The Journal of Ecocriticism
A New Journal of Nature, Society and Literature
JoE

The Lush and the Barren: Nature in William Bartram's *Travels* and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

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Abstract

"The Lush and the Barren: Nature in William Bartram's Travels and Cormac McCarthy's The Road" seeks to understand the connections between these two seemingly disparate texts. The works exist on binaries of the environmental paradigm – Travels presents a fecund landscape; The Road envisions a scorched one. "The Lush and the Barren" considers these works as being two faces on the same coin of the American terrain. Positioned between each text, haunts the environmental destruction of a small town in East Tennessee called Copperhill. Destroyed by copper smelting in the early twentieth century, the land surrounding Copperhill for many years resembled a moonscape. The desolate ground of Ducktown Basin looms and has become more than a razed corner of Tennessee; it possesses symbolic resonance and serves as crossroads between two moments in the history of America: Travels looks back beyond the age of written memory to a time when the land was flocked in so-called virgin wilderness, and The Road points ahead to an apocalyptic future, where the countryside is completely destroyed and burned to cinder. If Copperhill provides a glimpse into two worlds, an echo stone from which the imagined and the unimaginable commingle, then two literary works, William Bartram's Travels and Cormac McCarthy's The Road, function as mythical road maps from out of the garden and into the desert of our own destruction. "The Lush and the Barren" holds up these three landscapes and muses on the possible destiny of America.

Located under the shadows of the southern Appalachian Mountains, in the middle of a valley called Ducktown Basin, resides the small town of Copperhill, Tennessee. It is a place of both promise and presentiment. Copperhill straddles the Tennessee/Georgia border, and driving from Atlanta, State Route 5 is the most effective approach. I traveled into Copperhill last

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September just as the leaves were beginning to drop chloroform and color the hillsides with autumn fire.

In the middle decades of the nineteenth century, copper was discovered in Ducktown Basin, and its unearthing brought hordes of miners and speculators to the region eager for a mineral boom. On land that was once held sacred by the Overhill Cherokees, mining companies dug and slashed, burned and liquefied, ore until the landscapes surrounding the mine-pits were deforested and plundered. By the early twentieth century, companies had felled every tree in the valley to fuel their massive copper cauldrons. Once the copper was smelted, it transmuted into sulfur dioxide which created a lethal concoction of dust and chemical (Abramson 300). The smog permeated the atmosphere and created acid rain, which poured down onto the basin, laying it bare of flora and fauna for fifty square miles. The hills of Ducktown became like the mesas of Utah as the council mounds of the Cherokee were eroded and covered with ash.

The devastation proved so complete that fifty years after mining ceased, scars on the land are still apparent. As I drove into Copperhill, a billboard ironically urged "Please don't litter, keep Polk County beautiful." Polk County, Tennessee began reclamation shortly after the mining industry moved on. At first, citizens planted kudzu (*Pueraria lobata*) and Asian honeysuckle (*Lonicera xbella*) on the eroded land because very few plants could thrive in the polluted soil (Abramson 199). As years progressed, foresters were eventually able to cultivate small shrubs and even trees through soil reclamation projects. Today the county is peppered with fast growing white pines (*Pinus stobus*), black locust (*Robinia pseudoacacia*), and yellow poplars (*Liriodendron tulipifera*) which ever increase the green and vanquish the burnt ground. The omphalos of the Cherokee nation, it seems, may be healing.

Ducktown Basin acts as an unfortunate template for Euro-America's relationship with nature in the Southeast. On territory surrendered from indigenous tribes, both corporate and governmental entities have historically created policies which appropriate recourses, having little ecological forethought (104). But Copperhill seems more than town and Ducktown Basin more than merely a scorched corner of Tennessee. The places also possess symbolic resonances and serve as crossroads between two moments in the history of America: one points back beyond the age of written memory to a time when the land was flocked in so-called virgin wilderness, and another points ahead to an apocalyptic future, where the countryside is completely destroyed and burned to cinder.

If Copperhill provides a hint into two worlds, an echo stone from which the imagined and the unimaginable commingle, then two literary works, William Bartram's *Travels* and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, function as mythical road maps from out of the garden and into the desert of our own destruction.

In both form and function Bartram's *Travels* and McCarthy's *The Road* seem opposite. For example, *Travels* was published in 1791 by a naturalist who was recounting his journey across the South during the Revolutionary War. His goals were to observe the indigenous world as well as to identify and collect plant specimens for his botanist father, John and wealthy, British patron, Dr. Fothergill (Slaughter 169). Narrated in first-person, *Travels* can be read as imaginative nonfiction that blends natural history and early ethnography through the prism of Bartram's Quaker Romanticism. Michael Branch observes how *Travels* "helped introduce a pattern of ecological thinking in American culture; through an emphasis upon a feeling of membership in a natural community and upon the morally regenerative qualities of nature" (286). This "morally regenerative" impulse is at the heart of *Travels* and provides a clear juxtaposition against McCarthy's morally degenerative characters and landscapes found in *The Road*.

William Bartram is earnest in sentiment, if not completely factual in recounting his journey. For instance, Bartram's exact route is notoriously serpentine, and his recording of dates and specific times has been called both careless and obfuscated (Waselkov and Braund 30). Bartram seems detracted from the linear notions of Western time and space and takes the freedom to encounter an earlier and seasonal cyclical perception of time, concerned more with moon risings and flower blossoms than the worldly flux of market and almanac.

If *Travels* describes the South a few short years before it was overrun by pioneers intent on "taming" the new country, then McCarthy's *The Road* imagines America at the end of its tether, burned to the core and, heartbreakingly, a country no more. Published in 2006, the novel foresees a landscape where the terrain and every aspect of the natural world has been altered by an unknown calamity. The land is husked and ashen. In the post-millennium world of ever increasing fears of bio-terrorism and environmental crisis, McCarthy's grim vision seems possible, if not imminent. The plot follows a father and son as they journey through the hardly recognizable country. They travel from the Appalachian Mountains toward the ocean walking like latter-day Bartrams, without a patron or knowable goal.

Just as Bartram seems unconcerned with time, the father and son team are unleashed to wander without thought of clocks or schedules. Even the cosmic calendars are without reference and spin uselessly in the sky: "Dark of the invisible moon. The nights were now only slightly less black. By day the sun circles the earth like a grieving mother with a lamp" (McCarthy 33). The omniscient narrator gives the lie to Bartram and speaks in elegiac brevity, clean and without decoration. Cleary, McCarthy's prose lacks the density of Bartram's or even his own previous works. In addition to his sparse writing style, McCarthy skips spaces between each paragraph so that the physical text itself becomes an emblem of scarcity. Removed from the narrative, one third of the novel consists of blank pages. This economy of language and structure couples with the inversion of the natural world. Bartram praises in sumptuous detail, but McCarthy's world unfolds by negation. Everything that we know about the humid Southland lies splayed.

In spite of the chronological distance and divergence in genre and style, there remain commonalties between *Travels* and *The Road*, places where the veil of time seems to be stretched over the same coin. Neither the landscape of *Travels* nor *The Road* is wholly accessible, yet places like Ducktown Basin provide glimpses into both worlds – the verdant and the arid. For contemporary readers, both texts warrant leaps of imagination. No living person has witnessed the lush forests of Bartram's America, and we have yet to face the holocaustic vision of *The Road.* Though set in different centuries, both works essentially navigate the same sphere. The bedrock and the valleys remain untouched by human whims, and in their own time each work meditates on the landscape of the Southlands, simultaneously reminding us of our yesterdays and warning us of our possible tomorrows.

Birds: the Seen and the Forgotten

In the parking lot of Copperhill's sole grocery, Piggly Wiggly, house sparrows (*Passer domesticus*) and rock doves (*Columba livia*) hop from cart to asphalt, scouring the ground for any morsel dropped by shoppers. The sparrows are dusky and nervous birds, but they find good hunting along the seam between the sidewalk and street – in Wonderbread wrappers and crumbs of Hostess cakes is the preservation of the world, it seems. Flying in tandems, the pigeons flock down onto a hole in the blacktop. It is filled with rainwater and serves as an impromptu bath for the piebald and gray birds. These European imports, which are often associated with urban and suburban tracts, would have been readily noted by Bartram in his

Travels. Very few American birds escaped the eye and pen of Bartram. He details over 200 avian varieties and devotes many pages of *Travels* to their habitats, features, and songs. Unlike other early naturalists, such as John Audubon, Bartram did not often shoot the specimens that he described. Most of the birds Bartram identifies still inhabit the air, albeit in fewer numbers, throughout the Southeast.

However, *Travels* serves as an obituary for two species, the Carolina parakeet (*Psitlicus carolinienses*) and the passenger pigeon (*Ectopistes migratorius*). Francis Harper notes that "the brief account of 'wild pigeons' constitutes one of the principle records we have of the former occurrence in Georgia of the […] Passenger Pigeon" (418). They have long since followed the tribes of Cherokees and Creeks out of the South, and are as extinct as the aurochs of Lascaux.

For Bartram it must have been unimaginable to consider a landscape devoid of such flight. Many in the eighteenth century (and today) were not concerned with birds, and Bartram speaks to his critics in *Travels*, who would have him portray only arable lands and richly furred animals: "there remain however yet some observations on birds, which by some may be thought not impertinent" (178). He provides a caveat with the words "by some." So rare was Bartram's professional interest in birds that Harper explains "in a list of 'all living zoologists' published by F. A. A. Meyer in 1794, the sole American included was William Bartram!" (379). Apparently, Bartram understands that industrious people are often adverse to birds, which can damage crops or steal chickens. He also senses that observations on the birds of America appear "impertinent" and trifling against descriptions of potential economic ventures. Bartram goes on, though, to defend his long study of birds:

> There may perhaps be some persons who consider this enquiry not to be
> productive of any real benefit to mankind, and to pronounce such attention
> to natural history merely speculative, and only fit to amuse and entertain
> the idle virtuoso; however, the ancients thought otherwise, for with them,
> the knowledge of the passage of birds was the study of priests and philosophers
> and was considered a matter of real and indispensable use to the state …. (178)

Bartram claims that birds have a very real and positive value to a country. They were the study of both "priests and philosophers," the spiritual and secular apogees of a culture. For Bartram, birds act as facilitators between higher realms and the everyday concerns of the agriculture and industry. To silence his detractors, he qualifies the usefulness of birds to farmers. Bartram claims that by intently watching birds we could create "a calendar under such regulation at this time, might be useful to husbandman and gardener" (178). How a bird calendar might be "useful" to agriculture, Bartram leaves to speculation.

How much has America lost in the passage of its parakeets and pigeons? We read *Travels* to peek into their world, to view a slice of the curious behaviors of parakeets that are now only the images of the mind. *Travels* describes the parakeets that "for a month or two in the coldest winter weather, house themselves in hollow cypress trees, clinging fast to each other like bees in a hive, where they continue in a torpid state until the warm of the […] spring reanimates them [as] they issue forth from their […] cold winter cloisters" (190), and pigeon hunts "where servants came home with horse loads of wild pigeons which […] they had collected in a short space of time at a neighboring Bay swamp" (297). If the loss of the two species is lamentable, then *The Road's* complete eradication of birds is one of the most horrifying aspects of the novel. Somehow it seems foreseeable that humanity could bend its will toward annihilation. After all mankind is a being that *The Road* describes as **"**a creation perfectly evolved to meet its own end" (59). Birds lose more in the wager. Unable to have a say in the

armaments of countries or the feckless use of resources, the natural world plunges into the abyss like the hawk trailing Ahab's *Pequod* in the final pages of *Moby Dick*:

> A sky-hawk that tauntingly had followed the main-truck downwards from its natural home among the stars, pecking at the flag, and incommoding Tashtego there; this bird now chanced to intercept its broad fluttering wing between the hammer and the wood; and simultaneously feeling that ethereal thrill, the submerged savage beneath, in his death-gasp, kept his hammer frozen there; and so the bird of heaven, with archangelic shrieks, and his imperial beak thrust upwards, and his whole captive form folded in the flag of Ahab, went down with his ship, which, like Satan, would not sink to hell till she had dragged a living part of heaven along with her, and helmeted herself with it. (400)

McCarthy's world has "dragged a living part of heaven along with her" into the reality of ash and night. Like Bartram, *The Road's* protagonist has an appreciation for birds. He struggles to remember what they were like and to relay that memory to his son, who has witnessed neither feather nor beak. The first bird account in *The Road* comes early in the novel as the two travelers are crossing a gap in the mountains. The two look down into the valley and see a concrete dam surrounded by a dead lake. The view spawns a deep memory in the man, and also offers rare stylistic divergence from the typical narrative voice of *The Road*. What the man recalls is beautiful, so beauty of language follows his thought:

> In that long ago somewhere very near this place he'd watched a falcon fall down the long blue wall of the mountain and break with the keel of its breastbone the midmost from a flight of cranes and take it to the river below all gangly and wrecked and trailing its loose and blowsy plumage in the still autumn air. (20)

The minimalism of the man and boy's broken world falls always as the falcon shears through his mind. In other works, McCarthy has employed this vacillating language of the terse and the esoteric. Teri Witek observes that "McCarthy moves effortlessly from laconic dialogue […] to descriptive sections so dense with learned vocabulary and refined linguistic effects that the people who come so vividly to life would quite patently neither read nor understand the latter" (78). Whether or not "The Man" could understand his musings is a debatable point.

The imagery of the falcon rests on the specific diction of "keel," a nautical term, "gangly" and "blowsy." The words become assertive now that the actual falcon, and all things that fly through the sky, have been erased. It is through these details that McCarthy becomes "a master of such minute calculations, his word choice, not only particular in meaning but particular in sound as well, bringing attention to the individual properties of words and then drawing them into a peculiar music" (81). The nautical descriptions correspond with the theme of the text which finds nature shipwrecked and completely abandoned, just like the crane that trails "its plumage in the autumn air."

In *Travels,* Bartram wants to emphasize his skill at knowing birds and their features through observation and reason. Ever a man of his time, he gently chides "the ancients [who] on this branch of science, [seem] to have be very ignorant, or erroneous in their conjecture concerning what became of birds [during their migrations]" (178). Aristotle believed that birds changed shape during the winter months and some even argued that birds journeyed to the moon or other planets (178-179). Even though the antique thinkers possessed fantastical

notions about bird migration, Bartram stresses that throughout history wise people have peered into the sky and marveled at these creatures of air.

No longer bound by modern civilization, *The Road's* man and boy, share in the ancient debate of bird disappearances. Resting in the middle of a highway, the boy asks his father if he knows their location on a map. The man replies with words that are honest and as well as absurd: "I think we're about two hundred miles from the coast. As the crow flies" (157). Not only are there no longer any crows, but the language used to describe them has also become obsolete and a kind a luggage of empty exchange. The metaphors gleaned from animals and plants act as bankrupt currency, which fall flat and lead to greater miscommunication and isolation.

The characters in *The Road* are not only unable to see nature; they have become unable to *speak* nature:

> [The boy responds] As the crow flies?
> Yes. It means going in a straight line
> Are we going to get there soon?
> Not real soon. Pretty soon. We're not going as the crow flies.
> Because crow don't have to follow roads?
> Yes.
> They can go wherever they want.
> Yes.
> Do you think there might be crows somewhere?
> I don't know
> But what do you think?
> I think it's unlikely.
> Could they fly to Mars or someplace?
> No. They couldn't
> Because it's too far?
> Yes.
> Even if they wanted to.
> Even if they wanted to. (156-157)

The tick-for-tack probing between father and son continues for pages as the child tries to cobble answers from his father. The boy hopes for concreteness beyond the reality that the most ubiquitous bird ever to fly has become abstracted and beyond his lived experience:

> After a while the boy said: There's not any crows.
> Are there?
> No.
> Just in books.
> I didn't think so. (158)

The child receives the news of the fabled birds with stoicism. He offers the muted disappointment of "I didn't think so." Later in the text the boy finds liberation in his new knowledge, as he creates his own lore:

> Can I ask you something? [the boy speaking]
> Sure.

> If you were a crow could you fly up high enough to see the sun?
> Yes. You could.
> I thought so. That would be really neat.
> Yes it would. (159)

Hope is still a thing with feathers. Once the boy recognizes that birds exist in legend, he is able to remove them from the dead world and preserve them in a nonce mythology where they can be safe from pollution and escape the shelled buildings and hungry vandals.

The Land They Trod

Bartram's plant catalogs abound in each chapter of *Travels.* Through the simple listing of botanical nomenclatures, the speaker casts a linguistic net that attempts to capture and speak every known (and sometimes unknown) flora of the New World. Some might find his lists burdensome or even self-indulgent, yet Bartram's Biographer Thomas Slaughter remarks, "William added the lists of Latin names to his book for credibility's sake, to recover authority from a dead Roman past. The lists also add beauty, to some readers' eyes, even as they provide 'facts' that the scientist craves" (189).

An allusion here to Adam in the garden appears too obvious and also, erroneous, for the Native Americans had their own names long before Bartram entered into the forest. The democracy of the list, however, throws undeniable attention to the wilderness plants. Instead of mere background and anonymous green leaves, Bartram grants each species a stage from which to enter into the eyes of naturalists and agencies into both the popular and scientific imaginations.

Obviously, *The Road's* lack of resources would make such Bartramesque lists and observations on nature absurd. Yet *The Road* practices its own natural history. McCarthy catalogs by deletion; he conveys what is not. The speaker lists many of the most notable and recognized Southern plant varieties, both cultivated and wild. The text identifies the flora with familiarity, and the naming of plants serves as role call for the dead. We can imagine that the novel's characters have forgotten the green world's names, so *The Road* provides one final litany. For example, the speaker finds "a tangle of dead lilac" (26) planted outside of his childhood home; "stands of hemlock" (33); " a rich southern wood that once held may-apple and pipsissewa. Ginseng. The raw dead rhododendron twisted and knotted and black" (39-40); "ruins of privet" (111); and out on the southern plains "dead kudzu" (177); "country [that] went from pine to liveoak and pine. Magnolias. Trees as dead as any" (197); "a dead swamp" (274); and finally McCarthy describes an ocean coast covered in "dead sea oats" (221) and a shore that stretches "as far as the eye could see like an isocline of death. One vast sepulcher. Senseless. Senseless" (223). The senselessness of the landscape comments on the senselessness of humans who knowing devalued nature, knowing destroyed it and then, ultimately, unknowing forgot the natural world's very appellations.

The contrast between Bartram's use of plants and McCarthy's naming readily appears. Yet there is at least one instance where McCarthy seems to cloak his writing in the excesses of *Travels*. To provide a rubbing stone, I have selected a typical Bartram reverie of plant life:

> These swamps are fed and replenished constantly by an infinite number of rivulets and rills, which spring out of the first bank or ascent; their native trees and shrubs are, besides most of those already enumerated above, as follow: Acer rubrum, Nyssa aquatica, Chionanthus, Celtis, Fagus sylvatica, Sambricus;

> and the higher knolls afford beautiful clumps of Azalea nuda and Azalea viscosa, Corypha palma, Corypha pumila, and Magnolia grandiflora; besides, the whole surface of the ground between the trees and shrubs appears to be occupied with canes (Arundo gigantea) intangled with festoons of the floriferous Glycine frutescens, Bignonia sempervirens, Glycine apios, Smilax, various species, Bignonia crucigera, Bign. radicans, Lonicera sempervirens, and a multitude of other trees, shrubs, and plants less conspicuous; and, in very wet places, Cupressus disticha. (20)

Travels unleashes an army of plant names. By contrast, what *The Road* calls forth are all forgotten miracles of contemporary life – canned goods and plastics. The man and boy locate a bunker filled with provisions and the following passage rifles off of the narrator's lips with a smacking voracity:

> Crate upon crate of canned goods. Tomatoes, peaches, beans, apricots. Canned Hams. Hundreds of gallons of water in ten gallon plastic jerry jugs. Paper Towels, toilet paper, Paper plates. Plastic trash bags stuffed with blankets. He held his forehead. Oh my God he said […] Chile, corn, stew, soup, spaghetti sauce. (138-139)

The delights of lost domesticity flood into the chapter, and for a moment the two stand in "the richness of the vanished world" (139). They have gone underground to find an Eden of canned peaches and apples. The bunker acts as like time-capsule of America, and the luxuries of the past line the cave like oracles. They ate well.

Travels and *The Road* testify to their specific situations and genres. We should never forget that essentially both texts negotiate the same the grounds. The plant-life that Bartram foresaw are the ghosts of *The Road.* In one chilling scene, the speaker reminds us of this dual terrain. The man and the boy walk across a field toward an abandoned house, looking for shelter:

> The field had been turned a last time and there were stalks of stubble sticking out of the ground and the faint race of the disc was still visible from east to west. It has rained recently and the earth was soft underfoot and he kept his eye on the ground and before long he stopped and picked up an arrowhead. He spat on it and wiped away the dirt on the seam of his trousers and gave it to the boy. It was white quartz, perfect as the day it was made. There were more, he said. Watch the ground, you'll see, He found two more. Gray flint. (203-204)

The long forgotten Indians have left relics in the smoky remains of America's pastoral dream. The fields that plowed under the old growth now rest open as book to the history of the land. It moves back from the ashen to a time of green fields and earlier still, it reverts into the age of Bartram and, farther still, into the dim tribal world of flint and bone. The humans burned away the soft alburnum, yet underneath the soil earthen memories linger.

Finding Burra Burra

Like most businesses in Copperhill, The Burra Burra Mine Museum is closed on Sundays. It chronicles the mine's exploits from 1899 until it ceased operations in 1959 (Cochran). But I did not want a tour anyway. I sat in the abandoned parking lot for a long time. On my right leg, I

steadied the heavy volume of *Travels,* and on my left a paperback copy of *The Road*. Not far from the locked museum, a trail winds to an overlook where visitors can gaze into one of Burra Burra's largest shafts, now a dark and watery reservoir. I walked down to have a look.

The land surrounding the museum has been left as a witness to the environmental catastrophe that once reigned in this valley. Much of Ducktown Basin is restored, but here at the center of operations, the soil's coppery hue and the Mars-like fields confess and can not keep silent about the history of Burra Burra.

The land that surrounds the mine poises like a scale's fulcrum. Close to the trail the ground lies wasted, but in the distance Cherokee mountains rise up in their hazy blues, and the ridges are ones that Bartram would have recognized. The great Cherokee chief Attakullakulla would know this view as well and could have named every peak along the rim. *The Road* for all its barren-scapes and burned trees ends with a triumphal return to the clean creeks of Appalachia:

> 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. 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 to be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery. (287)

Bartram would have approved of McCarthy's final sentiment. *Travels* mapped out the Southland for those who followed, but many of the later settlers did not listen for the mystery and squandered its riches. *The Road* stands at the end of Bartram's map and indicts our progress away from the land. The map lies open before us, but whether or not we follow it toward a more balanced relationship with the earth and ourselves or whether we twist the atlas into a maze-like torch remains yet to be seen.

The trout still swim in the waters beyond Ducktown Basin, but the road driving back toward Atlanta along State Route 5 seemed more desolate and curved with every passing mile.

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