictly related to the Apocalypse (items such as eschatology, visions, and consolation and authorization) can be considered apocalyptic features, since they appear in other religious writings dealing with other subjects.

Hellholm's second observation refers to the incidence of the 31 *semes/noemes* in Apocalypses. Because of the "various levels of abstraction" of the "generic concept 'Apocalypse'", the items in his list cannot be present in all Apocalypses: "the more *semes/noemes* the fewer Apocalypses, the fewer *semes/noemes* the more Apocalypses"[6]. Moreover, some of the items appear in more than one category, which is mainly due to the perspective used in the analysis, "since pragmatics includes semantics and syntactics, and semantics includes syntactics as well"[7]. His fourth observation refers to the hierarchization of the items in his list of *semes/noemes* which is in agreement with the master-paradigm proposed by Collins but, and which is nevertheless still "imperfect". The fifth observation is related to the language as means of communication and the tasks of sender and of that of the receiver of the message (the receiver has a semasiological task, while

[2] Collins, "Introduction: Towards the Morphology of a Genre," 9.
[3] Hellholm, "The Problem of Apocalyptic Genre and the Apocalypse of John," 26.
[4] *Ibid*., 22–23.
[5] Bergen, "The New Apocalyptic."
[6] Hellholm, "The Problem of Apocalyptic Genre and the Apocalypse of John," 23–24.
[7] *Ibid*., 26.

BDD-A19545 © 2015 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 21:50:30 UTC)

the sender's task is onomasiological), interaction which leads to the conclusion that the exegete must play both parts when analyzing Apocalyptic writings: "When analyzing or interpreting a text, the scholar has to do justice to both aspects, the onomasiological as well as the semasiological. The role of the scholarly interpreter is thus different from that of the ordinary receiver"[8].

Therefore, there is no Apocalyptic writing which contains all the 31 *semes/noemes*. Most of the literary productions belonging to the (post-) apocalyptic genre can be analyzed through the lens of Hellholm's list of *semes/noemes*, which operate like a binding force giving birth to a genre uniting different (in terms of type, audience and even quality) works of art emerging mainly from the Judeo-Christian tradition, but also heavily influenced by secular, "tele-techno-scientific"[9] thought.

The (Post-)Apocalyptic in US Literature

In the US literature, the apocalyptic follows two major directions: one in which the religious is privileged to the detriment of literature and one in which literature derives great benefits from the immersion into the sacred. Apparently, the effects are absolutely unpredictable and the literary productions greatly heterogeneous.

Myths of the end of the world are by no means uncommon in human imagination and they have haunted the human mind for centuries. Beyond the truisms or nonsensical presupposition usually associated with this source of inspiration and which are also considered the main reasons why it has become so productive in literature (man's fear of death – on the spiritual side, the imminent natural disasters caused by anthropic interference with the balance in nature – on the more mundane side), one should note that the idea of the end of the world is as old as man, and that the "[m]yths of the end of the world are apparently as old as man's active religious imagination"[10].

The study of the historical traditions of the apocalypse actually starts with the primitive man, continues with the Judeo-Christian tradition and (probably) ends with "the often purely secular motif of American apocalypse"[11]. The most "poetic and imaginative form of eschatological writing" is apocalypse and its description became historical with the description of effects of the Hiroshima disaster, according to the US Bombing Survey[12]. This is one of the reasons why most American "apocalypses" in contemporary literature are imbued with the all-American secular motif of the end of the world as we know it (see the *Left Behind* series, or Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*).

The relation between chaos (or apocalypse) and human imagination or creativity in general is compulsory given man's fear of the reality of death and his

[8] *Ibid*., 32.

[9] Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge. The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone," 82.

[10] May, *Toward a New Earth: Apocalypse in the American Novel*, 3.

[11] *Ibid*., 4.

[12] See *ibid.*, 3.

BDD-A19545 © 2015 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 21:50:30 UTC)

need to turn it from an “end” to a “rite of passage.” Most (post-) apocalyptic literary productions involve some sort of an optimism we usually find in eschatological myths. According to Mircea Eliade, “…if entering into the belly of a monster is equivalent to a descent into Hell, into darkness among the dead—that is, if it symbolises a regression to cosmic Night as well as into the darkness of "madness" where all personality is dissolved—and if we take account of all these homologies and correspondences between Death, Cosmic Night, Chaos, madness as regression to the embryonic condition, etc., then we can see why Death also symbolises Wisdom, why the dead are omniscient and know the future, and why the visionaries and the poets seek inspiration among the tombs. Upon another plane of reference, we can also understand why the future shaman, before becoming a wise man, must first know ‘madness’ and go down into darkness; and why creativity is always found in relation to some ‘madness’ or ‘orgy’ involved with the symbolism of death and darkness”[13].

The “optimistic” myth of the end of the world on which (western) writings emerging from the Judeo-Christian tradition base their apocalypses and eschatology is of Iranian origin[14]. This optimism resides both in the fact that there is some or more substantial hope in chaos and in that the catastrophic event, the natural or provoked disaster happens only once in history (unlike in case of the primitive man whom, in order to protect himself from the terror of history/the profane time needed cyclical catastrophes which empowered him to connect to the sacred time).

This perspective is traceable in several “American” apocalypses published after the advent of the third millennium and it usually captures the attention of the (educated or less-educated) public for reasons which are not always connected with the quality of these literary productions, but with their use of old symbols identified by (post-)modern man with a gate to personal or collective renewal: “These degraded images present to us the only possible point of departure for the spiritual renewal of modern man. It is of the greatest importance, we believe, to rediscover a whole mythology, if not a theology, still concealed in the most ordinary, everyday life of contemporary man; it will depend upon himself whether he can work his way back to the source and rediscover the profound meanings of all these faded images and damaged myths”[15].

American literature is full of examples of “apocalypses” of different origins and symbolism. Critic John R. May has analyzed them from a mainly historical perspective in order to reveal a “typology of apocalypse” with its “variations and innovations” over time. He identifies several “modes of apocalyptic reaction to three phases of the American experience.” The first of them is the one that includes novels by Nathaniel Hawthorne (*The Blithedale Romance* – 1852), Herman Melville (*The Confidence-Man* - 1857), and Mark Twain (*The Mysterious Stranger*

[13] Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*, 225.
[14] Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return Or, Cosmos and History*, 124.
[15] Eliade, *Images and Symbols*, 18.

BDD-A19545 © 2015 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza”
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 21:50:30 UTC)

- 1916); "their apocalypse represents primarily a reaction against the romanticism and liberalism of nineteenth-century American thought." The second phase is "an indication of the continuing concern of … [the] great apocalyptic writers for exposing the perennial weaknesses of man," with "an emphasis on the individual"; it is represented by William Faulkner (*As I Lay Dying* - 1930), Nathanael West (*Miss Lonelyhearts* - 1933), and Flannery O'Connor (*The Violent Bear It Away* - 1960). The third phase includes both "the black novelists and the humorous apocalyptists", whom May assigns to the "contemporary" period (his analysis was publishes in 1972). The first three novelists (discussed in a chapter titled "Vestiges of Christian Apocalypse") are the African-Americans: Richard Wright (*Native Son* - 1940), Ralph Ellison (*Invisible Man* - 1952), and James Baldwin (*Go Tell It on the Mountain* - 1953). On the humorous side of the third phase stand: John Barth (*The End of the Road* - 1967), Thomas Pynchon (*The Crying of Lot 49* - 1966) and Kurt Vonnegut Jr. (*Cat's Cradle* - 1963). These are a few examples of American "apocalyptic" novels, but the apocalypses they imagine are by no means confined to the US and the Americans: "The genuine loss of world that their novels reflect is both national and universal in scope; it is a reaction against the ineffectual gradualism of social change, the faceless horror of technological society, and the myths perpetrated to distract us from the reality of impending universal cataclysms. In this latter period almost all American literature has an apocalyptic tone; the contemporary literary world seems genuinely to reflect a cultural climate that is itself universally apocalyptic. The climate, however, is turbulent; the literary processes are still no doubt in flux"[16].

John R. May's prophecy was to prove accurate some decades later. For example, between 1995 and 2007, Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins published *Left Behind*, a series of sixteen novels highly acclaimed by the public all over the world. Bergen identifies several of Hellholm's semes in the Left Behind novels such as: "s1. Eschatology as history in future form;" "s2. Cosmic history divided into periods;" and "s5. Combat between dualistic micro-cosmic powers" (under the heading of Content); "s23. Narrative framework" (Form); "s28. Intended for a group in crisis", s29 "exhortation to steadfastness or repentance", s30 a "promise of vindication and/or redemption" (under the heading of Function).[17] While these books and the movies they inspired fall under the category of literary productions belonging to what is generally called pop culture (Bergen straightforwardly places them under the sign of "edutainment"), they are valuable examples of how art (of high quality, or on the contrary) is able to shape people's understanding of what is generally accepted as the Christian interpretation of the end of the world: "The worldview in these books borrows both from the book of Revelation and from American nationalism. Insofar as these are incompatible, *Left Behind* follows the

[16] May, *Toward a New Earth: Apocalypse in the American Novel*, 201–202.
[17] Bergen, "The New Apocalyptic."

BDD-A19545 © 2015 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 21:50:30 UTC)

general worldview of conservative American Christian apocalyptic thinking, while portraying a more activist role for the believer in the apocalyptic scenario"[18].

***The Road* by Cormac McCarthy or "Please dont tell me how the story ends"**[19]

McCarthy's novels sound sometimes Shakespearean, sometimes they seem written in the tradition of Melville and Faulkner, but their tone is always (post-)apocalyptic. The main character in his 1979 *Suttree* is a Christ-like figure, a messiah without messianism, who gave up his belief and his family to become a fisherman, now living in an embryonic city (Knoxville), crossed by the Tennessee River; life has meaning for him only in the presence of death and he exists only in the presence of his Antisuttree, his dead brother. Salvation (as possibility not as certitude) comes from the basic forms of life, from the archetypes of existence: "The rest indeed is silence: "The river lies in a grail of quietude… A curtain is rising on the western world. … Ruder forms survive"[20].

Blood Meridian: Or the Evening Redness in the West (1985) is McCarthy's second novel that could be counted among those belonging to the apocalyptic genre, an example of how violence and evil, murder and death can become rituals of a "new alliance" which makes the sacred possible by challenging it (theodicy). McCarthy's characters speak like Continentalist philosophers (such as John D. Caputo: "The absolute secret is not some sort of conditional secret that could be revealed, but the secret that there is no secret, that never was one, not even one"[21]), but they are mere participants in the dance of war and violence: "Your heart's desire is to be told some mystery. The mystery is that there is no mystery"[22]. Its end is less optimistic than that of *Suttree* (the main character is raped and killed by the antagonist in an outhouse), but it leaves some room for some sort of a salvation: those who understand and acknowledge that radical evil is part of human nature, might be entitled to hope in the existence of the ultimate good that is able to confront its counterpart.

The Road was published in 2006 and, since then, it has been acclaimed as one of the most important post-apocalyptic novels of all time. Its public ranges from outstanding scholars to the general public in love with stories of the end of the world. The plot is somewhat simple, the novel being set in the United States after a (nuclear or natural) disaster which destroyed all form of life. The main characters are a father and a son, both unnamed, who struggle to reach the southern coast through the grey wasteland. They are confronted with the dangers of a nuclear winter and those of humanity turned savage by the surrounding circumstances. The son is the only one who eventually survives, after the father's self-sacrifice. *The Road* is by no means an ordinary post-apocalyptic novel, for it challenges the very

[18] *Ibid*.
[19] McCarthy, *The Road*, 75.
[20] McCarthy, *Suttree*, 5.
[21] Caputo, *Prayers*, 109.
[22] McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 252.

BDD-A19545 © 2015 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 21:50:30 UTC)

post-apocalyptic genre[23] and as well as the belief in the Christian Revelation. After the apocalypse, the natural world is dead and the people left alive on earth are divided into two categories: the "good guys" who carry the fire (i.e. the actual fire, the firearm – a pistol, and the fire of love - humanity) and the "bad guys" who are cannibals and murderers. There is also a crowd of neutral characters who are captive and are kept alive by the cannibals for food. The only named character is Eli, probably a grotesque representation of Prophet Elijah.

Nothing is what it seems: the pistol is not used for defense, but the father intends to use it to kill his child if caught by the cannibals, in order to prevent him from being eaten and thus dehumanized. There is no information about those that disappeared in the disaster, whether they died or were removed from Earth before the second coming of Christ, during the Rapture. The shopping cart is not used to carry new products but items scavenged by the two characters from the debris of the extinct world. Everything is grey, but there is one object which surprisingly survived the disaster: a red can of Coke.

In terms of the plot and its characters, McCarthy's novel could be included, in turns in all May's categories of American apocalyptic novels. On the humorous side, McCarthy understands to challenge and disrupt everything, from character to genre, from Christian to secular tradition, which could relate his work to previous novels of the same type. Moreover, the end of his novel, one that in most artistic products of the American (post-) apocalyptic type is optimistic, only potentially leaves room for a positive interpretation. The father dies on the shore and the child is found by a family of "good guys", but nobody knows whether they really are good or whether they are able to find a solution to the crisis.

Nevertheless, there is some hope but probably not for the humanity as depicted in the novel; there is some hope for redemption, through a return to the most basic forms which are able to bring the earth back to life. To McCarthy, a second, but different, Big Bang is more plausible than the man's capacity to restore his planet after such a cataclysm. The last paragraph of the novel is enough evidence: "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"[24]. McCarthy's perspective is similar to that of John R. May who, thirty-four years earlier, ended his book – just like McCarthy – with an identical hope in the archetypes: "If Christian faith will not support a universal vision of the future, we can perhaps do no more than hope for a rebirth of meaning from the spontaneous recurrence of archetypal images of new life"[25].

[23] See Andrade, "The Road to Post Apocalyptic Fiction."
[24] McCarthy, *The Road*, 286–287.
[25] May, *Toward a New Earth: Apocalypse in the American Novel*, 228.

BDD-A19545 © 2015 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 21:50:30 UTC)

Conclusions

To conclude, the (post-)apocalyptic is a genre in its own right, with a long tradition which starts with Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826) and continues with the more famous productions of the equally outstanding writers such as those presented above. Defining the (post-)apocalyptic has never been an easy task, but critics such as John J. Collins and David Hellholm managed to populate the critical scene with valuable insights into the terminological issues the enterprise of defining a genre usually involves. Hellholm's more detailed contribution can still be used today in the analysis of (post-)apocalyptic writings, in combination with the now classic methods of literary criticism, such as those employed in this subject area by John R. May. In US literature, the (post-)apocalyptic oscillates between the secular and the religious, using Judeo-Christian myths of the end of the world in combination with secular, all-American motifs. However, the apocalypses depicted in US literary productions are not confined to the area of North-American continent and do not refer exclusively to the American nation. They tend to become universal, even though their evolution is far from being predictable.

References

Andrade, Glenna. "The Road to Post Apocalyptic Fiction: McCarthy's Challenges to Post-Apocalyptic Genre." *Feinstein College of Arts & Sciences Faculty Publications*, January 1, 2009. http://docs.rwu.edu/fcas_fp/20

Bergen, Wesley J. "The New Apocalyptic: Modern American Apocalyptic Fiction and Its Ancient and Modern Cousins." *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 20, no. Fall (September 22, 2008). https://www.questia.com/library/journal/1G1-196832888/the-new-apocalyptic-modern-american-apocalyptic-fiction

Caputo, John D. *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion Without Religion*. Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion. Bloomington, Ind. [u.a.]: Indiana Univ. Press, 1997

Collins, John Joseph. "Introduction: Towards the Morphology of a Genre." *Semeia* 14 (1979): 1–20

Derrida, Jacques. "Faith and Knowledge. The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone." In *Acts of Religion*, edited by Gil Anidjar, 42–101. New York: Routledge, 2002

Eliade, Mircea. *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism*. Princeton University Press, 1991

———. *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries: The Encounter Between Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Realities*. Translated by Philip Mairet. New York: Harper & Row, 1975

———. *The Myth of the Eternal Return Or, Cosmos and History*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991

Hellholm, David. "The Problem of Apocalyptic Genre and the Apocalypse of John." *Semeia* 36 (1986): 13–64

May, John R. *Toward a New Earth: Apocalypse in the American Novel*. Notre Dame. IN; London, UK: University of Notre Dame Press, 1972

McCarthy, Cormac. *Blood Meridian or The Evening Redness in the West*. New York: Vintage International, Vintage Books, 1992

———. *Suttree*. New York: Vintage International, Vintage Books, 1992

———. *The Road*. Oprah's Book Club. New york, NY: Vintage International, 2006

BDD-A19545 © 2015 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 21:50:30 UTC)