

Susan J. Tyburski
Division of Liberal Arts & International Studies
Colorado School of Mines, Stratton Hall

**“The Lingering Scent of Divinity”
in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Sunset Limited* and *The Road***

I will show you fear in a handful of dust.

- T.S. Eliot, “The Waste Land”

In 2006, Cormac McCarthy published two works that strip the human condition to its bones. *The Sunset Limited*, “a novel in dramatic form,” involves a stark dialogue between two characters named Black (a “born again” African American ex-con) and White (a nihilistic Caucasian college professor) about the viability of faith in the face of an apparently Godless world. *The Road* dramatizes the same issue through a post-apocalyptic parable involving a man and a boy struggling to survive in a ravaged landscape filled with roving bands of cannibals. Both works reveal, in the midst of their respective wastelands, a surviving spiritual spark – a human hunger for “the lingering scent of divinity.”

In *The Sunset Limited*, a character named Black, who has just prevented a second character named White from throwing himself in front of a subway train, describes the necessary role that God plays in his life: “If it aint got the lingerin scent of divinity to it then I aint interested” (*Sunset* 13). This “scent of divinity” suffuses Black’s world with divine significance (10, 37-41, 78-9). The use of the word “scent” by Black suggests that, for him, “divinity” cannot be ascertained by reason, but rather is something more basic and elemental, even sensual. In contrast, White relies on “the primacy of the

intellect” to make sense of the world (96). These opposing modes of apprehending reality inform the debate at the core of this play.

White attempts to convince Black that his instinctive faith is based on fantasy (*Sunset* 10-13). In contrast to Black, White can find no evidence of God in the world. He has lost faith in “the value of things ... Books and music and art ... the foundations of civilization” (25). White seems to have grounded his existence in the higher expressions of human culture, and explains:

The things I believed in don't exist any more. It's foolish to pretend that they do. Western Civilization finally went up in smoke in the chimneys at Dachau but I was too infatuated to see it. I see it now (27).

All that is left for White to believe in is the subway train “The Sunset Limited” – a metaphor for his suicidal impulse in the face of the meaningless of human existence (27). He ironically calls himself “a professor of darkness. The night in day's clothing” (140). White claims that his only remaining hope, to which he clings, is “nothingness” (141).

Black responds: “...all this culture stuff is all they ever was tween you and the Sunset Limited.” He asks White, “what is the use of notions such as them if it wont keep you glued down to the platform when the Sunset Limited comes through at eighty mile an hour” (26). Embedded in this dialogue is the question – what “notions” can keep suicidal despair at bay? What can keep us reliably grounded in the world of the living? For Black, it appears to be “the lingering scent of divinity.”

Black describes “[t]hat thing that helps to keep folks nailed down to the platform when the Sunset Limited comes through” as “the pure ore” at “the deep bottom of the mine.” Black describes this “pure ore” as “that forever thing. That you don't think is

there” (95). Black concedes, in response to questions from White, that this “pure ore” is known to Christians as “Jesus,” but “Jesus” seems to be a metaphor for something much larger than one person - or even one Messiah. As Black suggests, “there aint no way for Jesus to be ever man without ever man being Jesus” (95). This mysterious “ore,” a spiritual essence we all share, allows us to connect, and to empathize, with other humans. Without a belief in this shared spiritual essence, White is left bereft at “the edge of the world. The edge of the universestarin’ at the end of all tomorrows and ... drawin’ a shade over ever yesterday that ever was” (87). This description sounds a lot like the wasted world of *The Road*.

In response to White’s plight, Black comments, “Sometimes faith might just be a case of not havin nothing else left” (*Sunset* 118). In fact, Black’s faith is born of desperation and violence – a brutal prison battle described, in typical McCarthy fashion, in compellingly graphic detail (45-49). The sensual specifics of this violent episode are a colorful shock in the midst of the abstract debate between Black and White. While Black lies in the “infirmary” recovering from his near-fatal wounds, he hears a “clear” voice say: “If it were not for the grace of God you would not be here” (49). We can’t help but be reminded of the interchange between John Grady Cole and Lacey Rawlins in *All The Pretty Horses*, where they both agree that God must “look out” for people (92).

Black spins his prison tale like Scherezhade, trying to keep White from walking out the door for another suicide attempt. But White remains unconvinced, and rejects Black’s faith as “make-believe,” affirming, “Evolution cannot avoid bringing intelligent life ultimately to an awareness of one thing above all else and that one thing is futility” (*Sunset* 136). He sees each man as “[a] thing dangling in senseless articulation in a

howling void” (139). White rejects the vision Black offers, and ironically proclaims, “Ich kann nicht anders (I can do no other)” (109), echoing a famous statement made by Martin Luther, father of the Protestant Reformation, rejecting reconciliation with the Roman Catholic Church (Luther).

The “landscape” of *The Sunset Limited* is, in its way, just as barren as the cadaverous world of *The Road*. The characters spend most of the play seated in “two chrome and plastic chairs” at a “cheap formica table” (*Sunset* 3). Their abstract debate about the existence of God and the meaning of life occurs in Black’s dreary tenement apartment, behind a strangely barricaded door. The opening stage directions state: “The hallway door is fitted with a bizarre collection of locks and bars” (3). This “bizarre collection of locks and bars” symbolically keeps White’s nihilistic vision - the deadly *Sunset Limited* - at bay.

Black’s door remains locked until the end of the play, when White forces Black to undo the “chains,” which “rattle to the floor” in the manner of Jacob Marley’s ghost. White crosses the open threshold, free of the shackles of illusion, into his “hope of nothingness.” Black “stands in the doorway” looking after him (141). In despair at failing to save White from suicide, Black instinctively turns to God in prayer:

If you wanted me to help him, how come you didn’t give me the words?
You give em to him. What about me?

If you never speak again you know I’ll keep your word ... Is that okay? Is that okay? (142-143)

The play ends – and, presumably, the stage lights go dark - on Black’s unanswered pleas (143).

Both Black and White, in their own ways, struggle with the terrible “darkness” at the core of human existence – a theme that runs through all of McCarthy’s works. Several early Christian mystics argued that God could only be encountered by stripping away the physical and mental trappings of this world, and immersing oneself in darkness or a “cloud of unknowing.” A 6th century Syrian monk referred to as Pseudo-Dionysius describes “the topmost height of mystic lore which exceeds light and more than exceeds knowledge, where the simple, absolute, and unchangeable mysteries of heavenly Truth lie hidden in the dazzling obscurity of the secret Silence, outshining all brilliance with the intensity of their darkness....” (36). Pseudo-Dionysius advocates “absolute renunciation of yourself and all things ... and so shall you be led upward to the Ray of that divine Darkness which exceeds existence” (37). He urges seekers of the Divine to “...plunge into the Darkness where truly dwells, as the Scripture says, that One which is beyond all things” (37), and calls that place “the Darkness of Unknowing” (38).

In a similar vein, the anonymous 14th century English author of “The Cloud of Unknowing” describes contemplative prayer as “a kind of darkness about your mind” in which “[y]ou will seem to know nothing and to feel nothing except a naked intent toward God in the depths of your being” (104). The author urges us to “learn to be at home in this darkness ... For if, in this life, you hope to feel and see God as he is in himself it must be within this darkness and this cloud” (104). This dark avenue to the divine is echoed by another 14th century mystic, John Tauler, who wrote, “[I]f thou wouldst find the Divine generation thou must quit all men, and go back to the source from which thou hast sprung” (129). Tauler describes a necessary experience of darkness as “thy soul reduced to a state of pure and simple receptivity, which alone can fit thee to attain to

perfection” (130). For these Christian mystics, immersion in “divine gloom” (Pseudo-Dionysius 36) provides a doorway to divinity.

Although White calls himself “a professor of darkness” (*Sunset* 140), this darkness is not one in which God is revealed, but instead blinds him to “the lingering scent of divinity.” Black tells White, “The light is all around you, cept you don’t see nothing but shadow. And the shadow is you. You the one makin it” (118). Because White cannot look beyond his disillusionment and pain, he is trapped in darkness and driven to self-destruction. At the end of *The Sunset Limited*, White walks off stage, presumably to throw himself in front of another train.

In contrast, Black seems to experience a similar darkness as a descending “cloud of unknowing” described by Christian mystics, in which he expresses “a naked intent toward God” (Pseudo-Dionysius 36). In despair at failing to save White from suicide, Black instinctively falls to his knees in the doorway, weeping and praying (*Sunset* 142-3). The play ends with Black’s unanswered questions hanging in the air before God and the audience, leaving us to ponder the fate of both characters, as well as the basis of our own faith – whatever that might be.

The Road seems, in many ways, to pick up where we left off in *The Sunset Limited* – immersed in darkness and gloom. In the opening scene of *The Road*, the man wakes up in a bleak and darkened landscape:

Nights dark beyond darkness and the days more gray each one than what had gone before. Like the onset of some cold glaucoma dimming away the world. (*Road* 3).

The “blackness” of the nights is described as “sightless and impenetrable. A blackness to hurt your ears with listening.... No sound but the wind in the bare and blackened trees” (13). Even the “noon sky” is “black as the cellars of hell” (149). The man is surrounded by a “cauterized terrain” (12), an “ashen scabland” (13), with “the ashes of the late world carried on the bleak and temporal winds to and fro in the void... Everything uncoupled from its shoring. Unsupported in the ashen air. Sustained by a breath, trembling and brief” (9-10).

At one point, the man

...walked out in the gray light and ... saw for a brief moment the absolute truth of the world. The cold relentless circling of the intestate earth. Darkness implacable. The blind dogs of the sun in their running. The crushing black vacuum of the universe (110).

This hellish epiphany echoes the naked nihilistic truth described by White in *The Sunset Limited* (136-139.) It also suggests the “darkness of unknowing” discussed by Christian mystics as a pathway to the divine. Like the character of Black at the end of *The Sunset Limited*, in response to this “cloud of darkness,” the man drops to his knees in the ashes, and whispers to God: “Are you there? ... Will I see you at the last? Have you a neck by which to throttle you? Have you a heart? Damn you eternally have you a soul? Oh God....” (10). Like Black, the man voices “a naked intent toward God.” But in the midst of such utter and absolute darkness, where can any hint of divinity be found?

In *The Road*, “the lingering scent of divinity” can be found in the man’s son. The man’s first instinct, when he wakes, is to reach out and touch the boy, to make sure he is still breathing. He is reassured when he feels “each precious breath” (3), and counts “each frail breath in the blackness” (12). These scenes set the tone for the relationship between

the man and the boy; throughout the novel, the boy serves as a moral and spiritual touchstone. In contrast, the surrounding landscape is “[b]arren, silent, godless” (4). The man and the boy encounter “secular winds ... in howling clouds of ash” (149), and the road on which they travel is bereft of “godspoke men” (27). They traverse a “sweeping waste, hydroptic and coldly secular” (231).

The man refers to the boy as “the word of God,” (4) which of course, is how Christ is described in the New Testament (John 1:1-3; Heb. 4:12-13; II Pet. 3:5; I John 1:1-3; 5:7), and how the Messiah is described in the Old Testament (Psa. 138:2). Towards the end of the novel, the man sees the boy “in the road looking back at him from some unimaginable future, glowing in that waste like a tabernacle” (230). In the Jewish faith, the tabernacle traditionally houses the Torah, the word of God (Exodus 25-28).

The man also refers to the boy as his “warrant” (*Road* 4), which sanctions the man’s use of violence to defend the boy. He explains, “My job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God. I will kill anyone who touches you” (65). After rescuing the boy from a cannibal, the man cleans the cannibal’s remains off the boy, and recites the following litany: “This is my child ... I wash a dead man’s brains out of his hair. That is my job” (63). Later, he comments:

All of this is like some ancient anointing. So be it. Evoke the forms. Where you’ve nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them (63).

Unlike Black, the man does not have a front door with a bizarre collection of locks to keep out the threatening darkness surrounding him. Instead, he grasps at remembered fragments of the former world, and “evokes” rituals to keep the darkness at bay.

The man continually reassures the boy that they “carry the fire” on their journey along the road (70). Near the end of the novel, he explains that the fire lies within the boy, and says he can “see it” (234). As the man lies dying, the boy brings his father a cup of water. As the boy approaches, the man sees “light all around him.” When the boy moves away, “the light move[s] with him” (233).

The recurring images of breath, light and fire suggest the Holy Spirit, which has been described as “the breath of God” (Genesis 2:7, 7:22), and as tongues of fire appearing on Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4). The man believes he is transporting “the breath of God” incarnate in the boy through the waste land, referring to the boy as a “[g]olden chalice, good to house a god” (*Road* 64). The boy’s holy “breath,” the breath of life and divinity the man has passed down to his son, contains a spark of hope for the future of the human race. As the woman at the end of the novel tells the boy, “the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all of time” (241).

In addition to “carrying the fire,” the boy seems to have instinctively tapped into the “pure ore” described by Black in *The Sunset Limited*, “[t]hat thing that makes it possible to ladle out benediction upon the heads of strangers instead of curses” (*Sunset* 95). His natural impulse to reach out, and be merciful, to other human survivors shines like a beacon in this demonic world, and is only enhanced by the surrounding atrocities. In contrast, the man attempts to squelch the boy’s empathy as a threat to their survival, even as he grudgingly recognizes its value. Like a Knight Templar, the man’s fierce purpose – his “warrant” – is to protect the boy at all costs – even from his own impulse to put the boy out of his misery. But the boy is not dissuaded from his empathetic responses

to others. His faith in his connection to other humans grows stronger, even as his journey with the man grows more desperate.

As the man and the boy continue along the road, their roles gradually shift. The boy begins to question the stories the man tells him, and challenges his ethical decisions (*Road* 147). During an argument about leaving a thief, who threatened their survival, starving and naked in the road, the man says, “You’re not the one who has to worry about everything.” The crying boy looks up at the man and says, “Yes I am ... I am the one” (219). This Messianic declaration signals a fundamental change in their relationship. Shortly after this argument, the man wakes and walks out to the road, and suddenly feels the earth rumbling beneath him, “[s]omething imponderable shifting out there in the dark” (220). This scene suggests a mysterious force, perhaps even a hint of divinity, lying shrouded in darkness, about to make a move.

As the man becomes sicker and weaker, the boy becomes the caretaker; he becomes the one who listens for the man’s breath in the dark (231). Like White in *The Sunset Limited*, who rejects Black’s stories, the boy ultimately must leave his father’s stories behind and make his own way in the world. Unlike White, however, the boy receives a kind of benediction from his father before he dies. As the boy is fretting about another little boy they had to leave behind on the road, the man responds to his son’s obvious concern about losing his father: “Goodness will find the little boy. It always has. It will again” (236). In his final desperate hours, the man seems to express faith, not only in the boy, but in the benevolence of God to lead “the good guys” to the boy. It can also be seen as the prayer of a dying man asking God to watch over his son.

In his essay “McCarthy and the Sacred: A Reading of *The Crossing*,” Edwin Arnold argues “that Cormac McCarthy is a writer of the sacred is beyond dispute” (215), and suggests that

[w]e might rightly identify McCarthy as a mystical writer ... a spiritual author who venerates life in all its forms, who believes in a sense of being and order deeper than that manifested in outward show and pretense of human individuality ... (216).

According to Arnold, this mysticism “demands of us another state of understanding altogether, something beyond the rational or symbolic or psychological” (216). Both of McCarthy’s new works require such a reading, as they sift among the charred remains of barren worlds for traces of God, for a “lingering scent of divinity.” Like Black in *The Sunset Limited*, or the man in *The Road*, as the darkness descends at the end of these narratives, we are left breathing in desperation on the remaining embers of our faith. McCarthy demonstrates that, where there is no apparent evidence of the divine, we will create “a naked intent toward God,” even out of abomination and ash.

Works Cited

Anonymous. "The Cloud of Unknowing." Pp. 103-108. Silent Fire: An Invitation to Western Mysticism. Edited by Walter Holden Capps & Wendy M. Wright. (San Francisco: Harper & Row 1978).

Arnold, Edwin T. "McCarthy and the Sacred: A Reading of *The Crossing*." Pp. 215-238. *Cormac McCarthy: New Directions*. Edited by James D. Lilley. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press 2002).

Luther, Martin. *The Columbia World of Quotations*. Number 37025 (1996). Accessed 4-23-07. <http://www.bartleby.com/66/25/37025.html>

McCarthy, Cormac. *All the Pretty Horses*. (New York: Knopf 1992.)

McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. (New York: Knopf 2006.)

McCarthy, Cormac. *The Sunset Limited: A Novel in Dramatic Form*. (New York: Vintage 2006.)

Pseudo-Dionysius. "What is the divine gloom?" Pp. 36-38. *Silent Fire: An Invitation to Western Mysticism*. Edited by Walter Holden Capps & Wendy M. Wright. (San Francisco: Harper & Row 1978).

Tauler, John. "God is Gained by Detachment from Creatures." Pp. 129-132. *Silent Fire: An Invitation to Western Mysticism*. Edited by Walter Holden Capps & Wendy M. Wright. (San Francisco: Harper & Row 1978).