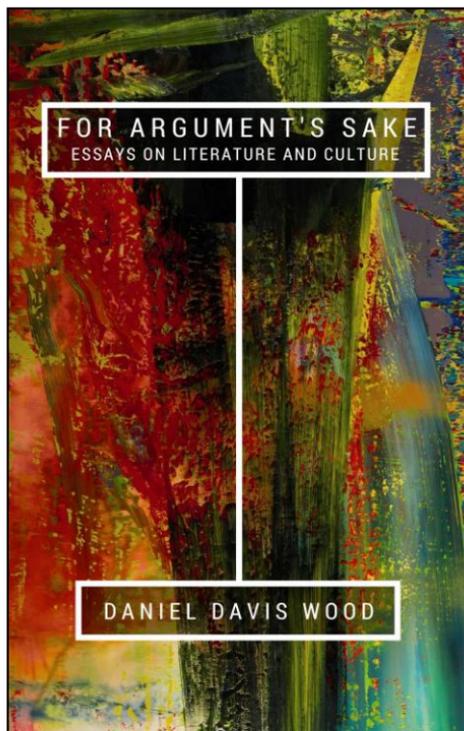


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A NOVELIST DABBLES
IN DRAMATIC FORM

CORMAC MCCARTHY'S *THE SUNSET LIMITED*

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OVER THE LAST FEW YEARS, CORMAC MCCARTHY HAS DESERVED-ly achieved widespread recognition as one of America's preeminent literary novelists. After the piecemeal publication of his *Border Trilogy* attracted critical acclaim and a popular readership throughout the 1990s, a quick succession of more recent triumphs — *No Country for Old Men* and its superb film adaptation, then *The Road*, the Pulitzer Prize, an Oprah endorsement and another film — have shored up McCarthy's place as a master of modern prose. Less appreciated, however, is McCarthy's work as a dramatist. Having initially written both *Cities of the Plain* and *No Country for Old Men* as screenplays, and having published an earlier screenplay, *The Gardener's Son*, as well as a stage play, *The Stonemason*, McCarthy is no stranger to the dramatic form. Nevertheless, his dramas continue to lurk in the shadows cast by his novels.

To what extent is prose therefore the medium that best allows McCarthy's particular talents to manifest? To what extent do his skills as an author depend upon setting down words on a page in order to coax out a distinct voice that mediates dialogue, character, and story with its own idiosyncratic ruminations? These questions seem speculative, I admit, but they must be asked because they haunt McCarthy's latest book onwards from its opening page. After all, *The Sunset Limited* is an almost verbatim reproduction of the script for a stage play McCarthy wrote for Chicago's Steppenwolf Theater Company in 2006. What makes it *almost* verbatim is the addition of a cryptic subtitle, *A Novel in Dramatic Form*, with which it distinguishes itself from the stage play by asserting and foregrounding its own novelistic capacity for prosaic mediation. Even as it bears that subtitle, however, its origins as a work intended strictly for performance have not been airbrushed away in its transference to print.

The Sunset Limited opens in "a room in a tenement building in a black ghetto in New York City" occupied by "[a] large black man" and "a middle-aged white man dressed in running pants and athletic

shoes" (3), and it consists entirely of a one-scene conversation between the two men which discloses select aspects of their histories and the fateful circumstances that have recently brought them together. 'White' is a humanities professor, possibly a professor of literature, overwhelmed by an irremediable depression that has perhaps been stoked by his insular intellectual musings. He has come to believe that the experience of happiness is "contrary to the human condition" (54) and that the pursuit of happiness is therefore futile. 'Black,' in contrast to White, is a self-confessed "dumb country nigger from Louisiana" (75) with a sharp tongue, a sharper wit than he gives himself credit for, and a bitterly self-deprecating sense of humour. Now a reformed prisoner living in a neighbourhood that White describes as "a moral leper colony" (75), Black is able to withstand the decay surrounding him thanks to the fiery evangelical convictions that leave him convinced he is watched over by God.

Early on, it becomes clear that the unlikely union between these two men is the outcome of a forestalled suicide attempt. When White tried to throw himself in front of a subway train, Black was there to save his life. But far from having the avowedly atheistic White suffer a crisis of faith after he falls into the arms of an acolyte of God, *The Sunset Limited* instead has White yearning more than ever to die while Black believes that this wayward soul was sent to him by God as a way of investing his own life with new purpose. Now Black refuses to relinquish his custodianship over White with a fanaticism that White finds repulsive and that only intensifies his urge to end it all.

So between the two men lies a rich vein of conflict crying out for McCarthy to mine it. Unfortunately, though, while McCarthy spells out the nature of the conflict at the very start of the book — the situation described above emerges in the first few pages — he doesn't make any careful effort to dramatise it. Rather, he takes it as a starting point for a lengthy conversation in which Black and White try to persuade one another of the validity of their respective worldviews.

Unusually for Cormac McCarthy, *The Sunset Limited* is, in its entirety, one long and uninterrupted exchange of dialogue. Aside from the odd stage direction, there is no pure prose to be found in its

pages. As such, McCarthy labours hard to maintain a rhythm in the exchanges between Black and White by keeping their banter as pithy as possible — only a few brief monologues run longer than two or three lines — as well as by lacing their words with taciturn humour. Sometimes, to his credit, the back-and-forth works well:

Black: Not too long ago I had a friend to get run down by a taxicab. Now where do you reckon he was goin? Drunk.

White: I dont know. Where was he going?

Black: Goin after more whiskey. Had plenty at the house. But a drunk is always afraid of runnin out.

White: Was he killed?

Black: I hope so. We buried him. (56)

For the most part, however, McCarthy's grasp on the dialogue is slack. Occasionally, in pursuit of pithiness, he recycles some of the better dialogue from his novels. In an early exchange in *No Country for Old Men*, for instance, as the assassin Anton Chigurh toys with the possibility of killing a gas station proprietor, he asks the proprietor how he came to acquire his business. "This was my wife's father's place," the proprietor confesses, to which Chigurh replies in disgust: "You married into it." "If that's the way you want to put it," the proprietor concedes. "I don't have some way to put it," Chigurh retorts. "That's the way it is" (54-55). Now compare that exchange to the words that pass between Black and White after White discusses his refusal to visit his dying father:

Black: Your daddy is layin on his deathbed dyin of cancer. Your mama settin there with him. Holdin his hand. He in all kinds of pain. And they ask you to come see him one last time fore he dies and you tell em no. You aint comin. Please tell me I got some part of this wrong.

White: If that's the way you want to put it.

Black: Well how would you put it? ... That's the way it is. (34)

Often, too, McCarthy's pursuit of pithiness results in glib remarks that might serve to leaven the tension between White and Black if they didn't undercut the credibility of both characters:

White: I dont regard my state of mind as some pessimistic view of the world. I regard it as the world itself. Evolution cannot avoid bringing intelligent life ultimately to an awareness of one thing above all else and that one thing is futility.

Black: Mm. If I'm understandin you right you sayin that everbody that aint just eat up with the dumb-ass ought to be suicidal. (136)

That's a street-slang summary of Albert Camus, preceded by the existential lament of a middle-aged humanities professor and yet expressed in terms more attributable to a third-year undergraduate. Unfortunately, it's also the beating heart of *The Sunset Limited*. Despite the rhetorical sophistication of both White and Black, the ideas they express in the course of their conversation are no more intellectually sophisticated than this one; and worse, as their exchanges veer sharply between the flippant and the overzealous, it's difficult to take seriously their commitment to the ideas they express even though they are both ostensibly voicing those which animate and give meaning to their lives.

To what extent do McCarthy's skills as an author depend on setting down words on a page in order to coax out a distinct voice that mediates dialogue, character, and story with its own ruminations? Almost entirely. More than anything else, *The Sunset Limited* offers a reminder that the most interesting thing about McCarthy's novels isn't what actually happens in them so much as what the consciousness that observes what happens makes of the events before its eyes. What is most memorable about *Suttree*, for instance, is not the quotidian turmoil of the protagonist's life but the oblique personality that chronicles it: a personality wry yet sympathetic and ultimately more personable than Cornelius Suttree himself. Likewise, in *Blood Meridian*, the horrific bloodlust of Judge Holden pales beside the chillingly amoral consciousness that catalogues the Judge's crimes down to their finest details; and, in *No Country for Old Men*,

the narrative tension between the renegade Llewelyn Moss and the assassin Anton Chigurh is less pronounced than the narratorial tension between the voice of the philosophically world-weary Sheriff Bell and the brusque, practical, impatient voice of the narrator who follows the other two men.

In *The Sunset Limited*, however, McCarthy's shift to the dramatic form entails the dissolution of such a mediating voice and thus the forfeiture of his greatest asset as an author. Despite the formal ambiguities promised in its subtitle, it amounts only to McCarthy's original script — printed, bound, and dispatched to a less obscure section of the bookstore than the one it would land in if it were to announce itself as what it actually is. Its value resides not its capacity to offer readers a uniquely engaging literary experience, but in its function as an instrument which illuminates, by negation, those aspects of McCarthy's prose that make his novels so compelling. While McCarthy devotees will find it to be a critically instructive if aesthetically marginal work, I suspect that even they will end up returning to what readers less familiar with McCarthy should turn to before they turn to this: the rest of his impressive *oeuvre*.

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