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“I yearn for the darkness”: Epicurean Thoughts on Death in McCarthy’s Recent Fiction

The Road Home: McCarthy’s Imaginative Return to the South

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In the opening lines of his Existential essay “The Myth of Sisyphus” Albert Camus promptly addresses what he believes to be the most important issue facing all people, regardless of their philosophical tastes: “There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest – whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories – comes afterwards” (3). That death is the end of a person’s being in the bodily sense is a truism, for no one will counter this regardless of any beliefs held in the continued existence of the soul or the afterlife, or lack thereof. Once a person dies then they are no more, or at least the person’s body is no more. Yet this is not where the problem of which Camus speaks comes about. Camus is instead concerned with the problem that suicide presents when a person comes face to face with the absurdity of existence, or the “divorce between man and his life...” (6). This threat to life, to the meanings and values often attributed to living such a human life, is the primary focus of novelist Cormac McCarthy in his recent fiction. McCarthy, who has often been associated with the subject of death in his novels, portrays Camus’s problem through two different stories: the post-apocalyptic novel *The Road* and the dramatic novel *The Sunset Limited*. In the former a father and son travel through the desolate landscape of the

ruinous world in the wake of an unnamed cataclysmic event, through which all meanings and values once held so dearly have buckled under the close scrutiny of the tragic survivors. It is by this exaggerated landscape and reality that the suicide question is posed by McCarthy: is this life really worth living, or does the cost of useless suffering outweigh such a life in such a place? The latter novel provides an account of two men, on an ex-con and the other a suicidal professor. As their friendly conversation evolves into a heated discussion, the professor's desire for death is quickly hastened. McCarthy conducts a dialectical study of the value of life and suicide in both works, allowing for a critical scrutiny of both sides. Is there a legitimate value or meaning in living a human life? Or is suicide the key to avoiding the continuation of meaningless pain and torture?

All of these questions are complicated further with several references to the ethical and physical philosophy of the ancient Epicureans, who prided themselves on their preaching against the fear of death as a legitimate rational discourse. Epicurus schooled his disciples in the philosophy of the Atomists who believed that the universe contained atomic bodies and the void in which they moved and nothing else (Epicurus 6). Both components are limitless, as the universe itself was infinite in its size and scope. Atomic bodies are also defined as indestructible and irreducible. These "atoms" would combine and form compounds, such as humans or animals or souls, which would later die and allow the component atoms to dissipate. This dissipation is death. As Epicurus wrote, "Get used to believing that death is nothing to us" (29). But how is this so? How could the assertion that death is merely the dissipation of atoms from a composite structure mean that death is "nothing"? Epicurus provides a direct answer: "For all good and bad consists in sense-experience, and death is the privation of sense-experience" (29). Pleasure and pain, according to this hedonism, can only be experienced through our senses. So what is

commonly considered “good” or “bad” in this sense is merely a matter of our sensual experiences. Therefore, since Epicurus believed that death was the “privation” of these experiences, then death posed no threat whatsoever to any person’s being. Epicurus concludes: “So death, the most frightening of bad things, is nothing to us; since when we exist, death is not yet present, and when death is present, then we do not exist. Therefore, it is relevant neither to the living nor to the dead, since it does not affect the former, and the latter do not exist” (Inwood and Gerson 29).

Epicurean philosophy is important for two reasons. Firstly, their inclusion into the discussion provides additional commentary to the original problem of suicide posed by Camus. The Existentialists seem to focus the problem on the absurdity in existence, whereas the Epicureans highlight the place of death between absurd existence and nothingness. Such a bridge would surely influence a desire for suicide. In this respect death is seen as the ultimate release from pain and suffering. Suicide as “escape” comes about “from loss of meaning in one’s life” (DeSpelder and Strickland 423). So when Camus’s absurd man realizes his condition and the absurdity of his existence, then death may be the only viable option for escape from the difficulties of life that are rendered useless and without purpose. Suicide then is *the* option for escape, as the voluntary taking of one’s own life allows for an ending with a semblance of control.

The second reason for the importance of the Epicurean philosophy of death is immediately apparent once one has thoroughly read these two novels. On separate occasions in each story, the characters of interest utter their own beliefs aligned with the teachings of Epicurus. During a flashback in *The Road* the suicidal mother rebukes the father’s pleas and exclaims: “As for me my only hope is for eternal nothingness and I hope it with all my heart”

(McCarthy 57). Throughout the argument the mother concludes time and time again that nonexistence of this sort is the only solution that allows for the avoidance of pain and suffering, and this nonexistence is reachable through death. Suicide allows for the same end via a means that is much more controllable. This same methodology is employed by the character White in *The Sunset Limited*, who “yearn[s] for the darkness” and believes that a person cannot “be one of dead because what has no existence can have no community” (McCarthy 135-136). The philosophical expressions of these two characters, the former who commits suicide and the latter who tries, are evidence enough to invoke the Epicurean philosophy as described above.

Relevance aside, the exact details dredged out by Camus and others must be addressed in order to provide an accurate summary of the problem of suicide. In doing so the problem may be properly sought in McCarthy’s work. The problem considered one of human values, or as Camus concludes, “...that the meaning of life is the most urgent of questions” (4). If the questioning of such values proved to negate their existence, then the actual problem of suicide would present itself. Without value or meaning or purpose to living a human life, why would a person not opt for suicide to avoid useless suffering? The lack of purpose in this scenario removes any value that can possibly be derived from any suffering or pain. So why endure it? Why not end it all now?

The choice of suicide results from the discovery of absurdity in existence. Camus contends that “This world I can touch, and I likewise judge that it exists. There ends all my knowledge, and the rest is construction”; the result is that a person “shall be a stranger” to their own identity, for nothing more can be possibly known outside of sense-experience (19). True knowledge is thus deemed a falsehood. It is merely a fabrication of the “human drama”, which advocates the unification and generalization of all things for the betterment of human

understanding (17). Once this need for unity, this condition of man's existence, is confronted with the realization that true knowledge is impossible and that the reason attributed to the world is merely "poetry", then the absurdity of human existence can come about (20). Human existence is absurd because it has no meaning; no meaning or value can be attributed to it because of the irrationality of the world, of reality. The order of the world is no order at all, but rather an imposed doctrine of man's design. As Camus himself describes it, "The absurd is essentially a divorce. It lies in neither of the elements compared; born of their confrontation" (30). What suicide boils down to is a loss of value in one's life, and what the problem questions is whether or not the choice of suicide is a viable option against this loss.

A great exaggeration of this loss is represented by the setting of *The Road*, in which the landscape and the people described by McCarthy are "Barren, silent, [and] godless" (4). The disaster itself is only eluded to and never fully divulged from the author or the characters. What happened is not important. What McCarthy emphasizes most are the consequences of the tragedy, which include a whole slew of new tragedies in and of themselves. Torture, rape, murder, and cannibalism reign supreme. Any and all forms of law, government, society, and culture have vanished. As the narrator recounts the "first years" he describes "Creedless shells of men tottering down the causeways like migrants in a feverland. The frailty of everything revealed at last. Old and troubling issues resolved into nothingness and night" (28). Whether it is various issues of philosophy countered by Camus's stress on suicide, questions of government and control, or even the simple query as to what is valuable – all are suspect and eventually become "resolved into nothingness". The loss of meaning and value in this respect is a highly exaggerated version of the examples given by Camus and the Existentialists, but the same

purposed is served. McCarthy's landscape is still believable within a certain framework of reality, so much so that the seriousness of the suicide question is made that much more tangible.

And the inquiry of values does not stop at any certain point with McCarthy. Instead the author chooses to provide constant reminders of the world through which his characters travel, referencing observations past and present made by the father since the apocalypse:

He'd carried his billfold about till it wore a cornershaped hole in his trousers.

Then one day he sat by the roadside and took it out and went through the contents.

Some money, credit cards. His driver's license. A picture of his wife. He spread everything out on the blacktop. Like gaming cards. He pitched the

sweatblackened piece of leather into the woods and sat holding the photograph.

Then he laid it down in the road also and he stood and they went on. (McCarthy

51)

Additional segments mention sights from the road, ranging from an intact cash register in a looted pharmacy to a vast array of expensive electronic devices and housewares littered along the roadways (183-184, 187, 199, 200). Aggregating these value losses only fuels the fire feeding Camus's insistence on absurdity and suicide. Acknowledging absurdity in McCarthy's landscape allows for a complete understanding of the travelers' situation – is it all worth it? Towards the conclusion of the novel the father admits to himself the loss all around, and then secedes to the one truth that his dead wife abdicated: “Every day is a lie, he said. But you are dying. That is not a lie” (238).

Aside from the darkened backdrop described above, the two characters Black and White of *The Sunset Limited* provide an accompanying discussion to the events of the first with their own viewpoints. White, who has been saved from a suicide attempt by Black, attributes the

finality of his decision to the absurdity of Camus's description. His discussion recounts a history of values once held, values of culture and intellect that are gone the world round: "The things that I loved were very fragile. Very fragile. I didn't know that. I thought they were indestructible. They weren't" (McCarthy 25). In both novels the same account of the loss of meanings and values is given, albeit within different levels of exaggeration. The loss of *The Road* is representative of the entire population of the world's survivors, but White's declaration is his own and not shared on such a grand scale. Yet the same reverberations of Camus are present. At one point in the discussion the topic turns from values to happiness, to which White retorts "It's contrary to the human condition" (McCarthy 54). All is lost for him in the face of the absurd, and the choice of suicide is the most appealing option for escape. An escape that represents the only truth of existence, according to White, who proclaims his belief in "the Sunset Limited" and likens the train to the truth of death (27). This same truth that is embraced by the mother and avoided by the father in *The Road*.

With the settings established McCarthy attributes to his characters these intense notions of loss and the sole remaining truth of death. The presentation forms a dialectical study of the question posed by the problem of suicide, with the father and Black on the one hand searching for meaning and value and the mother and White recognizing the ultimate loss of the world and choosing nothingness. Both parts of the dialectic are fleshed out, and with the supplementation of Camus and Epicurus, the comparison seems to be presented for the reader's own consideration and personal judgment.

In *The Road* the dialectic is best embodied by the final discussion and debate between the mother and father which results in her suicide (McCarthy 55-58). The two confront the absurdity of existence in their own right, but only the mother truly accepts it whereas the father denies it.

All things once valued are lost to her, including the basic meanings of identity often associated with companionship and emotion: "I dont care. I dont care if you cry. It doesnt mean anything to me" (55). The father's begging is ignored, rebuked even, so much that the mother refuses to acknowledge him altogether. His feelings mean nothing to her. However she is not merely negating him in for the benefit of her argument. Rather, the mother is expressing the same lack of feeling that the father previously conveyed when the son was born: "Her cries meant nothing to him" (McCarthy 59). The criticism continues with the mother scrutinizing the small semblances of value clung to by the father: his claims of "protection", "taking a stand" and his promise to "die for [them]" are all crushed at the foundations (56-57). A brief reflection of these empty promises and values will reveal their frailty once confronted with the reality in which they starve. What would it matter if a person would die for their friends and family? If they *did* die, then what? Those whom they had sworn to protect are then left defenseless against the same danger as before. In this case the mother believes that the father's death in an act of protection would be empty. The same is said for the notion of "taking a stand", to which the mother responds that "there is no stand to take" (57). She sees through all the fine print of their horrid existence and recognizes the absurdity of it. The mother acknowledges the confrontation and chooses death, referring to the end as a "lover" and a savior of sorts who can save her from what the father cannot (57).

The argument concluded, the mother moves on and commits herself fully to her choice. She commits suicide without retort from the father, because he acknowledges the same truths and falsehoods as she does but cannot bring himself to the same end. Instead the father commits himself to the life of his son and derives the only value for the worth of his life from this source. The mother's own perception alerted him to this fact prior to her death: "But he knew that if he

were a good father still it might well be as she had said. That the boy was all that stood between him and death” (29). The father creates his own “passable ghost” of value in the son (57). His move here provides an important counterweight to the pull of his life’s absurdity previously recognized: by placing all hope on the life of his son, the father gives himself a reason to live. He gives himself a sense of purpose as his child’s protector, and provides meaning and value to his continued existence. In doing so the father is able to confront the debacle of absurdity and prolong his own life amidst the suffering of his reality. The son’s importance is never hidden either; the father informs the boy of his intent almost constantly:

Can I ask you something?

Yes. Of course you can.

What would you do if I died?

If you died I would want to die to.

So you could be with me?

Yes. So I could be with you. (McCarthy 11)

Here a brief glimpse is given not only to the father’s own “passable ghost” but also to what he has taught the son. The son’s immediate response to the father’s first answer is to question his motive for wanting to die, asking if the father would do so to “be with” him. Be with him where? Both the mother and White from *The Sunset Limited* acknowledge for themselves the truth of the nothingness of nonexistence. So where would the son and father “be” together after death if they did not exist. Here the son seems to express a belief in the afterlife, and the father compliments this belief with a positive answer. Not only has the son given the father a reason for being, he has also given the father a reason to look past the reality that enshrouds them in order to see some higher purpose at work. Maybe even something divine. The father often debates with himself and

with “God”, usually in anger but his actions still reflect a positive outlook for the divine’s existence (11-12, 114). By this method the father is able to counter the increasing threat of suicide, for he has a hope to hold on to; he has a meaning for living.

As convincing as this value is to the father, it remains a guise for the truth he refuses to completely acknowledge. The truth of death is still prevalent in his reality. On several occasions the father begins to doubt the plausibility of survival for himself and his son. So much so that he finds himself fleeing from the sight of his son during his sobbing reactions so that the boy will not be perturbed or alarmed (McCarthy 68, 96). And the truth of death is never negated nor countered by him. There is nothing the father can seem to say in response, and he often finds himself cowering before it and planning for their demise: “He was beginning to think that death was finally upon them and that they should find some place to hide where they would not be found” (129). On more than one occasion the father gives the pistol to the son with an eerie set of instructions in the case that he does not return alive (70, 112-113, 118, 179, 223). And as the travelers wear out under the stress of the road, the father repeatedly recognizes death and its eventuality. He even desires the end, as though the son was not providing enough hope, and finds himself “wish[ing] it to be over” (154). Even the long-term goal of reaching the coast for a safe haven is questioned (213). The father’s hope fades quickly after buckling under the stress of his surroundings, and the reality of the dead world sets in.

However the doom and gloom throughout the majority of the novel come to a head as a more compassionate McCarthy fuels the dialectic with the son’s sickness and the death of the father. At these two specific instances the reality of hope held by these two is fleshed out completely. The power finally becomes enough to counter the absurdity warned of by the mother. During the intense fever of the son, the father confesses “I will do what I promised...No

matter what. I will not send you into the darkness alone” (248). This first taste of hope is still confined by the absurdity embraced by the mother for all value is in the son’s life. If the boy were to die, the father would not let him go alone into the nothingness that might follow. Not exactly the divine hope of togetherness after death that first appears to be what he has taught the son, but a valued promise nonetheless.

But the final moment of clarity arrives with the death of the father: “Here they camped and when he lay down he knew that he could go no further and that this was the place where he would die. The boy sat watching him, his eyes welling. Oh Papa, he said” (McCarthy 277). Here the truth of absurdity and suicide is falsified and brushed aside. The father had lived with purpose, lived with meaning; he had carried on with a sense of hope that could only come about by the love shared between himself and his son. This strong value, this “goodness” once forgotten and denied, is rendered live again by the father’s refusal to take the boy with him and his choice to die naturally rather than by his own hands (278-279). The final words shared between the two illuminate this hope fully:

Do you remember that little boy, Papa?

Yes. I remember him.

Do you think that he’s all right that little boy?

Oh yes. I think he’s all right.

Do you think he was lost?

No. I dont think he was lost.

I’m scared that he was lost.

I think he’s all right.

But who will find him if he’s lost? Who will find the little boy?

Goodness will find the little boy. It always has. It will again. (280-281)

Goodness. Previously in the story the father awakens from a dream sobbing, and finds himself unable to recall the contents of the dream because it may have been about “beauty or about goodness” (McCarthy 129). But in his death these values are fully recollected and embodied, which in turn allow for the continuation of the son in the desolate world. Here the road ends for McCarthy’s initial presentation of his concerns with the death of the father and the life of the son. Yet the discussion moves on to a more dramatic and personal form that encompasses a moment in the lives of two men.

This additional content for the dialectic is given in *The Sunset Limited* between Black and White. The latter’s descent into absurdity mirrors that of the mother and the rest of the barren world of the previous novel, but on a more personal level. No great cataclysm has ravaged the landscape; New York is still standing while these two gentlemen present their cases to one another and to no one else. The loss of values is merely White’s realization of the “truth” that no one else seems to have discovered (McCarthy 81, 112). His original conclusions lead him to the *Sunset Limited*, with which his first suicide attempt is supposed to conspire.

However, Black’s physical intervention saves White from death and takes him back to the drawing board. Here the two men take turns sharing in order to divulge the true nature of the matter as it concerns both their lives and the meanings they do or do not hold so dearly. In this case White’s absurdity of life and value are passed by Black, who reveals the true nature of happiness to be sourced in the pain and suffering of human existence (55). The removal of any ills from life would downplay the pleasant aspects of existence, including the notions of joy and happiness and pleasure. As such, Black contends that the negation of these ills will do the same for their consequences. Without pain and suffering, the supposedly “blissful” existence that

would result would in fact be devoid of any form of happiness. Without the comparison there would be no value to feeling.

But these points are passed. White complies with the absurdity of existence prescribed by Camus, believing that the irrationalities of the world and of his life are enough evidence for the truth of death. As White notes, “Maybe I have no beliefs. I believe in the Sunset Limited” (McCarthy 27). Voluntary death is all that is tangible. All else has been “slowly emptied out” and is without “content” (139). The repeated intercessions made desperately by Black are ignored, rebuked even, for no hope of salvation from absurdity remains in existence. White is content with the “hope of nothingness” and finds himself inseparable from the finality of suicide in the face of utter confusion (141).

No absolute answer to the question posed by absurdity is given by McCarthy. In each novel a simple presentation is revealed between the two opposing forces against the backdrop of the author’s choosing, the apocalypse on the one hand and New York on the other. When the arguments are reduced to their most primal forms the question is at best left to two considerably simple answers: “yes or no” (Camus 7). Against the ruins of a dead world of nothingness, what would one choose? What would a person choose in the face of such absurdity? Not only absurdity in existence, but in tow with the numerous accounts of pain and suffering that without meaning or purpose in life become useless and unnecessary. What would a person choose? A life without meaning, or the painless guarantee of nothingness? Though no direct answer is given McCarthy does include a thoughtful and personal suggestion against the bleak backdrop imposed by the question. On several occasions the father and son remind themselves of a single hopeful burden they both endure together, the carrying of “the fire” (McCarthy 83, 129, 216, 278-279). Even after the father’s death the son questions the traveler about this same chore:

So are you?

What, carrying the fire?

Yes.

Yes. We are. (283-284)

Towards the conclusion of the first section of his essay, Camus points out the importance of the “passionate flame of human revolt” and contends that “Obeying the flame is both the easiest and the hardest thing to do. However, it is good for a man to judge himself occasionally. He is alone in being able to do so” (64-65). This passionate flame of hope carried by the father and son on their journey seems to carry them, providing an authentic and meaningful purpose for the father’s life and a lone light for the son in the only world he knows. The father lives and breathes for his son and not for himself. This is why he repeatedly promises himself and the boy that he would do anything for him. But it is also why the father refuses to take the son into the darkness with him on his deathbed, because he loves him. Perhaps not the most direct of philosophical rebuttals against absurdity, but a personally powerful example of value in the face of total darkness.

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