DOES WATER DREAM IN DYSTOPIA? AQUATIC IMAGERY IN PAUL AUSTER'S *IN THE COUNTRY OF LAST THINGS,* NEVIL SHUTE'S *ON THE SHORE* AND CORMAC MCCARTHY'S *THE ROAD*

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Abstract: *This paper briefly analyzes the aquatic imagery of three dystopian texts belonging to what has been deemed as (post)apocalyptic fiction, a subgenre of dystopia. If* On the Shore *by Neil Shute (1957), one of the first novels dealing with the apocalyptic concern, was neglected by the critics, unfairly to a certain extent,* In the Country of Last Things *(1987) by Paul Auster and* The Road *by Cormac McCarthy (2006) are two well-known postmodern novels that have received a right amount of critical appraisal and praise, especially the former. I will attempt to refer only to those studies that can bring light to the way the image of water is dealt with by the authors of the three novels, resorting to a close reading of significant passages. Seemingly the water in these environmental dystopias has a function of a muted witness, of an indifferent or even reluctant receptacle of so much excruciating suffering caused by reckless human behaviour, a darkened mirror in whose depths nevertheless invisible mysteries may be brewing.*

Keywords: *utopian / dystopian fiction, (post)apocalyptic, landscape imagery, water imagery*

Fluidity and escapism, dreaming serenity alongside the necessity of violence and ultimately of death so that the return to the origins of life and (re)birth could take place again – are all evocative of Bachelard when water imagery comes to the foreground in literary criticism. This paper, as the title's paraphrase also alludes, partly draws on the concept of the ambivalence of the (dreaming) water in dystopian fiction. A substance of both life and death, both imaginary and material(ized), the story of water is always the human story of a dying water, of death (Bachelard 45). And such a water (story) could not be more illustrative of the story of the dying/dead human civilization that all dystopias attempt to foretell.

On the other hand, marine metaphors and particularly sea-shore symbolism have often been used by writers to depict meaningful landscapes for their utopian or dystopian plots. Informed by the geographical discoveries and inspired by Thomas More's coinage, various scholars envisaged paradisiacal utopian settings, impossible to conceive of in the already corrupted world, and therefore they placed them on distant imaginary islands (like *New Atlantis* by Francis Bacon). The sea was thus instrumentalized to put a comfortable distance between the known and the unknown, the real and the utopian. The *robinsonnade* as well has been considered a cross genre at the border between the adventure novel and the utopian story, although it implies

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an individual endeavour, unlike the collective enterprise a utopian community usually involves. Dystopian writings creatively borrowed examples of marine imagery from utopias, turning them into paradoxical instances. The symbolism of water, especially of the sea, stems from a rich cultural tradition reflected by the literary representations belonging to the utopian/wishful thinking. Beyond bitter eschatological visions, dystopias depend on the utopian thinking. Utopias and dystopias are very subtly interconnected. Authors like Corin Braga help readers of dystopia to understand that a binary opposition would be too simplistic a tool to grasp the dystopian turn or impulse. Critics such as Gregory Clays or Keith Booker have also pointed out that the utopian impulse was itself inherently dystopian.

The geographical discoveries that characterized the 16th century began to encourage the creation of new *loci*. Letters of explorers informed the invention of new spaces, usually overseas, in search for the terrestrial heaven. Geographical expansion was thus an opportunity for the intellectuals of the time to search for new horizons that would legitimize the creation of these new spaces able to accommodate human perfection – an idea incompatible with the Christian doctrine that could not agree with the possibility of an earthly heaven, and not accommodating either of the idea of the Fall, primordial sin and the Redemption offered only by Christ. Hence these places are distant enough to "escape" the Christian predicament, at the same time giving the hope or rather the illusion of the possibility of a terrestrial paradise.[1]

We may think of the topos of the island as a pre(-)text chosen by William Golding for his disenchanted parable of human civilization in *Lord of the Flies*. In classic dystopia, islands could be associated with the idea of questionable salvation – the promise of a utopian haven for dissenters. (Are the remote islands in *Brave New World* a real escape from social control for those who do not toe the line, as Helmolz Watson hopes, or only a real harsh exile beyond a mere escapist illusion, as Bernard Marx fears?)

In other literary works the sea imagery may be alternatively charged with unambiguous carceral connotations. In *In The Country of Last Things*, Paul Auster advances the idea of a Sea Wall Project, defined as a fortification, "a public works enterprise that had recently been started by the new government" (86). Critics have noticed the importance of the peculiarity of space in much of Auster's fiction, which seems to "pivot on spatial loci, on the actions of individuals within ... enclosed spaces, circumscribed areas, and the effects of closure and openness on human consciousness" (Woods 108). The protagonist of the novel, Anna Blume, is forever trapped and her (individual) attempt to escape eventually fails, crashing her quest: "with the sea wall now going up, with so many people mobilized to prevent departure, this comforting notion was dashed to bits" (89).

Water is often polarized on an "up" and "down" axis and a manicheist pattern associates the vertical with ritualistic cleansing, the horizontal with turmoil and fecundity.[2] In Auster's dreary setting the falling rain has nothing to do with the traditional purifying waters, rain brings only discomfort and disease, it is totally unpredictable and "unconquerable" (24). Like the characters in McCarthy's *The Road*, Anna strives hard not to get soaked under the sudden pouring showers although her vigilance is many times futile (as it is for everybody, because there is an ironically useless equality under the almighty rain: "The rain makes no distinctions. At one time or another, it falls on everyone, and when it falls, everyone is equal to everyone else—no

[1] Grosso modo that is one way utopian thinking was undermined and the dystopian turn emerged much earlier than the 20th century, as it is usually believed (Braga 2012).
[2] See Chevalier, Gheerbrant (374-382) and Cirlot (364-367).

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one better, no one worse, everyone equal and the same" (28).[3] Within the traditional, mystical or mythical scope of the water imagery along the history, the human influence upon nature has always been the focus of many beliefs and so has prevailed the possibility of appeasing the wild natural forces including violent rains. In the novel *In The Country of Last Things* there is an episode about the sect of Smilers who think that "bad weather comes from bad thoughts ... when you think a dark or pessimistic thought, it produces a cloud in the sky" (26). Therefore "gloomy thoughts" of many people at the same time will have a sure consequence: "rain will begin to fall" (26). For them that could be the only plausible reason "why no one has been able to give a scientific explanation of our bizarre climate." The unique solution they put forward would be positive thinking: "If a majority of the population could be converted to their beliefs, they are convinced the weather would at last begin to stabilize and that life would then improve" (26). The cultural connection is stated by the character-narrator Anna: "This is a rather mystical approach to the question, for it implies that thoughts can be translated directly into events in the physical world" (26). In other terms, as Bachelard pointed out, the imagination *does* become matter, and thus when water is thought of, water also muses back and takes material form through human reverie.

The most striking perception of complete despair is maybe represented by the uncanny air burial of Ferdinand. In a land where there are no burials anymore and the sea is accessible neither for the living nor for the dead, the elements of nature are interchangeably contrived so that Anna should find a temporary relief in a clumsily staged ritual, an attempt to return to a lost humanity:

> In our own minds, I said, we would pretend that we were throwing him overboard. That's what happens when a sailor dies at sea: he is tossed into the water by his mates. Yes, Isabel liked that very much. We would climb to the roof and pretend that we were standing on the deck of a ship. The air would be the water, and the ground would be the ocean floor. Ferdinand would have a sailor's burial, and from then on he would belong to the sea. (72)

The narrative technique of the diary[4] has been much commented upon and explained in terms of the crucial importance of writing, mainly in the sense of therapy and fight with oblivion: "As objects disappear, the memory associated with them and consequently the words used as referrals for these objects also fade away." And this is why Anna writes, it is "the only recourse to ensure that the experiences and objects surrounding her are not erased" (Alexander). Therefore Anna frantically performs the "sea" burial and then writes about it in an effort to defy the erasure of the sea image as the warm womb that welcomes mortals and guides them into the after-life. In spite of all the dismal premises, she enacts Antigona's role for a man whom she killed after a failed rape. The former sailor had told her: "There are sharks in those waters, and whales that can swallow you whole. Hug to the shore is my advice, hug to the shore and send up as many smoke signals as you can" (52). Pretending to return his dead body to the sea may seem also like a vindictive act, because Ferdinand the sailor was strangely afraid of the looming dangers of the sea – an instance reminding of the image of the Leviathan, and generally of the phobic archetype

[3] For more on the symbolism of rain see Ferber (164-165).
[4] The diary also confronts the reader with the "intersection of private and public spaces" (Woods 108).

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linked with water (Delumeau 49). All in all, the weird "sea burial" encompasses the stubborn symbolical life force of the water that still dares to dream (and by this to *be*) passionately through desperate human gestures even in dystopia.

On the Beach (1957), a novel unfairly neglected by criticism when it comes to (post)apocalyptic fiction,[5] as it is one of the very first texts of the kind, cannot be understood properly only in terms of a sheer "disaster" type of fiction. The action takes place in Australia and the landscape is important precisely in the above-mentioned sense of the expectations of the pre-colonial European about this unknown distant land. Rosalyn Weaver gives perspicacious explanations about the Utopian/Dystopian potential of the *terra australis incognita*, for which distance has been limitation and protection, hence triggering the inevitably cultural construction of an "apocalyptic map" (30-32). Interestingly enough, this novel seems to reflect the "nuclear anxiety" at a time when Australia was "the place of Britain's own testing of atomic weapons and of its doomed participation in the Space Race" (Baker 144).

On the Beach presents a realistic and detailed plotline: the USA bombed Russia by mistake and that triggered a chain of mistakes that couldn't be stopped; in the aftermath of the nuclear war, radiation level is so high in the northern hemisphere that life is not possible anymore. As the winds are sweeping the radioactive cloud southwards, people still living in Australia are torn between an unrefrainable hope for salvation and the undeniable reality of the doom. Dwigt Towers, an American submarine captain caught on a mission on the Australian shore, is thus among the survivors. While still faithful to his children and wife left in a now dead America – whose implicit death he refuses to accept, as he is preparing for his return, with a dignified lucidity – he engages in a platonic relation with Moira, probably the most picturesque character of the novel. She's a very young and attractive woman that has found an outlet for her despair in a hedonistic way of life, but drops her alcoholic binge after falling in love with Dwigt. A feeble Morse code signal from somewhere in the United States causes a controversy among scientists over chances of recovery and survival. Dwigt is in charge of the submarine sent along the North American shore in search for people still alive. The anticlimax of this linear plot is the discovery that the signal was produced not by humans, but by a transmitting key casually activated by a window frame blown by the wind into one of the empty offices of the antenna tower on the dead shore of North America. The omniscient narrator subtly records the failure of the mission and implicitly foretells the inescapable end of his fictional world: "[the officer] released the frame, and the needle fell back. There was one of U.S.S. Scorpion's missions completed, something that they had come ten thousand miles to see, that had absorbed so much effort and attention in Australia, on the other side of the world" (259). As they are travelling along the American shore, one of the members of the crew escapes the submarine in order to spend his last days in his home town, Edmonds, Washington. Yeoman Swain is then seen fishing nearby through the periscope of the submarine by his mates and he speaks to the captain while trying to mock at the whole situation. Unlike the other two books examined in this paper, *On the Beach* does not belong to the post-modern fiction or to the 'first-shelf' literature. Commercial as it may be considered (and it was at the time, mainly due to the success of the film adaptation

[5] Brian Baker, who dedicates a pertinent analysis to the book, considers it a "a British post-war disaster novel" and rightly observes: "Where British Cold War genre fiction is often investigated in terms of espionage and the double agent in a late recapitulation of the 'Great game' of Empire, the critical response to British science fiction and nuclear war is *under-regarded*" (italics mine). *On the Beech* has scarcely been mentioned recently either: "the most famous image of nuclear war as the end of the world" (Cordle 75).

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starring Ava Gardner and Gregory Peck), the novel is nevertheless characterized by an overall blank style, not commercially 'chintzy' at all, the dialogues are written in a matter-of-fact tone, without blatant tragic overtones:

> "Tell me, what are things like on shore?" "Everybody's dead here, Cap—but I guess you know that. I went home. Dad and Mom were dead in bed—I'd say they took something. (266). "I'm sorry about jumping ship, Cap, but I'm glad to be home." And it's a fine, sunny day. I'd rather have it this way, in my own home town, than have it in September in Australia." "Sure, fella. I know how you feel. Is there anything you want right now, that we can put out on the deck for you? We're on our way, and we shan't be coming back." "Thanks, Cap, but I got everything I want on shore. Without a dime to pay, either. Just tell the boys on board hullo for me." "I'll do that, fella. We'll be going on now. Good fishing." "Thanks, Cap. It's been pretty good under you, and I'm sorry I jumped ship." "Okay. Now just watch the suck of the propellers as I go ahead." He turned to the executive. "Take the con, Commander." (267)

The final scenes of the novel minutely present how the characters find different ways of facing their imminent death: most of them put an end to their radiation sickness by taking lethal pills. But Captain Towers decides to scuttle the *Scorpion* outside "the foreign port," out of Australian waters, as his duty demands. He leads his crew on this final mission: "We're taking Scorpion out tomorrow morning to sink her" (409). "I've run this vessel in the Navy way right through, and I'm running her that way up till the end" (413). Whereas Ferdinand is an alienated sailor who takes refuge in building miniature wooden ships but rejects any real encounter with the sea, Dwigt is the typical sailor who does not commit a suicidal act as such, but fulfils his duty: the sea burial is the dignified human act of defying and denying a random death. We might conclude together with Paul Eluard that (sea) water is the only element of the dead (Bachelard 93).

The sea is also a silent witness to the death of those who stay on the shore. The shore plays an important role within the aquatic symbolism of dystopia because it epitomizes liminality and transgression, and it has been used extensively by the dystopian cinema. (An emblematic instance is the memorable scene of the remains of the Statue of Liberty on the shore in *Planet of the Apes* by J. Schnaffner in 1968.)

In the last passage of the novel, Moira, who is not allowed to join the crew, wants doggedly to die together with Dwigt, so she approaches the shore and there she swallows the pills. The final scene is very visible and intelligible for readers and cinema watchers alike. The chromatic contrast between the dark waters and the clear shaft from the sky makes the end of the world more palatable. The light 'sinking' in waters (along sailors) does not point up hope but highlights death, it makes the End clearer.

> The sea lay before her, grey and rough with great rollers coming in from the south on to the rocky beach below. The ocean was empty and grey beneath the overcast sky, but away to the east there was a break in the clouds and a shaft of light striking down on to the waters. (...) She knew he could not see her and he could not know that she was watching, but she waved to him. (418). "Dwight, if you're on your way already, wait for

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> me." Then she put the tablets in her mouth and swallowed them down with a mouthful of brandy, sitting behind the wheel of her big car. (419)

The moral message of the book is also very clear: it foregrounds a clear warning against the lack of responsibility and diplomacy. John Osborne, a scientist, is the character assigned by the (implied?) author with this moralizing function as a wise spokesman: "I should think you'd have tried to negotiate" (116), "if a couple of hundred million people all decide that their national honour requires them to drop cobalt bombs upon their neighbour, well, there's not much that you or I can do about it" (404). Nevil Shute pleads (too overtly) for the necessity of education ("The only possible hope would have been to educate them out of their silliness") of responsibility and effective diplomacy: "It's mighty difficult to stop a war when all the statesmen have been killed" (114).

What it may lack in narrative achievement (less in the character development and more in the conspicuous concern with an unoriginal moral), this apocalyptic novel gains in visionary force: unlike other dystopias on tragical nuclear accidents (more famous and critically successful pieces of writing), it depicts an unequivocal end, there is no ambiguity about it (as readers can notice, say, in the acclaimed postmodern fiction *The White Noise* by DeLillo). The human race is here inexorably doomed: "It is tempting to read this book as the ultimate closed-frontier story, since, for humanity, there is truly nowhere to go" (Erisman 217). Not only does the book "grimly foret[ell] the end of civilization" (Lammers 139), but also there is courage in following so closely various characters who, till the end, naturally go on about their own businesses (including their inescapable death). And how does the sea relate to this "individual fortitude" (Erisman 216)? We may contend that at the end of the novel it explicitly (and abruptly) becomes a violent witness and determined recipient: only the "violent water" sets up a challenge and implies a "pattern of courage" (Bachelard 159). And courage is needed to witness and take in the death of the world (be it fictional).

The Road by Cormac McCarthy has caught much attention and received many exquisite analyses focusing on its language and style (Synder, Synder 2013; Ambrozy 2015), its narrative construction and imagery and thematic significance. Broadly speaking, there are several topics critics have dealt with in their readings of *The Road*, such as religious aspects, especially from the Bible – indicating The Book of Revelation (Frye 169; Stark 72), a "reverse genesis" (Stark 80) – or medieval Christian legends (Cooper 2011) and, within an ecocritical approach[6] – "environmental anxiety" (Stark 72) and pastoral nostalgia (Edwards 2008, Estes 2013, Godfrey 2011[7]). In my brief examination of the water imagery in *The Road* I will rely on the interpretation focusing on the mythical quest for the Holy Grail (mainly addressed by Lydia

[6] An approach rightly contested by some critics: Paul Sheenan, for instance, doubts the relevance of "ruminations about climate change" in the case of McCarthy's *The Road* (98). In a very recent study of *The Road* Andrew Estes somehow revisits his ecocritical approach and partly agrees with Sheenan (Estes 2017, 422).

[7] Apart from the seminal writings that lay the foundations of American pastoral vision, such as Emerson's *Nature* or Whitman's poetry, all these scholars draw upon other critical writings that set up a tradition of pastoral melancholia in American literary criticism and more precisely in the fictional works of McCarthy previous to *The Road* (Marx; Guillemin). For example, critics frequently quote a phrase significant for the brutal technical intrusion (symbolized by "the machine") into Nature and relevant to the context of the dystopian turn: "intruder upon a fantasy of idyllic satisfaction" (Marx 29). Indeed, McCarthy wrote not only once about the "pastoral dream" that is "subjected to erasure" (Guillemin 137).

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Cooper) and on the intertextual references to the cultural "palimpsest" of the landscape and its "geographical and emotional meaning" (Godfrey 163).

Referring to the landscape imagery of the novel, it has been discussed at a metaphorical level, but also in terms of plausible explanations of the causes of the irreparable disaster: without giving precise information, McCarthy depicts a frozen/dead world in the aftermath of what could have been a nuclear cataclysm or the collision of a meteorite or an asteroid or both. Also, the unnamed characters of the novel, the father and the son, are making their way southwards, heading the ocean, probably the Gulf of Mexico, crossing the Appalachian Mountains (Godfrey 170). Since the characters keep going guided by an (ironically useless) oil company map, the novel was characterized as a "tragically parodic version of the post-Cold War world" (Lagayette 89). If the cataclysm as such is ambiguously rendered by means of metaphorical phrases (e.g. "a long shear of light" that seems to echo the "shaft of light" on the ocean at the end of the world in *On the Beach)*, the description of the postapocalyptic scenery is very explicit: the sun is blackening, the earth is scorched, the charred trees are falling down noisily, the waters are poisoned, the animals and the fish – extinct, and humans face starvation and the "bad guys" resort to cannibalism (the "good guys" are a few, like the family met by the boy in the end). Some critics have gone so far as to follow the strict occurrence of chromatic elements in the story: there are eighty-one appearances of the word "gray" in *The Road* (Grey 9). And gray are the waters. And so is the ocean, much to the boy's disillusion. The readers are given to understand his dreaming of a blue ocean he had only heard stories about and his expectations as he was going to finally see it, so their arrival at the gray beach, a "salt sepulcher" next to a bleak "alien sea," is a confirmation of the minimal chances they have to survive in that harrowing world.

> Is it blue?
> The sea? I don't know. It used to be. (182).
> Beyond that the ocean vast and cold and shifting heavily like a slowly heaving vat of slag and then the gray squall line of ash. He looked at the boy. He could see the disappointment in his face. I'm sorry it's not blue, he said. That's okay, said the boy. (215).

The laconic dialogues are typical of the "austere restraint" of McCarthy's style (Synder, Synder 36). Similar to many other words in the novel, "(blue) sea" and "(blue) ocean" are devoid of meaning, in a "world of *empty signifiers* - that is a world with names for a multitude of things which no longer exist outside of memory and books" (Synder, Synder 36, emphasis mine). On the other hand, the memories of the father are like a palimpsest that reveals to the son names from a vanished world: "it is these memories—in combination with McCarthy's own culturally weighted landscape details—that help create a layered and complex geography out of postapocalyptic nothingness" (Godfrey 164-65). If the boy is the grail-bearer, as explained below, the father is the memory-bearer or the "memory individual" (Nora 16). Once the water of the rivers was "teacolored" and full of visible trout, remembers the father, now the water is opaque and malicious, the stones disappear in it as if swallowed (41). But does this mourning of the lost, "greener world" (including its clear waters) bring relief in the novel? Laura Gruber Godfrey is doubtful about it, giving examples like the one above, which backs the antinomy between "now" and "then." Ty Hawkins also considers the "elegiac stance" toward the lost

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world as one of the issues that threatens hope in *The Road*, together with the evil embodied by the cannibals and the danger of giving up and of nihilism (Hawkins 130-131). The father's loss of memory rather "burdens the son" (Godfrey 174) instead of comforting him; in his effort to keep his memories alive he just puts a lens on a past alien to the boy, the father is "longingly dreaming of his dead wife, or perhaps death itself" (Hawkins 130). When he contemplates the dull water that swallows everything, readers may recall the water's depth and its longing for tuning with the human psyche: to contemplate water means to die (Bachelard 45). All the more so as the water is dying or dead already. Its death calls for death, beyond the reverie, a death of imagination and matter alike.

As for the interpretation grid proposed by Lydia Cooper, it relies on the original title of the early drafts of the novel: *The Grail* (222). This title would have been maybe too overtly indicating the legendary inspiration; the text of the novel already abounds with mythical allusions: the father's quest is focused on saving his son, whom he perceives as a "chalice" (64), a "tabernacle" (230). In this Waste Land, the two protagonists are "like two pilgrims in a fable," says the author from the very beginning (McCarthy 3). The boy is associated with the figure of Perceval (unlike in the legend, he is abandoned by his mother) and the father with the dying Fisher King. As in the example above, "The father's affiliation with water runs throughout the novel ... [he] defines himself in terms of proximity to water" (Cooper 226). There is a memory of a perfect day, an image with his uncle in a boat on a lake with the limpid waters of the past, probably fishing (12-13); there is also a moment when he insists on teaching his son to swim in a pond with the malignant water of their harrowing present. And, what becomes tantamount to the mythical force of water imagery of the novel,[8] "he brings the boy south with the shore as a destination, a shore near which he finally dies" (Cooper 227). The image of the shore thus unites the vision of the dying Fisher King and the vision of the son both as the grail and as the grail-bearer. When the father realizes he could move no further and is going to die, he watches his son "kneel with the cup of water he'd fetched. There was light all about him" (277). The ceremonial on the shore turns into a ritual of transubstantiation of water (not of wine) into the blood of Christ.

> The halo of firelight surrounding the cup-bearer suggests the complicated image of the boy as the grail. According to legend, the grail is the cup Joseph of Arimathea used to catch drops of Christ's blood as he hung on the cross. The restorative substance in the cup, in short, is blood. (Cooper 22)

A fragment that has received many comments is the very end of the novel, a "pastoral coda" (Edwards 55), an enigmatic paragraph portraying "ecological crisis and loss" (Godfrey 172-173), evoking "the yearning for the pastoral" (Greenwood 80):

[8] The "grail narrative" of Lydia Cooper gives an insightful perspective that may easily be missed in a literal interpretation like this one, never mind the accuracy: "When they reach the ocean, which they believed was to be the end of their journey, it is only a minor textual occurrence and they must come to terms with the fact that sea only delivers more monotonous grey. The coast provides only temporary respite from their journey and their arrival at any final destination is endlessly deferred. The man and the boy have no future; while the man dies at the end of the novel, the boy is left in a world of ever diminishing resources" (Stark 74).

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> 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. (McCarthy 286-287)

The excerpt asserts "the clearest articulation of a 'biocentric map'" (Estes 2013, 213-216) and rightly challenges the apparent anthropomorphic vision: "This anthropomorphism is part of the 'inability to see [our] intertwinedness with nature' which *The Road* criticizes" (Estes 212). The image of the trout was also examined by critics, a symbol "a world which is no longer possible and which cannot be repaired" and which, combined with the last word of the novel "mystery", suggests the beginning of the world as much as the beginning of redemption" (Ambrozy 75). Hannah Stark draws the attention to the contrast between this paragraph and the vision of the monster in the lake with which the novel begins: "the cave contains a dark and ancient pool whereas the stream in the mountains is moving with an "amber current" (Stark 84). We should not neglect the fact that the last image of the book is only a flash-back, a metaphorical reminder of the irreparable damage to the world. In other words, the clear water cannot be restored, as Bachelard pointed out: no dark water gets clear again. It has to darken in order to absorb the suffering of the world and the phenomenon is irreversible. (Bachelard 45). Chronologically speaking (in the fictional diegesis), what the readers are left with is the image of the gloomy water of the cave in the father's nightmare. Nevertheless, water remains ambivalent. The life force within it will go on beyond the human egocentrism[9]: "the novel's power resonates because it extends beyond the realm of the egocentric concerns of the life and death of human beings into a more universal and cosmic realm." (Greenwood 80) But could water dream beyond the end of human race? If in its depths it goes on fostering maps of future worlds, apparently those dreams/worlds include humans no more, but in this ambiguity resides the existential "mystery" of water.

The water imagery of *In The Country of Last Things* is presented through the alienation of the characters: the water is loathed (the rains are driving Anna mad, the sea makes her a prisoner) or feared (Ferdinand identifies the sea with the Leviathan). In *On the Beach*, a text that is (maybe too) explicit about the causes and the close timing of the end of the world, the water is a mild partner in the respite before becoming suddenly sepulchral: the characters still have time to indulge in such entertainment as boat races, they may enjoy the blue sea – an extinct image in *The Road*, where there is a strong emphasis on the longing for the blue ocean. Meanwhile, only the pure spring waters of the past are dreaming of new beginnings.

[9] Surprisingly enough, there are interpretations that contradict this idea, contradicting themselves at the same time. Stark assumes *The Road* offers an "anthropocentric vision of the end of the world in which humans are the final witnesses, and also in which the end of the human is also the end of the world" (80), and then the concluding vision "suggests a timescale that extends beyond the human to deep or geological time" (81).

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