

## Now Let's Talk about *The Sunset Limited*: An Exchange With Marty Priola

Peter Josyph

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The following is an excerpt from “Now Let's Talk About *The Crossing*”: An Exchange With Marty Priola,” a long and, thanks to Marty, engaging chapter in my forthcoming book *Cormac McCarthy's House: Reading McCarthy Without Walls*. During my discussion with Marty about *The Crossing*, HBO broadcast the film adaptation of *The Sunset Limited* directed by Tommy Lee Jones. I decided to address it, and this is a sample of that phase of our exchange.

In a discussion about dreams in McCarthy and specifically in *The Crossing*, I had said that Billy's sense of his departed brother Boyd being somehow alive and yet irretrievable is a common concern for dreamers of the dead, and Marty had related a dream in which a friend named Heather assured him that she was all right, after which Marty was told that she had died during the night.

*Dear Marty:*

I have a Japanese friend, Masaki Katahira, whom I met on one of his tributive trips to Ground Zero on September 11. He was in full dress regalia as a Japanese firefighter; his little boy Shoto was dressed in the bright orange jumpsuit of a working firefighter; his petite young wife, Saito, dressed traditionally, was carrying flowers for the Ten-Ten Fire House on Liberty Street. I gave him a copy of *Liberty Street* as a kind of thank you, and as a result we started to correspond. At first his neighbor translated our letters, then it was done badly by internet providers. He told me that if the U.S. were ever attacked again, he was ready to help. He sent me Japanese firefighter t-shirts with my name on them. He gave me his cap that said **CALL 119**. He sent me Japanese films. Knowing that I drink matcha tea, he sent me canisters from a friend who owned a matcha field. I made and painted a wooden firehouse for his son and sent FDNY figures along with firefighter patches from Manhattan. On one September 11 I met Masaki on Church Street opposite the site, walked him over the Brooklyn Bridge, showed him the Woolworth Building and the gaslights in City Hall Park. He brought homemade Japanese flags to present, with makeshift formality, to firehouses and places such as the old First Precinct, a stone fortress of a building (from which you see Popeye Doyle emerging in *The French Connection*) that is now the Police Museum. When we looked at the September 11 displays, Masaki was visibly disturbed, tapping his chest with his fist: “My heart . . . My heart.” I don't know where he learned those two words of English. I know that he nearly died on the job in Sayama City and suffered severe post-traumatic stress—in a country in which you are better to die than disgrace yourself and your country by surviving a mishap or a catastrophe. There was no support system available to him. “My sickness is not understood.” He was ostracized, reduced to mowing lawns around the firehouse. He had terrifying nightmares. His body was breaking down. Coming to Ground Zero was a way of assuaging his guilt for having lived. “I want to be

useful for an embarrassed person of me.” He was tributing those who did not make it through September 11—“I cannot write the book and make the picture like Peter”—and he volunteered for any municipality that would take him. He wanted to fly into Haiti from the U.S. after the earthquake. Before that it was Katrina. “I wanted to go to the typhoon of New Orleans.” I was the only person to understand his distress. “Some time I think of if there is money, I jump out of Japan and want to work in a side of Peter.” When we parted after his visit here a few years ago, he wept uncontrollably on my shoulder. His son had never seen such a display in Japan. I made gestures that he needed to stay strong and that I would help to remind him. I told him that he is a good man, a good father, a good firefighter. His wife left him and took his sweet Shoto with her, “because I had been completely absorbed as a volunteer.” Masaki asked me to find out whether he could work in New York. “Now I am 53 years old and am I too old to work there or not?” Impossible, of course. I hesitated to tell him, feared that he would be driven to suicide. I had feared it all the time, now more. “My work is very dangerous as you know,” he wrote. “If anything happens to me, please pray for me.” Last week, a message from one of his friends: Masaki is dead. I am sure it was suicide. Masaki had asked him to thank me for all that I had done.

*What had I done?*

*What’s the point of being a friend if you cannot save a life?*

“There might be a place where meaning is not transmitted,” Masaki wrote about our software translations, but I blew my chance to hear a clearer call, address a deeper need. I keep seeing him in his white shirt and tie standing on the Brooklyn Bridge as if he were waiting for me to take him off, as if I never came, as if he were forced to jump. *I jump out of Japan...* The morning after I heard the news, I awoke (but was not really awake) and, seeing him alone on the bridge, I realized that I should call him, speak to him, let him hear the sound of my voice—despite that he doesn’t comprehend English. The voice of Peter-san alone would reassure him. Then I realized no, I can’t call Masaki on the bridge or anywhere because Masaki is dead. If I did call him, there would be the discomfiture of wondering whether he knows that he is dead—same as I’ve felt about my father—and what might happen if I were to mention it? If I ever have another visitation from the dead (or, in the dream, the undead), and if it is not my father, it will be Masaki.

If I could be standing with him again on the Brooklyn Bridge, *really* there, what could I do to save his life that I did not do before?

What could Billy have done for Boyd that he had not done before?

What could Black do for White that would ensure a long life for him out of the subway tracks?

Black feels that he has failed in his mission. Billy feels that he failed to take proper care of his brother. I feel exactly the same way about Masaki. But what is *proper care*—and does it even have a meaning in this life when someone is that disturbed, that out of place in his own universe?

*Best,  
Peter*

*Dear Peter:*

My recollection of Heather's visit is that I never said a word. Of course when I had the dream I didn't know she had died that evening. But your point is a good one. If I had spoken back to her, something would have broken. My purpose in that scene was to witness it. And maybe, years later, to recall it and tell of it. Your story about Masaki seems similar. There's a fatalistic tone, an inevitability, with which you write about his death. Even *before* he appears, he is doomed. And the loss is tragic: for you, for his family, for the people he helped, for *us*. You ask what you could have done to help. "What's the point of being a friend if you cannot save a life?" I just watched *The Sunset Limited* on HBO, and that's the essence of Black's crisis at the end.

But I think McCarthy might say, and I might agree, that it's not about saving, it's about *seeing*, witnessing. Heather is dead, Masaki would have died, you'll die, so will I. But you saw him on the Brooklyn Bridge and you have reported it. He was no more forced to jump than you or I would be. But your scant report makes him matter. Because he *was* on the bridge, because he *did* help others, because you held him while he cried. Maybe that's not enough—for him, for you—but maybe it's all he needed at that moment to go on a bit longer. What do you figure is the worth of even a single day in a man's life?

I've also been pondering how Masaki relates to Heather and vice versa. Which is worse, the loss of a family man who was trying to expiate his demons by doing good, or the loss of a young woman, childless, in her early twenties with her "whole life" before her? As it happens, her life was whole, complete, finished—I think too early. Masaki's too, I'd guess. The question "Which is worse?" is nearly a nonsensical question, but we ask it anyway. We don't have control over when people we love are taken from us, or how. Billy is trying to deal with that too, and he clearly thinks he could have taken better care of Boyd. And I of Heather, Black of White, you of Masaki. We are given or we make moments with people. And then they are gone. What we do with those moments, how we interpolate them into our own lives, is a tribute to them. In that sense, I think McCarthy's priest in *The Crossing* is right: that bearded heretic berating God for his suffering affected the priest. And the priest told his story. Billy listened. The priest couldn't save the man nor any other, but I don't believe lives are futile, and I don't believe stories are either. Maybe, in the long light of things, the story is enough.

—M

P.S. Masaki "out of place?" Not for you, no, I don't think he was. The life you save may be your own, but the life you live may not be *for* you alone.

*Dear Marty:*

What did you think of the HBO *Sunset*?

*Best,  
Peter*

*Dear Peter:*

I thought it was very effective. I enjoyed it more than the Chicago production.<sup>1</sup> Samuel L. Jackson was particularly fine. And the blocking change for the jailhouse story was especially effective. I liked the final shot in which

the camera tilts up and out the window into a kind of sunrise. It gave more closure to the piece. I am struck, again, by the way the play moves. Throughout, Black seems to be getting the better of White—until the end, when White decides that he has no alternative but to tell Black what he really thinks. It's not so much that Black loses the argument. White is written differently. We get less background, he's less fully formed as a character, and his speech is less colorful. All of this seems correct, as White—given his condition—is more or less incapable of joy and enthusiasm. To play White properly is to underplay him, and I think Jones got that right. But it's *really* difficult to like White. For me, Black's case is more persuasive. But then I like Black as a character more. White is aloof, removed (again, as he has to be). What's interesting to me about White's case is that he doesn't so much make an argument as state a fact, a fact for which Black has no rebuttal. I would like to see Al Pacino play White. Jackson was about as good as I can imagine Black being played. Is it worth seeing? Yes. And I have a feeling there's a lot of subtlety there that will show itself on repeated viewings.

—M

*Dear Marty:*

The Jones *Sunset* is beautifully rendered, with many fine touches. Jones is a good director, and he and Samuel Jackson are topnotch in this. I like **Lennox Ave. Industries** scripted over the pocket of Black's janitorial shirt, despite that it's not how you spell Lenox Ave, which is named for a philanthropist and bibliophile, James Lenox, who did a lot for New York. I like the crucifix hanging on the wall under the roll of paper towels in the kitchen over the two-bowled porcelain sink with rust on its unglazed underbelly. I like White's badly chapped lower lip, and his three shifts of the chair closer to Black while proposing not to make another attempt—a delicious piece of business that might seem trivial but plays a role in bringing the script to life. I like Jones's first pronunciation of *Jeee-zus*. I like the solitary orange on the counter, one of the few spots of bright color in Merideth Boswell's superb production design, *superb* being an adjective you mightn't expect to hear about the set of a rundown Harlem apartment. I like "2 x 7 x 52" on the page of Black's marbled notebook, what could easily be the measure of the door he wants to replace. I like Black finger-spraying his hanging plants. I like the double lamp—an old one with a new one clamped under it—by the big old blue easy chair. I like the amber glow on the outer perimeter of the windows. In fact all of the lighting and cinematography is first-rate—the DP, Paul Elliott, who won a prize for the TV film *Truman*, deserves much credit for this movie. I much appreciate the beautiful closeup "stills" of the apartment during the credits at the start, the sort of thing I did in *Liberty Street* (I called them, for shorthand, Kubricks), and I especially like the overhead insert of White's coffee cup, unusual angle and isolation of object, especially interesting because *the coffee has nothing to say* and constitutes a pause, a silence, a rest, despite that we hear a dog barking in that silence. (One could write a second act—perhaps a monologue—from the perspective of that cup.) I like the amusing suggestion of Freudian therapy with White stretched out on the torn couch and Black in a chair behind his head, an especially evocative bit because White, known to Black as Professor, is talking

about his father to Black, who is standing in for Freud, generally called Professor by his patients. I like the sound of someone learning to play trumpet downstairs, and the sound of a woman calling someone an asshole, then spelling it incorrectly. I am glad for all the little cuts to the text because, as you know, I am not the greatest fan of the play. And I am fascinated by the daring of Jones's choice to place White *outside* of the duet and thus to render him impervious to any strength of argument.

The two live stagings of the play that I have seen supported my presumption that White was never going to try to kill himself again, at least not in the near future. One feels that Jones's White could say, like John Grady Cole when Rawlins asks whether he would leave for Mexico without him: "I'm already gone" (*Horses* 27). Jones's choice makes Black's—and Jackson's—task a hell of a lot harder because he is, in effect, striving to convert to Christianity a man who is already dead to the world, a ghost to himself: the undead. The man in *The Road* says: "If only my heart were stone" (*Road* 11), but White doesn't need to wish for that: it is already. Jones's choice also creates a seeming paradox: it is precisely because White knows that Black can have no effect on saving his life—because his life is already over—that he can linger and accept Black's ministry as one of the last things that he hears from a human being. The last thing he hears could be anything at all—what does it matter?—he's not taking it with him any more than he'd be taking the sound of the subway. But it is apt, in a way, that it should be Black's pitch for Jesus and the Bible, for it represents exactly the kind of drivel White has sought to escape and, in fact, *has* escaped.

Jackson and Jones play so nicely together that I wanted the script to be more of a comedy, more a disquisition *Odd Couple* with Oscar (White) becoming more and more frustrated by Felix (Black). That's as far out a critique of *The Sunset Limited* as you are likely to hear, but there *were* several bits in the beginning of the film that made me think of it as a missed opportunity. Even the jailhouse story put me in mind of this, for when Black acts it out, as if to a child, one could easily believe that he is making it all up. It is sacrilege to say that nothing would have been lost had it been written as less of a drama, more of an entertainment, but one of the rules that I learned as a man of the theatre is that if you make an audience laugh, you can take them anywhere.

As a performer, Jackson is naturally in a position to garner more attention. This is partly, as you suggest, in the nature of his role as compared to that of White; partly in his charisma and skill; and partly due to Jones's choice to render White as a kind of post-holocaustic ghost, a distant nephew to Rod Steiger's pawnbroker—distant because his frustration with Black is amusing at times. But there is a singular virtue in Jones's performance that is equally visible in *No Country for Old Men*. This is the quality of *doing nothing more*, generally a virtue in older performers who no longer have a thing to prove and who, instead of relying on a bankable bag of tricks (actors too have their trick bags), allow all of the old song and dance to fall away and perform with a kind of lyrical purity. I first noticed this phenomenon, consciously, with Henry Fonda's performance as Clarence Earl Gideon in *Gideon's Trumpet*, a Hallmark Hall of Fame film for TV based on a book by Anthony Lewis. As you

know from the Gideon v. Wainwright ruling that assistance of counsel *must* be considered essential for fair trial, Gideon was charged with a burglary in Panama City, Florida and, after being *denied* court-appointed representation, managed his own case and was sentenced to five years. Appealing from prison, he claimed that he was denied his 6<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment rights. In time, Abe Fortas (played by José Ferrer in the film) was appointed to plead the case before the U.S. Supreme Court that led to the landmark decision. In the movie, I was struck by the fact that Fonda, an actor who, like Spencer Tracy, was known for his down-to-earth simplicity—who was ever simpler, more free of *effects*, than Henry Fonda?—had managed to cut his performance even closer to the bone. There was nothing at all there and so everything was there. Similarly, in *No Country* and in *Sunset*, Jones is all sinew, muscle, bone. There's no fat anywhere. During the days when *The Orchard Keeper* was prepping for publication, McCarthy wrote to his editor, Albert Erskine: "As a general rule, when in doubt, do not punctuate, do not hyphenate."<sup>3</sup> This is what you see in Jones: *he is not punctuating*. Of course a part has to lend itself to that approach, but the actor must have the courage of that simplicity, for in art it is always a bold thing to do less in order to make more. Dylan showed that he was aiming for this when, around the release of *Modern Times*, he said that at last he was working with musicians who know *how not to play*. Toulouse Lautrec understood it when he said that at last he no longer knew how to draw. In Zen, it is the point where the arrow shoots you, not you the arrow. As an actor I have felt only once the sensation of working with such apparent lack of effort that it was no longer me, not quite, on the stage. In a one-man play, *An Hour at Walden*, one night Thoreau played me and *I was a little elsewhere*, not quite even in my own body, for it was moving, correctly, without me. The character I had created out of more than a year's work was now behaving on his own, and the experience was exhilarating *and* unsettling, for it is no small thing to surrender the kind of artistic control on which you have come to rely for consistency. Now, *you are inspired*. Marvelous—and scary. In the Zen aphorism *Nothing holding you, nothing to hold onto—you are free*, what is most striking and wise is the *nothing to hold onto*. Artist or civilian, we all want something to hold us safely on the earth, but of course one cannot be free *and* safe at the same time... one of the cardinal tenets of *Suttree*.

It would be nice to have Fonda around to be acting McCarthy. He was alive during *The Gardener's Son*. It was shot in 1976, six years before Fonda died, but I doubt that Mike Hausman, the line producer, could have worked him into a budget of \$200,000. Too bad, because it might have rescued Fonda from *Tentacoli*, an Italian thriller about a killer octopus.

I saw Al Pacino's Shylock at the Dellacorte Theatre in Central Park this summer before it came to the Broadhurst on 44<sup>th</sup> Street. He owned the stage. With Al you get your money's worth. It is always a privilege to share a space with him, in this case that plot of ground in Central Park. I've also seen him in *American Buffalo*, in *Richard III*, and on West End Avenue filming *Sea of Love*, on which I did stunt work (long story) and wound up walking into a scene with him—*that's* sharing space. A few days prior to seeing *The Merchant*, I had handed in to Pacino, through a security guard, my *Rue Picasso* screenplay, for which Al would be perfect in the part of Picasso. And you are

correct: he would make a compelling, original White, equally as tortured, but differently. I'd love to play Black to his White. I'd love to play *the coffee cup* to his White. Speaking of that: Pacino's film of Ira Lewis's *Chinese Coffee* is also, essentially, a two-man play between Pacino and Jerry Orbach, also set—with cinematic openings out—in a single room of a small Manhattan apartment. The film is in a boxed set along with *Searching for Richard* and *The Local Stigmatic*, which is another essentially two-character play that Pacino had wanted to film for years. The play and the screenplay were written by an Englishman, Heathcote Williams. Williams is also an actor who gives an astounding performance reading Dante's *Comedia* on Naxos Audio. Dante himself is enjoying it with Beatrice in Heaven, teasing her that it was worth falling in love with her, and writing his love for her, in order to hear Williams reading his *Comedia*.

I thought of *The Crossing* and what you've said about it when I heard this from White: "The Bible is full of cautionary tales. All of literature, for that matter. Telling us to be careful. Careful of what? Taking a wrong turn. A wrong path. How many wrong paths are there? Their number is legion. How many right paths? Only one" (*Sunset* 31-32). This perspective very much suits *The Crossing*. Then it occurred to me that White has a "last" meal with Black—Black's gumbo stew—and that *The Sunset Limited* is, in a sense, one more case of a McCarthy character paying a high rhetorical price for a meal: an hour of Black. I must admit, though, that as rough as I find Black's salvationism, he is easy to listen to compared to the Mexican flappedoodlers in *The Crossing*, or Ben in *The Stonemason*, or the Dueña Alfona in *All the Pretty Horses*. When I hear them I think: "Black—come back!" Also, in moments when I am only half a Frankenstein, what you've said about Heather, Masaki, and Boyd makes me wonder whether White's Last Supper isn't perhaps all the life he ever needs: a bowl of good gumbo, a cup of black coffee. One can see the amazing leap as a way of knocking on Black's (not Heaven's) door and of passing through that array of dropbolts and latches to take a seat at Black's table, a table he had avoided all of his life.

Did you notice that in the shorter HBO promo for the film, McCarthy's brown boots are so well polished, so richly toned, that they look almost red? There is also this line from McCarthy during the brief snatch of rehearsal with Jackson and Jones: "See, that's the question. But it's not a question—it's an accusation." I wonder whether it's White's line: "Do you really think that Jesus is in this room?" (*Sunset* 8) (It is there that we hear Jones's *Jee-zus*.) For someone teaching the play, that would be the perfect assignment: *Find the question that is really an accusation*. I liked, too, the shot of McCarthy wearing headphones. Brings him a little further into civilization, a feel of the contemporary. Strange, though, that despite establishing shots of the 155<sup>th</sup> Street/8th Avenue station with its rows of yellow I-beam columns at every few yards, they kept the line about the absence of posts in the subway, along with the line about Bellevue Hospital being *up* when it's 120 blocks *downtown*. They also kept references to the subway as a commuter train, which—as every New Yorker will tell you—it is not, and to a train with a name, the *Sunset Limited*, as if New York subways are named. And no one refers to the subway as a train station—it's a subway, a stop, a station, never *a train station*, despite

that a subway *is* a train—that’s just how it is in Manhattan. Genet said: “If we maintain that life and the stage are opposites, it is because we strongly suspect that the stage is a site closely akin to death, a place where all liberties are possible” (*Letters* 12). Yes, but not quite all. New York must not be forced, or even allowed, to stop New Yorking.

I’ll be watching again tomorrow night.

*Best,*

*Peter*

P

P.S. Boy that’s some patch of real estate for someone on a limited income. In Manhattan one cannot afford a place to piss.

P.P.S. The National Gallery has a Picasso *Cup of Coffee* (1912) in which the cup and the saucer are two pieces of paper, one dark brown with white chalk, one off-white with charcoal. Before Picasso glued them, the pieces were pinned, probably to a wall, and if one sees it live one can see the pinpricks. There is other imagery in this stunning masterwork (it made me cry when I first saw it)—a table, a guitar—and there are interesting effects wherever you look—e.g. two boldly chosen patches of wallpaper bleeding off the edge of the picture plane; a stark rectangle of blue alongside the guitar (or a part of the guitar)—but for all that, the brown and white cup of coffee retains its compelling existential power, *without saying anything at all*, not even *I am a cup of coffee*. In other words, it asserts itself without announcing itself. Strong coffee, but one is not to taste it, one is only to know its existence. The insert of the coffee in *The Sunset Limited* reminds me of the Picasso, and the Picasso reminds me of the insert. If, some day, you get to see the Picasso in the flesh—more precisely, *the coffee* in the Picasso—you will be seeing White in Black’s terminal apartment.

*Dear Peter,*

It’s not really proper to call Black’s stew a gumbo, and I’ve been curious as to its origins. Although, as they say, you can put anything in a gumbo, it’s not like any gumbo I’ve ever heard of. Mango? Was there pineapple or coconut, too? Sounds to me suspiciously like a Caribbean dish, which wouldn’t have been prevalent down here during Black’s Southern sojourn. Cajun (the word is a corruption of Acadian or Acadienne) cuisine is derived from French Creole cuisine. As far as I can tell, the difference between Cajun and Creole food is that Cajun is country and rustic, Creole is more refined and citified. A gumbo, to my mind, is a soup-like dish whose thickening and principle flavor components arise from cooking equal parts flour and fat (which varies by gumbo type) together in cast iron, slowly and for a long time. The mixture darkens, sometimes even blackens, then you add what Cajuns call the trinity: onion, celery, bell pepper, usually green (like a French *mirepoix* of carrot, celery, and onion). Typically, gumbos are seasoned with salt, cayenne, and not much else—maybe a little thyme, a little bay leaf. Always garlic. Black’s stew would be shockingly sweet, which might work well with the black coffee, but it’s not like any Southern food I’ve ever had—or Cajun or Creole either.

I never saw it that Black had saved White. Perhaps quite the contrary. Black’s God is a Protestant one, and so he expects that He will help Black.

Being a non-Catholic, that whole notion of an active God working in the world, etc., seems to me a decidedly non-Catholic way of looking at things. A Catholic wouldn't expect God to be that close. Nor would he expect to hear God talking to him. Black's failure to detain White represents a crisis of faith for him because God has let him down. My father was raised Catholic. He doesn't attend Mass—never has—but he maintains a Catholic understanding of the world. One of the most revelatory things he has said about religion was that he intensely disliked the English-language Mass. "I liked it better in Latin. I don't think God ought to be that close." This sentiment might be anathema to Christian doctrine as a whole, but it says a lot about the difference between a Catholic's and a Protestant's conception of God. Catholics never get to approach God directly. Not so Protestants. And I think that's Black's problem. He is presented, at the end of the film, with a God in whom he believes but who has not—as far as he sees it—helped.

—M

P.S. What do you make of the sunrise at the very end of the film? That brought to my mind *Blood Meridian* and a whole host of other McCarthy references.

*Dear M:*

When I said that in the two previous stagings of *Sunset* I never felt that White would make another attempt, I didn't mean as a result of Black's mission, I meant that in White's decision to remain (or inability to leave), and in the way that White participates with Black, Black's mission is, in a sense, already accomplished, at least insofar as saving White's life, if not his soul. In those stagings it made no sense to think that White was really in danger of killing himself in the near future. With Jones's choice for the part, I felt the opposite: that Black might've been talking to a wall.

Watching the film again tonight, I realized that although I have spent the last several years trying to think of what to say to my dear friend Masaki that would keep him alive, and have come to see that I said nothing at all to him and was totally ill-equipped for the task that was entrusted to me, I do not identify with either Black or White. Unlike White, I am not depressed from disappointment in the things in which I believe; and about Black's Jesus, I feel as White does: I don't think in those terms, I don't believe in those things. I find the idea of salvation offensive. But I *can* relate to Black's enjoyment of life and to his enthusiasm. I am, as you know, a secular enthusiast, especially in my art. Also, I too am a bit of a blowhard; I like to coddle stews (of food and of prose); I own less than anybody I know; I believe in the word (if not the Word); I like John Coltrane; I have worked, as an adult, at the lower end of the scale—taxi driver, stock "boy," sales clerk, security guard, packer on an assembly line, etc. *And* I have failed to save a life. So Black and I have that much in common. As I've told Tom Cornford, who directed the *Sunset* reading at the CAPITAL Centre in Warwickshire, as an actor I would like to play White *and* Black.<sup>2</sup> By the way: Black's stew has molasses, bananas, mangos, rutabagas, and Black makes a point of explaining that he learned it in New York, *not* in Louisiana, so you are probably right that it's not a Southern thing. I still find it extraordinary that no one volunteered to McCarthy the New York fundamentals, or that, if

someone did, McCarthy rejected them. Beyond the blunders I have mentioned, you don't—really, cannot—*leap* into the tracks of Manhattan subways, you simply step off the platform and there you are—it's a drop of a few yards, and if Black were to catch White during his amazing leap, Black would have to have been down in the tracks already, presumably enacting his own suicide. And, as I have said, subways are named in letters, so the notion that a subway called the Sunset Limited is a kind of poetry doesn't wash. If I set a play in Santa Fe between two types who ride their horses to Taos and hitch them to lampposts (as some men still do), it would be taken as typical East Coast arrogance/ignorance to have them refer to riding their horses on the Expressway, and my calling that poetry wouldn't cut it. 155<sup>th</sup> Street/8<sup>th</sup> Avenue is served by the IND Concourse line, and its trains are the D and the B. In fact you see a D roaring through the stop at the beginning of the film. Disappointing, too, is Black's satiric reference to a train schedule (there is no such thing for subways), and seeing "when that next uptown express is due" (*Sunset 17*). We assume that the Sunset Limited is, in the world of the script, an "uptown" express. If Black were on the same platform as White, he would have to have been waiting for an "uptown" train, for the southbound platform is on the other side of the tracks. But Lenox Avenue runs from 110<sup>th</sup> Street to 147<sup>th</sup> Street. The avenue stops there because the Harlem River is in the way. At 155<sup>th</sup>, Black is already above the termination of Lenox Avenue (now co-named Malcolm X Boulevard). Why would Black be taking a subway farther "uptown" if he is working at Lenox Avenue Industries? Could the business have moved and kept the name? Not likely. What business that was not on Lenox Avenue would want to be associated with Lenox Avenue? And, anyway, the next stop on the IND Concourse is *not* uptown. On the surface above the 155<sup>th</sup> Street station was the famous Polo Grounds, where I saw the New York Giants before they moved to San Francisco. Next stop: 161<sup>st</sup> Street, the Bronx—Yankee Stadium. That is *not* uptown—that is out of Manhattan entirely. Was Black secretly on his way to a ballgame? Well, no—not that early, and not in the rain. What we *can* say is that the costume designer gave everybody an out, for Black's shirt says **Lennox Ave.** and thus refers to a street that doesn't exist in Harlem. As for White leaping in front of an "uptown" express, if we correct that to being a northbound express, even that doesn't fit the facts of the subway, for the D that roars through the station without stopping during the morning rush "hour"—which is more like two hours and forty-five minutes, from 6:15 a.m. to 9:00 a.m.—is the *southbound* D in what is known as "peak" direction. None of this matters much, other than to verify that Cormac McCarthy, one of fiction's most fine-tooled research machines, dropped the ball here, either because he was writing about New York, or because he was writing a play—or, perhaps, for both of those reasons. A play set in Manhattan doesn't matter as much to him as a novel of the South or the West.

When I spoke with Tom Cornford about the play, I mentioned that Black was not very smart in his choice of topic at that time. If he had had even the most elemental understanding of human psychology, he would have made White comfortable, chatted with him, taken his mind off himself, drank a few cups of mud, and established a friendship such that he could, perhaps, meet

with White again—if *he lived*. The notion that he would save White’s life by converting him to Christianity in the course of a single sitting is almost insane. After this viewing, my friend Joan, a therapist, made an interesting point about Jones’s performance that related to this perspective. For her, White was too exhausted to leave at the start of the film, and the very thing that Black was trying to do with White—talk him into Jesus—fired him up, gave him the energy to leave, the will to accomplish his task. Whether or not this was on McCarthy’s mind or a part of his discussions with Jackson and Jones, the film lends itself to that interpretation.

On stage and in the film, the ending is too hokey and stagey for me, too much a Dramatic Moment before the lights go down—or, in the case of the film, up, for after the tilt out the window to what you interpret as a kind of sunrise, it fades *up* to a whiteout. I am also puzzled about the choice of music there, a composition layered over an old field recording made by Alan Lomax of what is described as “8 Kirby Industrial School Girls.” Nothing wrong with any of these touches—I just don’t find them effective. They are the sorts of things that one tries out, then removes. “Forget it—we’ll go to black after Sam and we’ll listen to the neighborhood underneath the credits.” Also, to be a nitpicking son of a bitch for a moment, Jackson’s reaction to White’s final statement of despair and his longing for death is a little forced, as is the entire orchestration of that sequence as written and directed. It reminds me of Lee J. Cobb’s conversion at the conclusion of Sidney Lumet’s *12 Angry Men*: there’s just not enough screen time for Cobb to unravel convincingly, and Cobb as an actor wasn’t up to the nearly impossible task on that day. Neither, quite, was Jackson with *his* nearly impossible task—but this is just the cineaste in me (you would say the director) who sees that a moment doesn’t work as well as it should and wants to know why. Black’s “I’ll be there in the mornin” (*Sunset* 59) is too melodramatic for me. In Coventry the actor who played Black, Wale Ojo, struck the most beautiful pose after he finished his lines, and that was more eloquent, and believable, than any of his lines after White leaves the room. I’ll show you a photo of it. I wasn’t impressed with, or engaged by, the suggestion of sunrise before the credits. It was too much of a pointer for me—pointing where I didn’t know and didn’t care. Overall, though, Jones did an extraordinary job with less than stellar material. And both men are a joy to watch.



*Best,*

*Peter*

P.S. Would you like to see a second act?

*Dear Peter,*

The play itself seems finished, but if I could have a second act I think I’d take it. I’d like to know what White’s apparently inevitable suicide does to Black. And I’d like to see Black out in the world, instead of cloistered away in his apartment. How you make that work, after the confinement of the “first act,” I don’t know.

Your comments about the New York City subway system aside, what time of day or night do you figure it is when the play starts? The amazing leap is

said to have occurred in the morning. Black says that he was on his way to work. White says that nobody was around. That fact suggests *early* morning. But the noises in the film all seem to be nighttime noises, even though I suspect that New York never sleeps. I'm wondering if perhaps the scene is meant to take place hours after the rescue. Are we in the afternoon of the same day? Morning of the next? These men wouldn't, believably, have that sort of discussion as pure strangers. One might also assume that there would have been police and city officials and ambulances and hospitals, and that would take time. White is clearly a danger to himself or to others, so he could have been locked up if he had seen a judge or even a doctor. I need to fix the time of day or night in my head.

—M

*Dear Marty:*

Trust me: with *The Sunset Limited*, it won't help to inquire too far beyond what we actors and directors call *the given circumstances*. Leave that to those of us who have to play the thing. Lend no more circumstantial credence to the fact that White claims that no one was around when he leaped than to the fact that there were no posts in this magical subway station, which is more on C.S. Lewis's Perelandra than the Earth. Make it morning and the station was sparse, and now it is still morning, albeit raining and dark under the clouds. It makes no sense that any authority/institution was ever involved with these men between the rescue and the debate, which is really a second rescue—or second attempt at one. Nothing suggests that: not their description of the event, not from the rest of their dialogue, not the sense that we get from their personalities, not from how things work in McCarthy or McCarthy's Manhattan, perhaps not even from the way they work in mine. You would be forcing the issue, and denying one of the most important hints as to where we are at the start of the play. When White first rises to leave, Black too rises to go home with him. Clearly this is the first time this has happened. If they had been together a while, this would not have been a first for that sort of business. Interesting that in the film (not the play) it is raining fairly hard and consistently, but when Black rises to leave with White he puts on a sport jacket, which no one would do unless they had a raincoat as well—but we see no sign of that, and having only a sport coat makes no sense to Black's practicality: it's a flaw in the conception. Jones & Co. might have decided that since Black knows that White will not take him home with him, he's not going out into the rain anyway, but I could then argue that Black is not doing a great job of convincing White that he is determined to leave. In any case, the play begins fairly soon after the two of them sit, having walked together directly from the subway. It's in the dialogue that the scene is not at night: White says so distinctly. Instead of justifying this peculiar dialogue by extrapolating more time for them to know each other, better to realize this is a whole nother world, and in the world of *The Sunset Limited*—where subways have names and platforms have no columns to support them and janitors improvise imaginary newspaper articles—strangers will argue religion for 90 minutes in between two attempts at suicide.

After driving through Times Square a few nights ago, I was crawling eastward on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street when I saw a huge billboard advertising *The Sunset Limited* on HBO. In the backseat was Ingela Ögren Weinmar, a Swedish curator who helped me to hang *Cormac McCarthy's House* at the Kulturens Hus in Luleå, a seaside town in northern Sweden. She knew about McCarthy from me and my work, but think of what she was seeing in Norrbotten: a small simple house on Coffin Avenue in the old Texas town of El Paso—that was her association. Now she was seeing rather hugely tangible signs of McCarthy's work in Times Square. The billboard features closeups of Jones on the left, Jackson on the right. I returned to the scene to take pictures. It was around seven degrees and I shot for an hour and a half at 42<sup>nd</sup> Street. The result is a cold that is taking my voice away—and some very nice shots of McCarthy's imaginary world lit large in a sea of insanity. I'll enclose a few.<sup>4</sup> McCarthy has indeed entered the modern world.

*Best,  
Peter*

P.S. Toward the end of my least favorite scene in one of my least favorite McCarthys, the wife in *The Road* expresses a sentiment remarkably close to White: “my only hope is for eternal nothingness and I hope it with all my heart” (*Road* 57). That could easily have been a line for White. It practically is. When White is at the door at the end, he says: “Now there is only the hope of nothingness. I cling to that hope” (*Sunset* 59). Both the thought and the expression are practically the same. And of course both characters are on their way out of a dwelling to kill themselves. What do you make of the fact that a woman who is certain that her husband and her son will be raped, murdered and eaten, feels much the same about ending her life as a guy who has taught in a New York City college?

*Dear Peter,*  
I guess being a professor is harder than I thought, especially in New York City!  
—M

*Dear Marty:*  
That's what I was thinking: McCarthy's got some dismal view of New York academics!  
*Peter*

*Dear Peter,*  
About Black putting on his sportcoat (never heard the term “sport jacket” down heah): McCarthy and I are from roughly the same part of the country, though it gets a bit colder in Knoxville than in Memphis. Down here it's common for folks to wear sportcoats without raincoats—even when it's raining. If you had a raincoat you'd wear it, I suppose, but it usually doesn't get cold enough to make the two necessary. Add to that that *we don't walk anywhere*. Driving is how one gets around, so we're not as much in the elements as a commuter in Manhattan. I might not, even if it were raining, grab a raincoat to go with my sportcoat because I'm walking a few yards to my car,

driving to where I'm going, and walking a few yards to the door when I arrive. The issue of a raincoat never occurred to me until you mentioned it. Black may not own one, or if he did, it could have been stolen by one of the junkies. He makes a point of not needing things, and I can see his clothing pared down to (almost literally) the clothes on his back.

—M

*Dear M:*

Interesting what you say about the use of sportcoats in the South. It could easily be the cause of the mistake. In Manhattan no one would put one on to go out in the pouring rain, and Black would have to have rain gear in Manhattan, even if only a zipup jacket or parka for colder weather that would serve in the rain. One can buy old coats around the city. Black would know where to go. As an older man, he would know how to take care of himself and his clothing. The multiple locks tell you that. Southern guys *driving* everywhere—it's an amusing spin on McCarthy's approach to Manhattan. It reminds me of when Woody Allen referred to Mia Farrow driving him places and him getting *off*. No one gets *off* a car, you get *out*. As it is raining only in the film, not the play, the rain might have been a Jones addition—but then, Jones is not exactly a New Yorker himself.

Incidentally, when Michigan State was publishing *What One Man Said to Another: Talks With Richard Selzer*, I cast about for an image that would suit a book of congenial conversations. A nice image of a couple of guys chatting—that's all that I wanted, where exactly—in a café, a rowboat, some ancient arched corridor—I didn't much care. I discovered something: *Men don't talk to each other in Western art*. I finally found something locally, *The Conquest of the Air* by Roger de la Fresnaye, a 1913 oil on canvas in the Museum of Modern Art. It worked well for the dustjacket and the wrap on the CD that I recorded with Raymond Todd for Blackstone Audio. But I can tell you, beyond that the pickins is mighty slim—and I looked everywhere. What does it mean?

Apropos two men talking, I have noticed a major difference between the north or the nor'east and the South and the Southwest. Here on Long Island, for example, you will never see two mature men driving together. I know that it happens, but rarely enough that if you glance into almost any car, you will never see two men above the age of 50 riding alone together in the front, and if you are looking for a pair of men above the age of 60, you can forget it entirely: *it simply doesn't happen*. But a couple of old codgers driving along in an old (or a new) pickup is a common enough sight in the South. I suppose this says something about human relations in the two hemispheres, exactly what I don't know. One approach to writing an Act Two for *Sunset* would be to justify the image of Black and White riding in a pickup together, the way that we see Robert Duvall and James Earle Jones driving along together in *A Family Thing*—which, incidentally, was directed by Richard Pearce, who directed *The Gardener's Son*; photographed by Fred Murphy who, as I've said, shot *The Gardener's Son* and who directed second unit on *All the Pretty Horses*; and it was co-written by Billy Bob Thornton who, as you know, directed *All the Pretty Horses*. And Duvall is the blindish old man in *The Road*. So there are a lot of McCarthy connections in that film. With Black and White, don't assume

a happy ending. They could be doing a *Thelma and Louise*—sunsetlimiting together—over a cliff... and Act Two would be what exactly gets them into the truck.

A different Act Two would be the conversation between the judge and the kid in *Blood Meridian*. In both encounters do we have a kind of certainty and religious—or, in the judge's case, near-religious—zeal facing off against obdurate resistance. In both cases does the one express the need to escape from the other but is hindered by something either within his own psyche or the force of the other man. White's refrain is repeated with little variation throughout the conversation: "I should go," "I need to go," "I'd better go," virtually the same as we hear from the kid: "I got to go" (*BM* 327). It is also the case that both White and the kid are now being badgered, rhetorically, by a man who presents as a kind of advisor/protector, and both Black and the judge carry a leatherbound book—Black's Bible and the judge's ledgerbook—to which each adds his own marginalia, the judge literally, Black in other ways. Over the years I have contemplated a kind of anthology film consisting of separate dialogues extracted from Shakespeare. One could do the same with McCarthy. Many of them can more or less stand on their own without the necessity of context. Much would be lost, but they would still be powerful—and amusing. They could even be done in contemporary dress. Such a film would be more interesting than 99% of the crap at the cineplex. Of course it would cost a fortune in rights.

One more thing about two men talking that might be another difference between the North and the South, one that works, in this instance, to McCarthy's benefit and that enables me to more or less contradict myself. Despite the accelerated pace of New York as compared to, say, Memphis—or, perhaps, because of it—it's not that improbable for strangers to plunge into a serious conversation and thus to become *unstrange* perhaps more swiftly than their Southern counterparts. And don't forget that when you've interjected yourself between a man and eternity, you have established a bond such as he'll have with no other.

At the start of *Suttree*, during Suttree's first visit to the ragman—not the second visit, in which the ragman begs Suttree to burn his body with gasoline—the ragman says: "They say death comes like a thief in the night, where is he? I'll hug his neck" (*Suttree* 12). White chooses a different part of the body, but the sentiment's the same: "I rush to nuzzle his bony cheek" (*Sunset* 59). Love of God, longing for death—these are not small issues. When Nicole Laporte, reporting for *Newsweek*, asked Tommy Lee Jones what *The Sunset Limited* was about, Jones said: "I don't think there is a message. The idea, it seems, is to make the biggest ideas in the history of the world entertaining and immediate. It would seem, therefore, that the questions become far more intriguing than the answers." I am not so sure that suicidal depression's a great idea, but it is certainly a force. I would easily say the same about the notion of God.

*Best  
Peter*

*Peter, Old Man:*

The questions raised in *The Sunset Limited* are indeed big ones, but they aren't asked, they're asserted, held up to scrutiny, turned about, reflected upon. In short, treated seriously. As in any debate, evidence is brought and the witness is left to decide. Of course *The Sunset Limited* admits of personality, which converts it from a rational exercise into something higher. The story is two men struggling with themselves and with each other. The conflict *is* the story. Dialogue is a very old form of examination. In the West it's as old as Plato, but beginning with the Renaissance, dialogue seems to have become less fashionable. Does it have something to do with individualism as a philosophical notion? Or is the artist, working alone, an exalted seeker of truth? Ask the same about the critic. Sad, too, because dialogue gets at the nub of things in a way that nothing else can.

I wouldn't characterize Black's position as love of God. He's after *faith*, faith in the Divine Nature, belief not only in the existence of a godlike being but also in His goodness. About longing for death, you have to include some notion of lust or desire, not longing merely. Also, in White's case, pride. White might know that his decision is foolish, but he is so certain about his view of things—in the same way that a fundamentalist is certain—that he cannot admit it. Such an admission would destroy him. Here, the questions aren't more interesting than the answers, they *are* the answers. The truth of the thing inheres in complex portraits of these two men, their beliefs, their struggles, and their own internal debates. The other day on the radio, Werner Herzog asserted that McCarthy creates worlds *by dint of declaration*.<sup>5</sup> Herzog's phrase, *by dint of declaration*, is perhaps more complex than he knows. He means *by dint of* in the sense of *by means of*. But *dint* has an archaic meaning: a blow or a mark made by a blow. That's similar to another word: *inspiration*, which is much like Genesis 2:7: "And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul."

—M

*Dear Old M:*

As an artist one is, indeed, inspired by the breath of the gods, but they can be busy elsewhere—presiding over the slaughter of the American Indian, pushing couples out of the top floors of the North Tower, etc.—so it helps to be self-reliant on a lot of hard work. In a very bad film of *The Subterraneans*, Leslie Caron takes a drag on a cigarette and gently blows it into George Peppard's ear. O George! I am not a smoker, but I could become one—that's the breath of a lifetime.

Interesting that John's "In the beginning was the Word" is fraught with ambiguity, as Logos is not only *the word* but THE WORD, meaning THE LAW OF THE UNIVERSE and thus meaning God, so that if the Word is with God then it's really not saying much. Interesting too that King James admits this in the next phrase: "and the Word was God." So that John begins with a kind of ecstatic babbling, translatable as: "Wow! Son of a bitch! Life! Universe! Holy Guacamole!"

*Best,  
Peter*

*Peter, Old Man,*

Though not in John so much, the New Testament and Christian dogma taken together suggest that God Himself has personality, and that would seem to me to separate him from the Law of the Universe. God can't violate laws He enunciated, but that also suggests that they are separate from Him. Those observations, however, are fraught with peril, because we are moving into the Doctrine of the Trinity. The Word was "with God" and simultaneously "was God." That's not much different from saying Jesus is God but is *not* God the Father, who is in Heaven. When you start saying there's one thing with three personalities that is/are both unified and separate, well, you're in an area that language really can't do much with.

—M

*Dear Old M:*

As I said about the priest in *The Crossing*, God is a dead issue for me. And the discussion in *Sunset* seems terribly elemental, really old hat, far from McCarthy at his best—far, even, from art. But the film, while it doesn't attain the level of high art—it would need a better script for that—is indeed a work of art in its own right, and that, of course, derives from everything McCarthy has written and has meant to the artists involved. It also derives from their dedication, talent—and inspiration. Once again McCarthy has had cinematic luck, and one can also say that he has earned it. What's interesting is that, as I suggested about your friend Heather and *The Crossing*, discussing *The Sunset Limited* with you has changed my relation to the work without necessarily changing my view of it. More than a good film of a weak play that was written by the best prose writer of his day, *The Sunset Limited* is something about which I've had a good discussion with Marty Priola. All of this is just a way of reading Cormac McCarthy, of taking him into the world; and reading McCarthy like this is a way of living a life.

In a collection of Russian proverbs, I read this morning: "With God you may cross the sea; without him, do not cross the doorstep" (38). As you know, it has been my complaint that Black makes the mistake of trying to save White's life *and* his soul in the very same hour of sanctifying grace, and that he might have done better for White's body *and* his soul if he had simply made him feel more at home, without that array of conversion strategies. Clearly the temptation was too much for Black to resist. But that proverb helped me to clarify something: for Black, *it's the temptation of a lifetime*. My friend Tom Sheridan, an Irish Catholic whom I've known from high school, used to love to interpret the look on my face as what he called "blasted." Despite my remaining in a productive state of mind throughout nearly every hardship, he would decide that I was down, then he would love to argue that I could never be *that* down if only I were Catholicized. And of course there was the deliberate conflation, so common amongst proselytizers, of hard luck with faithlessness, of good luck with God, one of the most absurd of religious inanities. Another way of looking at Black's bad timing (in thinking that the timing was perfect for a conversion) is that McCarthy couldn't resist the temptation to place a religious man opposite a man who is so entirely not that he is ready to end it all.

But as an actor playing Black, this reflection won't help me on stage. I need to decide what it is that Black is doing, what *exactly*. It's easy to say that I would like to have White accept Jesus as his personal savior and I will see him at church the following Sunday. But realistically speaking, what is the immediate goal with which I am hoping, as you say, that my God will assist? If I knew that by converting White to Christianity (by convincing him that his life is an empty one because it is empty of belief), White would at least walk out the door with Jesus walking with him, *would that be enough for me*, even if it were no guarantee that White will not step in front of another train? Or do I imagine that no believer will ever kill himself, and that Jesus is the surest way—perhaps the only way—of keeping White alive? As a performer inhabiting Black's psyche, I need to know what it would look like if I got what I wanted, know it realistically, moment by moment. Do I honestly expect the Professor to say: "You know, man, you're right—I never saw it that way—let's get down and pray"? Or: "Maybe you've got something there. In all my life of thought I've never heard such things. Can we get together tomorrow for Bible study?" What is the picture that I, Black, want to paint of reality an hour from now in this room, at this table?

You would like to see Al Pacino as White. I would like to see me as White, but I would also be interested in seeing McCarthy himself playing the part of White. Having sat with him around a breakfast table, my imagination is spurred, now, to see him at the kitchen table with Black. In that case, I would have to be the director. Neat notion—directing Cormac McCarthy in his own play, the sort of thing one would dream. "Had this oddass dream last night in which I was directing *The Sunset Limited*, and somehow McCarthy was both there as the author but also *in* the play—in fact I think he was playing White..."

*Best*

*Peter*

*Dear Peter,*

Your Russian proverb reminds me of a comment William F. Buckley, Jr. once made in a debate. The moderator asked Buckley whether being a Christian made him a better person. The question was something like, "When you wake up in the morning and look in the mirror, is there something about being a Christian that makes you different?" Buckley's response was, "Imagine if I weren't." The audience and the debaters all laughed and they moved on. But Buckley was making a serious theological point. Christianity should change a person. After Black has seen the light, there is no other way. For Black, saving the life and saving the soul are the same exercise. I do agree, however, that Black probably moves in too quickly, much as your friend Tom Sheridan did. I also agree that one can't conflate hard luck with faithlessness, or good luck with God. Witness: Job. As to Black's motive—the WHAT he's doing and why—I would argue that he believes his preaching is not an option but a Christian duty, and I suspect that he doesn't know the outcome or ideal solution—short of some vague notion that White will realize that all is not hopeless. Remember, Black believes in an active God who, in the person of the Holy Spirit, intervenes in situations like these and *helps*. So the outcome isn't

all up to him. He has to stir the pot. God's supposed to pitch in. That's the rationale behind my saying that the play ends with Black in crisis. It's not an easy thing for a God-fearing Christian to feel abandoned by God. The slick doctrinaire response is that God takes the long view, that what we want or need or desire may not, in the long run, be the best outcome. That's not helpful, however, when it's your own child lying there dying of cancer. But something allows the Christian to accept it, to deal with it, to move on—and to maintain faith.

I'm not trying to dodge your question. Black hopes for divine assistance, and he hopes that White will see the light. But I'm not sure he knows what that entails. Church on Sunday? Bible study tomorrow? Black's smart enough to realize that those successes are down the road. If it were me, I'd want White to admit that something is valuable about life and living it. As you have suggested, Black gets closest to receiving this admission when they share that meal, and maybe that's enough. "This is good" (*Sunset* 42) is not a statement I imagine White making lightly. If the food is good, other things might be good. From there, you can work. But White's a hard case. For Black, though, God is a fact, and God loves White regardless of White's opinion, so Black has a duty *to witness*, this time in the religious sense of the word. What White does with it, what God does with it, is out of Black's control—and that's Black's crisis at the end.

I can see you playing White, inasmuch as I can see myself playing Black. I like Black, I sympathize with his position and his argument. He speaks like people I know, although most of them don't discuss these things as directly—unless prodded. I can see McCarthy playing either or both. But I don't read McCarthy as being as hopeless as White about the present and future of humanity, nor as confident as Black about the Ways of God and Man. McCarthy is right there in the middle of that discussion. Remember *All the Pretty Horses*: "Between the wish and the thing the world lies waiting" (238). One of the questions *The Sunset Limited* raises is: which is the wish and which is the thing? For me, it suggests that you need both to make the world.

—M

*Old Mart:*

There has been a play in a small theatre on the Upper Westside off Central Park West called *Freud's Last Session*.<sup>6</sup> Written by Mark St. Germain, it's what the British call a twohander: Freud during his last days in London, and a visitor, C.S. Lewis, who appears during the blitz to talk about religion. Very conventional mainstream theatre is not my thing, but this production is so good at what it does—in the writing, staging, performances—that I recommend it to you, especially as I gather you are interested in Lewis—and, of course, approaches to the concept of God. It has been extended several times and appears to be running forever. I respect it the way that I might prefer a straight-on painting of a tea kettle, or of sailboats in the harbor, over the usual run of amateur expressionist dumpster art. It makes a fascinating contrast with *The Sunset Limited*, for they are both two men with opposing views of religion for which the script provides a room and a situation in which to engage. Someone could write a fine piece about the two. You should take a short trip into

Manhattan and have a look. It's inexpensive and brief. The theatre's a little jewelbox. I'll meet you for coffee and discussion and I won't have leaped or even stepped into the subway tracks.

Best  
Peter

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> In May 2006, the Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago premiered *The Sunset Limited* at the Mere Reskin Garage Theatre, directed by Sheldon Patinkin, starring Freeman Coffey as Black, Austin Pendleton as White. Marty saw this production in Chicago. I saw it that fall, with the same cast and director, at the 59E59 Theater in Manhattan.

<sup>2</sup> This quotation by McCarthy, from a letter to Albert Erskine around the time of *The Orchard Keeper*, is filed in Box 29, Folder 3 of the Albert Erskine Papers, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia. The letter is undated. The folder is dated 1962-1964.

<sup>3</sup> In June 2009 at the CAPITAL Centre of the University of Warwick, England, Tom Cornford directed a staged reading of *The Sunset Limited* starring Wale Ojo as Black and Michael Gould as White. See "Believing in *The Sunset Limited*: Tom Cornford and Peter Josyph on Directing McCarthy," in *Intertextual and Interdisciplinary Approaches to Cormac McCarthy: Borders and Crossings*, ed. Nick Monk (New York: Routledge, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> One of my shots of the Times Square billboard for the HBO film of *The Sunset Limited* is on the cover of this journal.

<sup>5</sup> On an edition of NPR's Science Friday, a discussion at the Santa Fe Institute between Werner Herzog, Cormac McCarthy, Lawrence Krauss, and Ira Flatow, Herzog said: "By dint of declaration, Cormac McCarthy creates a whole landscape that has been unknown to all of us, even though it seems to exist like, let's say, Faulkner and others invented and described the Deep South; someone like Joseph Conrad describes the Congo and the jungle and the mysteries."

<sup>6</sup> *Freud's Last Session*, written by Mark St. Germain, directed by Taylor Marchant, stars Martin Rayner as Sigmund Freud and Mark H. Dold as C.S. Lewis. It ran from July through November 2010 at the Margery S. Deane Little Theatre of the West Side YMCA on 64<sup>th</sup> Street in Manhattan, then it resumed performances for an open run starting January 2011. In October 2011 it transferred to New World Stages on West 50<sup>th</sup> Street.

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