

“Minimalist Tragedy“: Nietzschean Thought in McCarthy’s *The Sunset Limited*

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The Sunset Limited is a curious text in McCarthy’s recent work. It calls itself a “novel in dramatic form,” but it does not look much like an instance of the genre, and in both form and story it hardly compares with his other recent novels, *No Country for Old Men* of 2005 and *The Road* of 2006, which have been both popular and critical successes. As far as “dramatic form“ goes, this is certainly not McCarthy’s preferred literary type, though he is also not unskilled in it, as *The Stonemason* and the screenplay *The Gardener’s Son* reveal. Yet the plot and form of *The Sunset Limited* seem somewhat lacking: a religious ex-con has saved a suicidal professor and holds him prisoner in his apartment for a brief time, during which they have a fairly philosophical conversation, one in which a desire to be “meaningful“ nearly overruns the story. In its reduced stage aesthetic and theme of nihilism the play, as well, does not seem extraordinarily original: one wonders whether the ghost of Beckett inhabits it a little too much.

We do well, however, not to put *The Sunset Limited* back on the bookshelf too quickly, for a number of details, when examined closely, reveal that the text is up to far more than one might at first think. McCarthy’s “play”¹ engages with a complex array of ideas, and to begin here we might list questions of literary canonicity, heresy, conceptions of truth, the Freudian theory of the death drive, and existentialist philosophy. Particularly noteworthy are several references to German literature and culture, and the present essay considers these references within a broader literary context that includes the Bible, Beckett, Kafka and Nietzsche. Within such a contextualization, we can see that a number of important aspects of McCarthy’s play run parallel to certain Nietzschean concerns: to history and learning, to time and repetition, and especially to the theory of the Apollonian and Dionysian in *The Birth of Tragedy*. What emerges is that *The Sunset Limited* offers itself as what we can call a “minimalist tragedy.” Against the backdrop of Nietzschean thought, Black and White’s story unfolds as an unlikely drama of Apollonian and Dionysian tendencies, one that ultimately declares, despite White’s seemingly victorious nihilism, a kind of Dionysian affirmation of life.

The Bible, Beckett, and the German Literary Tradition

In a fairly obvious way *The Sunset Limited* is about literature. White and Black have a conversation about books, and because this is so our attempt to make sense of McCarthy’s text will depend in part on what sense we make of this conversation. And “books” here mean literature, especially the Western literary tradition that the play explicitly invokes. In their conversation Black and White discuss or touch upon the Bible, *War and Peace*, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, and Kafka, but the Bible is undoubtedly the most important of these: Black’s side of the literary conversation, following his worldview, centers around it, and the Bible is also the only book that is physically present. Yet Black is no typical Christian, as his heretical tendencies reveal. To get a bearing on the status of the Bible as book in this play, we should consider some

of Black's heretical impulses, such as his view of the literal word of the Bible. Asked whether he thinks one need not believe everything in the Bible, Black replies:

No. I dont. I dont think you even have to read it. I aint for sure you even got to know there is such a book. I think whatever truth is wrote in these pages is wrote in the human heart too and it was wrote there a long time ago and will still be wrote there a long time hence. Even if the book is burned ever copy of it. What Jesus said? I dont think he made up a word of it. I think he just told it. This book is a guide for the ignorant and sick at heart. A whole man wouldnt need it at all. (67-68)

Such Christianity is one of a fairly radical Enlightenment. In this view, knowledge of the literal word of God or even of the story of Jesus does not matter, as long as one behaves in the spirit of that word. We find an even more surprising heresy in Black's view of the relation between Jesus and human beings: "And if I said that there aint no way for Jesus to ever be man without ever man bein Jesus then I believe that might be a pretty big heresy" (95). Such a statement may be open to some interpretation, but Black's claim that every man, on some level, is already Jesus opens a proverbial can of worms for more conventional Christian thinking. Heresy, we should note, is a broader theme in McCarthy, as with the "terremoto" story in *The Crossing*² or, more implicitly, with the necrophiliac "child of God," Lester Ballard. Black's heresies will be further addressed later in this essay, but right now it is important to see that if the Bible is the most prominent book in McCarthy's play about books, the view presented of the Bible is by no means traditional.

By treating the Bible in this way the play puts it on a level playing field with other books, or in other words treats it as literature. Yet far from making all books equal, *The Sunset Limited* asks what books are most worth reading and have had the greatest value for the people reading them. As Black puts the question to White, "What would you say is the best book that ever was wrote?" (18). For *The Sunset Limited*, the question of the value of the Bible is involved in the question of the value of the strongest books in general, or in other words, of literature. We consequently have to ask: What is the value of literature in this play's eyes? And what are the broader implications of the equal status the play gives to literature and the Bible?

To start, we should look at the literary texts that seem particularly close to *The Sunset Limited*. Though *War and Peace*, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, and Kafka are mentioned in addition to the Bible, Beckett is a better place to start, for he is a highly present precursor. Not only does *The Sunset Limited* share with Beckett a nihilistic vision and a stripped-down aesthetic, but part of McCarthy's literary dialogue seems to swerve out from a moment in *Waiting for Godot*. Early in Beckett's play Vladimir asks Estragon, "Did you ever read the Bible?" (6), and in his literary conversation with White Black seems to ask Vladimir's question anew, though without the tragicomic irony:

Black: Have you ever read this book?

White: I've read parts of it. I've read in it.

Black: Have you ever read it?

White: I read *The Book of Job*. (14-15)

It is, as well, not surprising to find Beckett in *The Sunset Limited*, for he is a spectral presence elsewhere in McCarthy—in, say, Billy’s wanderings in *The Crossing*, and in the post-apocalyptic wasteland of *The Road*. In some respect, the shadow of Beckett in *The Sunset Limited* sets up a nice dichotomy, because in terms of the question of meaning, Beckett’s work is diametrically opposed to the Bible. If the Bible has been one of the greatest sources of meaning in human history, and Beckett one of the most poignant voices of despair at the lack of meaning, *The Sunset Limited* sets up a bridge between them in the dialogue between Black and White.

Beckett’s tenebrous texts are also extremely self-conscious, and McCarthy’s play works in a similarly self-reflexive spirit (entirely appropriate in this play about books). The idea of reading arises numerous times, not only in Black and White’s discussion of books, but likewise in moments where the play offers ironic reflections on the acts of reading and writing. Impressed by White’s phrase “in the moral leper colony,” Black jokes around:

Black: Damn, Professor. Moral leper colony? Where my pencil at?

[...]

White: Well it is.

Black: I aint never goin to want you to leave. Put that in my book.

White: In your book? (76)

At another time Black even appears in the role of the writer of this play itself:³

He takes his pad and his pencil and begins to write laboriously, his tongue in the corner of his mouth, grimacing. This for the professor’s benefit. He looks sideways at him and smiles. He tears off the page and folds it and puts it in his shirtpocket.

Black: All right. Go ahead.

White: I think that’s the most ridiculous thing I ever heard.

The black takes the folded paper from his pocket and hands it across. The professor opens it and reads it aloud.

White: I think that’s the most ridiculous thing I ever heard. Very clever. What’s the point? (117-118)

What is it exactly that Black writes, and that White reads out loud? It is nothing other than the line that White has just said and now repeats: “I think that’s the most ridiculous thing I ever heard.” Since Black writes this line down *before* White says it for the first time, Black has apparently “predicted” the line and thus would also seem to have “written” it, an act that sets him parallel to the author of the play. If such moments briefly cast Black in the role of author, he also plays the role of reader, and specifically the reader of White’s story:

He reaches and picks up the newspaper from the table and leans back again and adjusts his glasses.

Black: Let's see here. Story on page three.

He folds the paper elaborately.

Black: Yeah. Here it is. Friends report that the man had ignored all advice and had stated that he intended to pursue his own course. (113-114)

Such moments indicate the ironic self-awareness with which McCarthy has written his play. Black and White not only discuss books, but are themselves a dramatization of reading and writing.

A consideration of Beckett also brings us to the elements from German literature and culture in *The Sunset Limited*. If Beckett is a precursor for McCarthy here, one should also recall that Beckett owes a literary debt to Kafka, who is mentioned close to the end of McCarthy's play, as a kind of measuring stick for existential misery: "That would be the final nightmare. Kafka on wheels" (135). Yet Kafka is present in other ways as well. When White quotes from the German without any reference —"Ich kann nicht anders" (109)—it turns out that his source is Kafka's "A Hunger Artist," at the point where the starving hero makes his dying confession:

Immerfort wollte ich, daß ihr mein Hungern bewundert", sagte der Hungerkünstler. Wir bewundern es auch," sagte der Aufseher entgegenkommend. Ihr sollt es aber nicht bewundern." sagte der Hungerkünstler. Nun, dann bewundern wir es also nicht," sagte der Aufseher, warum sollen wir es also nicht bewundern." Weil ich hungern muß, *ich kann nicht anders*", sagte der Hungerkünstler.

"I always wanted you to admire my fasting," said the hunger artist. "We do admire it, said the hunger artist," said the overseer, affably. "But you shouldn't admire it," said the hunger artist. "Well then we don't admire it," said the overseer, "but why shouldn't we admire it?" "Because I have to fast, *I can't help it*," said the hunger artist. ("A Hunger Artist," 277 [emphasis added])

In such a context, the title of the book that Black jokingly claims he is writing, "In the Moral Leper Colony" (76), would likewise appear to be another allusion to Kafka—to his story "In the Penal Colony." And such an allusion is fitting: Kafka's story about a culture centered around an execution machine would seem to be precisely the type of story that, in White's view, articulates the horrible truth of existence.

Dark in outlook and highly self-reflexive like both Beckett's works and McCarthy's play here, Kafka's writings are also significant for the German literary tradition to which they belong. In the play's exploration of the nihilism of the West, German literary tradition and culture has a certain centrality, in particular because of the terrible paradox that German culture presents. White's existential despair derives in part

from Hitler and the Holocaust: “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). Or as he puts it later:

White: I dont know. The Germans contributed a great deal to civilization.
(*Pause*) Before Hitler.

Black: And then they contributed Hitler.

White: If you like. (110)

There is thus a distinctive German literary and cultural presence in McCarthy’s play. We can even go so far as to compare White to that most famous character in German literature, Goethe’s Faust, who, like White, despairs from a surfeit of learning and even attempts to commit suicide (also interrupted). The philosophical difference is that where Faust concludes that “we can know nothing” (93), White’s emptiness results, as he describes it, from “a gradual loss of make believe... a gradual enlightenment as to the nature of the reality” (120). This reality is one that, for him, takes on descriptive terms reminiscent of the German disaster: he sees the world as “a forced labor camp from which the workers—perfectly innocent—are led forth by lottery, a few each day, to be executed” (122).

One of the most important German authors, however, whom we might bring into this discussion of *The Sunset Limited* is Nietzsche. Crucial for White is the relation between education and the will (or lack thereof) to live, a concern that also lies at the heart of Nietzsche’s essay “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life.” When White explains that he intends to commit suicide because he no longer believes in the value of cultural things, Black—rather sensibly—responds, “But I still got to ask 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 miles a hour” (26). This is a thoroughly Nietzschean question. As a Faust-like figure who has learned too much, and whose learning now leads to the wish to end rather than to improve his life, White compares well with Nietzsche’s description of a person incapable of forgetting:

Imagine the extremest possible example of a man who did not possess the power of forgetting at all and who was thus condemned to see everywhere a state of becoming: such a man would no longer believe in his own being, would no longer believe in himself, would see everything flowing asunder in moving points and would lose himself in this stream of becoming. (62)

White, of course, does not see everything as eternal Becoming, but as eternal Dying. As he says, “The shadow of the axe hangs over every joy. Every road ends in death” (137). But White’s problem also stems from an inability to forget, a failure to have a healthy belief in himself and to disregard what he has read and learned, most of which is outside of his own direct experience. And so one of the play’s primary concerns boils down to the same concern in Nietzsche’s essay: if the study of the past and all of its

books, music and art do not enhance life, if the “use” of history does not ultimately empower and vitalize human beings—well, why bother?

The Birth of Tragedy and McCarthy’s Play

When contextualized with Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*, however, *The Sunset Limited*, becomes a stranger, richer text, such that we can profitably call it a “minimalist tragedy,” since the play contains many elements that, on a reduced scale, correspond to Nietzsche’s theory of tragedy. A brief recapitulation of the Apollonian and Dionysian will be helpful here. According to the young German philologist, Greek tragedy develops out of the tension between two artistic drives, the Apollonian and the Dionysian, whose primary artistic manifestations are, respectively, sculpture with its orientation around beautiful appearances, and music with its call to song, dance and the fullest enjoyment of the senses. In the phenomenon of Greek tragedy, produced by the interplay of these artistic drives, the tragic hero is the representative of the Apollonian state of individuation. When in the course of the drama it becomes clear that individuation is a source of suffering, the tragic hero is destroyed. This destruction is joyous, however, because it means the “Apollonian” individual returns to the original unity of all being (“das Ur-Eine“), which is the Dionysian state and its intoxicated, musical jubilation. The chorus in Greek tragedy represents the Dionysian unity, and in his or her downfall the tragic hero rejoins that unity masked as the chorus.

White’s longing for death results, at least in part, from an excess of knowledge, and in this he has an affinity with the tragic hero in *The Birth of Tragedy*, particularly with Nietzsche’s famous comparison of the Dionysian man and Hamlet:

Both have once looked truly into the essence of things, they have *gained knowledge*, and nausea inhibits action....

Now no comfort avails any more; longing transcends a world after death, even the gods; existence is negated along with its glittering reflection in the gods or in an immortal beyond. Conscious of the truth he has once seen, man now sees everywhere only the horror or absurdity of existence.
(60)

This passage could just as easily describe White in McCarthy’s play. He likewise believes he has lost all illusions and looked into, as Nietzsche calls it, “the essence of things;” no comfort avails for White anymore, existence has been negated for him. As he tells Black, he has experienced “a gradual loss of make-believe... a gradual enlightenment as to the nature of the reality” (120). Viewing existence only as horror and absurdity, White subscribes to that Silenian-Dionysian wisdom that the best thing for a human being is never to have been born in the first place, and the next best thing to die immediately. It is, by the way, not surprising that *The Sunset Limited* employs aspects of Nietzsche’s mythos of tragedy, since McCarthy uses the mythos elsewhere. This is most prominent in *Blood Meridian*, where the judge at times appears as a weirdly skewed parody of the Dionysian, as in his jubilation in the closing scene:

And they are dancing, the board floor slamming under the jackboots and the fiddlers grinning hideously over their canted pieces. Towering above them is the judge and he is naked dancing, his small feet lively and quick and now in doubletime and bowing to the ladies, huge and pale and hairless, like an enormous infant. He never sleeps, he says. He says he'll never die. (335)

The Dionysian and Apollonian in *The Sunset Limited* hardly appear in such overt terms, but without too much difficulty we can construe the suicidal White as an inversion of the murderous, "Dionysian" judge, who, also quite the scholar, is an extroverted rather than an introverted nihilist.

The Apollonian and Dionysian can also be used to frame the quality of White's relations with other human beings. If Apollonian individuation can mean isolation (as with, say, Hamlet), then White is the Apollonian figure in extremis, an isolate individual par excellence. The play repeatedly emphasizes his solitude. He has no family and no real friends, and of his university colleagues he says, "I loathe them and they loathe me" (82). Even his attempts to find companionship with others like him have failed, for as he says, "I've been in group therapy with those people. I never found anyone there that I felt any kinship with" (82). White himself perhaps sums it up best: "I'm not a member. I never wanted to be. I never was" (86). This isolationist aspect of White's personality comes out so much because Black is trying to help him see that there might be kindred spirits—"constituents" (84) or other "drugproof terminal commuters" (85), as Black variously calls them—with whom White might feel some fellowship, and therefore feel more at home in existence, which would thereby become less of a horror. Such hypothetical kindred spirits, while lacking the qualities of elated revelry, have the symbolic value of a Dionysian community in McCarthy's play. Black is quite close to an aspect of the Dionysian when he asks, "So how come they [the other nihilistic "commuters"] can't be your brothers in despair and selfdestruction? I thought misery loved company?" (116). "Brothers in selfdestruction" here is an apt trope for the Dionysian unity resulting from the destruction of the Apollonian individuals. In some sense, then, if White desires release from the suffering of his extreme case of Apollonian individuation, he and Black offer remedies corresponding to two facets of Dionysianism. White wants the release in the destruction of individuation as death, and Black proposes a reunion with the "unity of being" by finding some sort of community with which White might feel at home.

The play has other, less prominent tokens of Nietzsche's theory that are worth noting. Since music is integral to the Dionysian, one might wonder at its absence in the play. But it is significant that the subject of music comes up in their dialogue:

White: ... I mean, you like music, right?

Black: Yes I do.

White: Who's the greatest composer you know of?

Black: John Coltrane. Hands down.

White: Do you think his music will last forever?

Black: Well. Forever's a long time, Professor. So I got to say no. It wont.

White: But that doesnt make it worthless, does it?

Black: No it dont. (130-131)

This passage might seem negligible, for White is simply using music to demonstrate his point about how things can still have value despite their finitude (quite strange, coming from White). But in the context of the other elements of Nietzsche's theory of tragedy this reference to music again signals the idea of the Dionysian. Similarly, Black describes the death for which White longs as a "mighty big drink of whiskey" (61), and in doing so he couches that prospective death in the Dionysian terms of intoxication. A small drink of whiskey will produce a mild intoxication and mild loss of self, and a "mighty big drink" produces that greatest of intoxications leading to the greatest loss of self.

Keeping White Interested

If a variety of the play's elements fit with the terms of Nietzsche's theory of tragedy, then White's temporary captivity in Black's apartment takes on a new frame of reference. At the end of the play, Black unlocks the door to let White out, well knowing his charge will now commit suicide:

White: ... Now there is only the hope of nothingness. I cling to that hope.
Now open the door. Please.
Black: Dont do it.
White: Open the door.

The black undoes the chains. They rattle to the floor. He opens the door and the professor exits. The black stands in the doorway looking down the hall. (141)

Why does Black acquiesce? Since up till now Black has refused to undo the chains, why can Black not continue to do so? What prevents him from persisting in his good-hearted stubbornness? White may have grown more steadfast in his nihilism, less capable of being diverted, but no new development actually forces Black's hand. He simply gives in now and obeys White's request to open up. Accordingly, we need to reevaluate the dynamic of White's stay, his captivity in the apartment. The play makes it appear that Black is holding White prisoner in the apartment, but this is not entirely accurate. If Black releases White at the end simply, in effect, because White insists and seems beyond Black's powers to persuade him otherwise, then the logic of imprisonment has something to do with how White's will power is directed. Could White's release from imprisonment here be a matter of his focusing his will, that is—to put it more mundanely—of his *insisting* with a particular steadfastness? And if there is some element of insistence in White's final release, what prevents White from insisting earlier? The consideration of a moment just before White's final departure can help us here. Hoping yet to prevent his guest from leaving, Black says, "Come on, Professor. We can talk about somethin else. I promise" (140). What Black knows is that he can keep White there, and thus keep him alive, as long as he can keep him *engaged in conversation*. That is, it is conversation as well as locks and chains that keep White imprisoned in the apartment. If Black can keep White involved in a discussion of some sort White will not

think to demand as insistently as he does at the end that Black open the door. And thus, caught up in conversation, White stays in the room for a time (giving us the duration of the play.) This is not to say that White forgets the death he wishes; but this wish cannot quite have the power it otherwise has with him as long as this other person, Black, succeeds in getting White to listen and talk with him. Call it the logic of distraction. Thus, even if the locks on the door are crucial in keeping White in the apartment, they are only one of two elements that keep White there. The diversion tactic here is not to be overlooked.

If we specify this idea of conversation more precisely, it takes us to the Apollonian. Typically, conversation is not forced, but depends more properly on two or more parties being interested in a subject, be it in an agreeable or antagonistic mode (a cheery tête-à-tête versus a heated argument). The topic under discussion and the remarks of other people may hold one's attention and interest, and so one participates, responds with one's own thoughts. Precisely the idea of "interest" arises when White interprets Black's story cynically, saying that Black found God only at the expense of the misery of the man he had nearly beaten to death. Black responds, "You seem to have a powerful wish for that to be the real story. So I will say that that is certainly one way to look at it. I got to concede that. I got to keep you interested." (50) To keep White "interested"—this above all has to be Black's strategy with White, for it means preventing him from dwelling on his nihilism, from focusing on his suicidal plan. If White is interested in the conversation topic he will not constantly be demanding that he be let out.

Understood as that which helps keep White in life by keeping him "interested," the conversation between White and Black has a function similar to the "beautiful illusion" of the Apollonian, which veils one from the chaotic, unending flux of existence. Quoting Schopenhauer in the first section of *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche's description of the beautiful illusion offers itself, mutatis mutandis, for a reading of White's situation:

And so, in one sense, we might apply to Apollo the words of Schopenhauer when he speaks of the man wrapped in the veil of *mâyâ* (*Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, I, p. 416): "Just as in a stormy sea that, unbounded in all directions, raises and drops mountainous waves, howling, a sailor sits in a boat and trusts in his frail bark: so in the midst of a world of torments the individual human being sits quietly, supported by and trusting in the *principium individuationis*." In fact, we might say of Apollo that in him the unshaken faith in this *principium* and the calm repose of the man wrapped up in it receive their most sublime expression; and we might call Apollo himself the glorious divine image of the *principium individuationis*, through whose gestures and eyes all the joy and wisdom of "illusion," together with its beauty, speak to us. (35-36)⁴

By keeping White "interested," by keeping his attention directed at something other than his immediate wish to kill himself, Black is trying to draw a kind of veil of *mâyâ* around White. The object of interest that gives us that veil comes in the form of stories. Having learned that Black spent time in prison, White's curiosity is aroused and he asks, "Do you have a lot of jailhouse stories" (36). Such curiosity, which is a form of

interest, is not trivial, for White's willingness to stay in the apartment—and in life—hinges on it. Black is first reluctant to tell any such stories, but when White becomes more insistent about his need to leave, Black relents:

Black: What if I was to tell you a jailhouse story? You stay then?

White: All right. I'll stay for a while.

Black: My man. All right. Here's my jailhouse story. (44)

The jailhouse story that Black now tells occupies the same position as the Apollonian illusion. When Black tells of the prison fight in which he and his attacker nearly killed each other, the act of storytelling—the “illusion” that is the story—helps keep White in life. White puts his death drive in temporary check in order to hear Black's story, and such a storyteller-listener dynamic echoes the saving power that Nietzsche grants to art in his theory of tragedy. As Nietzsche puts it later, when a human being peers into the “horror or absurdity of existence,” art comes in to deliver him or her from the abyss of despair; art “approaches as a saving sorceress, expert at healing” (60). Though White and Black's drama unfolds in terms less sublime than those of Greek tragedy, and though White ultimately prevails in his will to self-destruction, Black's jailhouse story comes much like such a “saving sorceress,” however brief and reduced the salvation.

There is a second way in which White has been a “man wrapped in the veil of *mâyâ*”—in the quality of his existence in the past, and in the contrast of his present despair with that past. We have already touched upon how his drive for self-destruction, brought on by a surfeit of knowledge, resembles the Dionysian wisdom that knows of the pain of individuation and sees through life's illusions. But White's past also has a lot to do with art, which is a considerable irony within this interpretation, since Nietzsche calls the Apollonian and Dionysian “artistic drives.” When White comments that “Western Civilization finally went up in smoke in the chimneys at Dachau but I was too infatuated to see it” (27), the word “infatuated” would seem not only to describe the deluded state in which he has lived, but also to point to the “books and music and art” (25) to which he devoted so much time and attention. Indeed, cultural goods are not only what White has been interested in, they are what he has “believed in” (24). His life in the past had a general Apollonian tendency, where the “beautiful illusions” shielded him from seeing into the abyss, into the horror of existence. And for White the Professor, the “beautiful illusions” of life have not only resembled works of art; they have also been works of art themselves.

Minimalist Dionysian Moments

Nietzsche's theory of tragedy has its conceptually slippery, if not dubious parts, especially regarding the spectator and her loss of self in the original unity of being. In this present essay on McCarthy's “minimalist tragedy,” some of this difficulty comes out in the use of the Apollonian to analogize the keeping of White's interest, the way in which he is temporarily distracted, or “veiled,” from the horrific truth he sees in existence. This act of distracting or veiling is a form of self-forgetting: for a while White does not dwell on the nihilistic “truth” that defines existence for him. Art—here, Black's jailhouse

story—comes as the “saving sorceress,” albeit only temporarily. But self-forgetfulness is also typically associated with the Dionysian. At issue here is how one defines the self and what it means to speak of a forgetting of the self. The complexities of Nietzsche’s theory are less important here, but Black and White have two moments of interaction that, while not radically different from the “Apollonian” moment of the jailhouse story, are actually better compared with the Dionysian.

The first of these moments is another instance of storytelling in which White, having become distracted enough, has a slight respite from his nihilism. White is amused by Black’s humorous story about Evelyn and the whiskey bottle that she hides in the toilet. “That’s pretty funny” (58), says White after the punch line. White’s amusement might seem unremarkable enough, but it stands out in the context of the whole play because White is generally so sullen. The special quality of this moment gives it a figurative power that effectively stamps it as another token of the Dionysian in McCarthy’s minimalist tragedy. Though there are no stage directions here, it is easy to imagine White chuckling, perhaps letting out a proper laugh, and such pleasure of laughter opens up onto the phenomenon of the Dionysian. As a form of pleasure, laughter is located on a broad spectrum of possible pleasures, ranging from the slightest pleasing amusement to the overwhelming of the self that occurs in extreme intoxication or the height of sexual pleasure. In this sense, finding something funny, as White finds Black’s story funny, is not simply a fleeting enjoyment, but connects up with the whole spectrum of pleasure that culminates in an undermining of the self, which in Nietzschean terms means the return of the Apollonian individual to the Dionysian “original unity.” Thus we speak of cases of extreme laughter, where a person, laughing uncontrollably, has or has almost lost control of herself: a joke or humorous event leaves a person leaning over in a chair, or even “rolling on the floor,” unable to stop her laughter. The thing that the person finds so funny has overwhelmed her and this overwhelming yields great pleasure, comparable in ways to a climax in sexual intercourse. White is, of course, nowhere near such an experience here, but in the context of this play and its periodic tokens of the Dionysian, this moment of amusement signals White’s forgetting of the abysmal truths of existence. That the story has to do with an intoxicant—the bottle of whiskey—would also seem to fit the underlying pattern.

The second moment of a more Dionysian “loss of self” in this minimalist tragedy comes at what is arguably the high point in the play’s action—Black and White’s sharing of a meal. As noted above, part of the project of *The Sunset Limited* is an engagement with the Bible, and Black and White’s shared meal revises one of Christianity’s primary stories, that of the Last Supper. A remark by Black, in particular, points to this revision: “You break bread with a man you have moved on to another level of friendship. I heard somewheres that that’s true the world over” (93). Black and White’s shared meal, however, also participates in the Dionysian. Connected with the more direct enjoyment of the senses in music, dance, intoxication, and sexual pleasure, the Dionysian is also linked with the gustatory pleasure of eating good food. Much like White’s comment that the story about the whiskey bottle in the toilet is “pretty funny,” White’s reaction to the food contrasts considerably with his overall negativity. Taking his first few bites, White says, “This is good,” and then reiterates more emphatically, “This is very good” (98). As they then eat they discuss the food and White is quite taken in. One might even say it is touching to see this character, otherwise so intent on killing himself, suddenly ironized by

nothing more than his belly's reaction to a good home-cooked meal. The primacy of the body, so central to the Dionysian, briefly undermines his nihilism.

In addition to this physical, gustatory pleasure, the shared meal has another Dionysian facet. If a tension exists between Black and White throughout the play, with the one man wanting to kill himself, the other hoping to prevent it, the meal relaxes that tension like no other moment in the play. Relishing the dish and taking a genuine interest in the ingredients, White connects with Black. With the meal they enter into a harmony that otherwise eludes them during their intellectual discussions. In having this effect the meal amounts to a Dionysian moment of union and enjoyment in McCarthy's minimalist tragedy, a moment that on some level is also ironic. In their conversation Black makes a considerable effort to find White kindred spirits, his "constituents," and I suggested above that these hypothetical others are the play's equivalent of the Dionysian unity. But it is Black and White's conversation, their extended moment of interaction, that effectively gives White his minimal fellowship, with the culmination coming in the brief enjoyment of their shared meal. Thus, if Black never achieves what he wants to achieve with White, if he is never able to find White his "constituents," he does nevertheless succeed, ironically enough, on a different, much humbler level. Black himself provides the fellowship that he has sought for White, though their time of communion is short. We might consequently sum up the dynamic between White and Black as follows. In this oppositional conversation between the atheist and the believer, between the man who wants to die and the man who wants to save him, we see periodic relaxations of the tension: first in the jail house story, then in the humorous anecdote about Evelyn's whiskey bottle, and now, as a kind of culmination, in the pleasure and concord of the shared meal.

It might seem odd that this essay emphasizes Nietzsche's theory of tragedy at the expense of the story of the Last Supper, which is much easier to discern in Black and White's shared meal. But the gap between the two phenomena is not necessarily as wide as one might think. In the bold syncretism of *Totem and Taboo* Freud locates the Eucharistic celebration and Greek tragedy on the same family tree of human social behavior: both have developed out of the totem meal, the festivity in which, through the killing and devouring of the totem animal, the individuals of the community reassert their identity with one another. That totem animal is the primitive ancestor both of the tragic hero and of Christ, and when the community's members reassert their identity with one another in the totem meal, this act both anticipates the Dionysian chorus and provides for the social regulation that develops into morality.⁵ Black and White, in re-staging the Last Supper, also re-figure the totem meal. Their moment of friendship and minimal communion flickers as the afterimage of that primordial festivity of joy and excess.

Time and the Play's Mode of Repetition

On the surface, *The Sunset Limited* seems decidedly pessimistic, a fine reflection of the brutal cosmos that McCarthy paints in his major fiction. White, this intellectual who believes in the horrid misery of the world, presumably succeeds in killing himself, and Black's faith seems shaken by the event, as his despairing prayer reveals: "I dont understand what you sent me down there for. I dont understand it. If you wanted me to help him how come you didnt give me the words. You give em to him. What about me?"

(142). But the “minimalist tragedy” of the play problematizes such a straightforward, pessimistic reading, and of crucial importance in this respect is the question of time.

As a reaction to the finitude of existence, White’s nihilism is fundamentally also a question of time. Overall, *The Sunset Limited* reveals that it operates in terms of a cyclical conception of time, not the conventional understanding of linear time, the “clock time” that is an infinite succession of new moments. Here, again, it is useful to review Nietzsche. In his theory of tragedy, existence is a cyclical process, a movement back and forth between Dionysian unity and Apollonian individuation, and time likewise becomes cyclical, defined by repetitions. A realm of self-forgetfulness much like sleep, the Dionysian state produces the Apollonian dream images, which with their fine lines of delineation give form to individual human existences. The individual in the Apollonian state, in turn, eventually comes to understand that individuation is a source of pain and suffering and consequently longs for dissolution, for a return to the primordial wholeness of being. After this return to the Dionysian unity the whole process begins again, starting with the sleep-like state and the production of the dream images.

McCarthy’s minimalist tragedy is similarly caught up in some form of repetition. Early in their conversation Black and White discuss how it happened that Black came out of nowhere to save White. Black believes that God sent him, which provokes a scoff from White: “Do you really think that Jesus is in this room?” (10). This is actually an odd question. Black has spoken of God, but he has not yet referred to Jesus, and has certainly not suggested that Jesus is in the room with them. This lack of proper preparation for White’s question in turn invites the query: why does White specifically ask this question about Jesus, about his possible presence in the room? White’s question implies that Black has already claimed that Jesus is there in the room with them, but even if Black goes on to say that he “knows” Jesus is with them (10), he has not made this claim before White’s question. White is, of course, responding to Black’s belief that he has been sent by God to save White, but the response does not fit well with what has preceded. We might explain away the oddness or clumsiness of White’s question by saying that he has just assumed that Black believes something along those lines; White is “anticipating,” and his anticipation turns out to be right. But such an explanation equals White’s question in clumsiness. That Jesus would be there with them is a rather specific idea to anticipate, and since some might say it is too specific, we can venture another hypothesis: Black has indeed already claimed that Jesus is in the room with them, but he has not made the claim here and now. Rather, he made the claim in an earlier encounter with White, an earlier encounter that is nothing other than an earlier “performance,” an earlier occurrence of this conversation. White knows Black believes that Jesus is in the room because they have already had this conversation, or one like it, at an earlier time, if not at multiple earlier times. In other words, the play seems to be carrying out a continual, though not necessarily exact, repetition of itself. In such an idea the play follows the mode of repetition that *Waiting for Godot* suggests of itself. Vladimir’s third line to Estragon is, “So there you are again” (3), a statement that plays with the repetition (and general repeatability) of stage performance.

Other parts of *The Sunset Limited* hint at the play’s possible mode of repetition. Earlier, for instance, White uses the hypothetical “Cecil” to clarify his objection to Black’s “knowledge” that Jesus is in the room, whereupon Black asks, “Who’s Cecil?” White responds by complaining, “We’re not going to get into this again are we? It’s not

the same thing. The fact that I made Cecil up” (11). To this we should ask: Again? When have they earlier talked about Cecil, this imaginary person introduced by White? The implication, accordingly, is that they have talked about Cecil previously—in an earlier instance of their encounter, in an earlier “performance” of their play (which, again, could be a different version of the play). What comes to light here is that White and Black, much like Beckett’s bums in *Waiting for Godot*, seem to be caught up in repetitions of their own story. Black will save White again and again, they will have some version of this conversation again and again, and White will leave Black’s apartment to go end his life again and again. The repetitions might not be absolute, point-for-point repetitions, but the play nevertheless suggests that a certain cyclicity characterizes its structure.

If Black and White are caught up in such repetitions, then there are important implications for the meaning of time in the text. Most specifically, individual moments no longer have the singularity and finality that they have in the more conventional conception of linear time. In *The Birth of Tragedy* the repetitions of the Apollonian and Dionysian redefine time as a cyclical movement between states of individuation from, and then reunion with, the original unity of being. This cyclical movement, which rejects linear temporality, is central to the overall affirmation of life for which young Nietzsche (contra Schopenhauer) is laboring in this early work. In *The Sunset Limited* Black, in his apparently heretical outlook, offers the play’s most important statement about time, specifically in his definition of eternal life:

That aint what he [Jesus] said. He said you could have *life* everlastin. Life. Have it today. Hold it in your hand. That you could see it. It gives off a light. It’s got a little weight to it. Not much. Warm to the touch. Just a little. And it’s forever. And you can have it. Now. Today. (78)

Black says here that life itself can *already* be everlasting, that is, that the moments of one’s life can in and of themselves be eternal, at least if one fulfills a certain precondition, which is, as Black goes on to explain, “to let your brother off the hook. You got to actually take him and hold him in your arms” (78). Under this definition, “life everlastin” need not be a matter of continued existence after death. Rather, life itself can already have the quality of the eternal, even in the flow of time and all of its apparent ephemerality. To have life everlasting “now” and “today,” to hold in your hand this life that’s “got a little weight” and “gives off a light”—this would be nothing more than to give an absolute value, an “eternal” value, to life simply as it is.

The dual presence of this potential absolute valuation of life as it already is and the play’s mode of repetition brings us close to another Nietzschean idea, the notion of the eternal return, the thought experiment with which Nietzsche tries to overcome Western nihilism.

“Behold,” [Zarathustra] continued, “this moment! From this gateway, Moment, a long eternal lane leads *backward*: behind us lies an eternity. Must not whatever *can* walk have walked on this lane before? Must not whatever *can* happen have happened, have been done, have passed by before?” (*Zarathustra* 270)

As with the cyclical temporality of *The Birth of Tragedy*, Zarathustra's idea that whatever can happen—which is also to say, whatever is happening—has happened before solidifies life into the eternal cycle of itself. Against time's apparent ephemerality, against the dominion of "it was" (*Zarathustra* 251), life is willed and affirmed. White even seems to have an inkling of repetition along the lines of the eternal return, and he is its denier:

Well, here's my news, Reverend. I yearn for the darkness. I pray for death. Real death. If I thought that in death I would meet the people I've known in life I don't know what I'd do. That would be the ultimate horror. The ultimate despair. If I had to meet my mother again and start all of that over, only this time without the prospect of death to look forward to? Well, that would be the final nightmare. Kafka on wheels. (135)

In this statement of depressingly inveterate nihilism White seems to refer to an afterlife when he speaks of the possibility of meeting people whom he has known in life. To "start all of that over," however, also implies some sense of repetition. An afterlife, at least in the Christian sense, means a kind of continuation of the life one has had, but "starting all of that over" does not fit easily with such continuation.

Following Black's suggestion, if we say that "life everlasting" is already possible, that life already can in and of itself be eternal, then what it means to be human has been transformed. Such a transformation brings us to Black's most important heresy, which I touched upon earlier:

Maybe one more heresy won't hurt you. You pretty loaded up on em already. Here's what I would say. I would say that the thing we are talking about is Jesus, but it is Jesus understood as that gold at the bottom of the mine. He couldn't come down here and take the form of a man if that form was not done shaped to accommodate him. And if I said that there ain't no way for Jesus to ever be man without ever man being Jesus then I believe that might be a pretty big heresy. But that's all right. It ain't as big as saying that a man ain't all that much different from a rock. Which is how your view looks to me. (95)

As Black sees it, every human being is already Jesus, is already God, which we could describe not simply as blasphemy but as outright hubris. It is, however, a democratic hubris, open to everyone. Earlier, we might note, Black makes the off-hand comment, "I ain't God" (52), by which he means his powers are limited; he cannot do what God might do. But given the claim that every man is Jesus this comment appears in an ironic light. If everyone, including Black, is Jesus, then "I ain't God" is a false statement. Black *is* God, but he is so just as everyone else in the world is. This claim does not mean, of course, that human beings are omnipotent or omniscient, but redefines the terms of human existence. Black's heretical theology moves in the direction of a radically Romantic position that holds that that which is divine and eternal in existence is nothing other than human life. We can view this "democratic hubris" as the zenith of the ironic affirmation of life in the minimalist tragedy of *The Sunset Limited*. If each human life has

its own potential eternity, its own absolute value despite the seeming transitoriness of existence, then each human being has a quality that, at least in the West, is typically associated with the divine. White's nihilism might seem to succeed in the end, but that success is ironized by the tokens of the Dionysian, the play's mode of repetition, and Black's heresies.

Conclusion

With this interpretation I do not mean to claim that *The Birth of Tragedy* is a crucial, indubitable source for McCarthy's play. Indeed, some of what I argue about the play in relation to Nietzsche's ideas might be expressed without those ideas as well. But McCarthy's use of Nietzsche's theory of tragedy in *Blood Meridian* should give us reason enough to entertain an Apollonian-Dionysian reading of *The Sunset Limited*. Moreover, this text, as a dramatic work, also locates itself within a tradition going back to Greek tragedy, and while this dialogue between Black and White would appear to have little in common with the plays of Aeschylus and Sophocles, we would be wrong to say that there is no shared ground between them. Nietzsche helps articulate that shared ground. That articulation comes from a close reading of a variety of textual details that, to some readers, may seem trivial—the whiskey story, White's enjoyment of the meal, the mentioning of Cecil, for instance—but McCarthy is a writer of considerable subtlety, and those details accordingly deserve a proper contemplation. In this highly self-conscious literary text, with its invocation of so many other texts, we need to ask well what the larger literary context is in which the play invites us to view it. By considering how Nietzschean thought—in *The Birth of Tragedy* and beyond—is part of that larger context we are able to sound out some of the strange ironies that McCarthy has to offer to us, especially with regard to White's extreme existential pessimism. Far from triumphant, White's nihilism has been tempered by a furtive Dionysianism, oddly minimalist but decidedly life-affirming in the end.

Notes

¹ Though McCarthy labels the text a “novel in dramatic form” I will refer to it as a “play” for the sake of convenience.

² See *The Crossing* (141-158).

³ And Black’s appearance as writer is significant insofar as we might be inclined to identify White more closely with the intellectual position of the author.

⁴ The page number reference within the text is Nietzsche’s own.

⁵ See chapters. 5-7 of Part IV of *Totem and Taboo* (882-898).

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