5-2024

Looking for Hope in America: Catholic Voices Pilgrimaging Across the Secular Void

Brendan G. Coffey

LOOKING FOR HOPE IN AMERICA:

CATHOLIC VOICES PILGRIMAGING ACROSS THE SECULAR VOID

A thesis by

Brendan G. Coffey, S.J.

Presented to
The Faculty of the
Jesuit School of Theology
of Santa Clara University
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Licentiate in Sacred Theology

Berkeley, California

May 2024

Committee Signatures

_____

Prof. Jerome P. Baggett, Ph.D., Director Date

_____

Prof. Devin P. Zuber, Ph.D., Reader Date

Abstract

Looking for Hope in America:

Catholic Voices Pilgrimaging Across the Secular Void

Brendan G. Coffey, S.J.

Secular forces have thoroughly altered the conditions for belief. This thesis explores how three American Catholic novels astutely and soberly reflect how these secularizing forces shape us while offering a hopeful response grounded in Christian wisdom. Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, Walker Percy's *Love in the Ruins*, and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, each depicting desperate souls seeking hope on the roads of a pilgrimage, move from loss to discovery, from sin to redemption, from the dying gray ash-heap to life guided by the light of new fires. When read together, their voices share strikingly similar concerns even as they offer fascinatingly contrasting views of how we might move forward in hope.

This project relies heavily on the philosophical work of Charles Taylor, but also incorporates various sociological, historical, and theological voices as a means of fully entering into the world of these novels. Like Taylor, these novels do not count secularity as a total loss, even as each acknowledges that something has ruptured in the culture and in our selves—a modern malaise, a disorientation, a diminishment. Taken together, the novels offer a pluralism of responses to this cultural shift, itself a testament to the many ways of being Catholic in this new secular epoch. And yet each summons a similar story of hope that offers fresh perspectives on ancient faith: a sacramental imagination to break through the altar of rationalism, a plea for true community to counter our rampant, lonely

individualism, and a fervent belief in redemption, that is, an expression of our desire for holiness amidst our sin and despair. Each novel also invites us to find our own story in their pages so that we too might recognize how we have been shaped by secularity and still seek a way forward with hopeful hearts.

Prof. Jerome P. Baggett, Ph.D., Director Date

Dedicated to my students—portals of hope each and all

Contents

Acknowledgements

With tremendous gratitude, I wish to thank the following professors, without whom this project would not have been possible: Prof. Jerome P. Baggett, Ph.D. (Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University); Rev. Justin G. Gable, O.P., Ph.D. (Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology); Rev. Edward L. Krasevac, O.P., Ph.D. (Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology); Prof. Eric Naiman, Ph.D., J.D. (University of California, Berkeley); Prof. Devin P. Zuber, Ph.D. (Graduate Theological Union).

Introduction

Cormac McCarthy famously declared that "the ugly fact is that books are made of books."[1] He was talking about how fiction writers are always dependent on previous novels and the writers who created them. But his statement also reveals the truth of our lives—that we are like characters plotted into stories made of stories, a chaos of experience that only make sense when they are shaped into narrative forms borrowed from the stories we know. Fundamentally, this is a project about stories, a testament to their power in revealing the truths hidden in our own experiences *and* the way stories complexify ready-made assumptions based on those same experiences.

As the philosopher Alastair McIntyre wisely observed, "the story of my life is always embedded in the story of those communities from which I derive my identity."[2] Our American communities live within several big stories—metanarratives, according to sociologist Christian Smith, that shape what and how we know, and ultimately "who we are, where we are, what we are doing, and why."[3] This thesis is about one of those metanarratives—the story of secularity and how it has profoundly shaped how and in what we believe. The story of secularity has transformed more than ecclesial influence or the number of worshippers in the pews—it has definitively re-shaped the way we conceive of ourselves, our communities, and our sense of meaning in the world.

---

[1] Michael Lynn Crews, *Books Are Made of Books: A Guide to Cormac McCarthy's Literary Influences* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2017), 1.

[2] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, Third Edition (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 221.

[3] Christian Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003), 67.

If this project is generally about the power stories, specifically it is about how this story of secularity has shaped our own stories. To demonstrate that, it will look to three novels from three American Catholic writers from the past half-century which represent, understand, and respond to the struggles and hopes of living an authentic Christian faith in our modern, secular age. Those three novels are Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957), Walker Percy's *Love in the Ruins* (1971), and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006).

These are stories that move from loss to discovery, from sin to redemption, from the dying gray ash-heap to life guided by the light of new fires. Because these novels move from despair to hope, they contain a deeply Catholic imaginative structure: the pilgrimage. French folklorist and ethnographer Arnold van Gennep noted that all *rites de passage* have three parts or phases: "separation, limen or margin, and aggregation."[4] That is, they begin with a kind of severance "either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure or from a relatively stable set of cultural conditions," then move through a liminal dimension where the wayfarer, or "passenger," moves between "all familiar lines of classification," which finally ends in a "consummation," a return to life, though changed in that return. Kerouac, Percy, and McCarthy not only depict with artful precision the ways secularity has shaped the American imagination. Each place their protagonists on pilgrimages corresponding to these three parts or phases. Thus, this thesis is structured in line with that form—three chapters for these three phases, each named for

---

[4] Victor and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1995), 2.

a corresponding part from perhaps the most famous Catholic literary pilgrimage: *The Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri.

Rather than discussing these novels one at a time, they are discussed together, as though the novels themselves are in a lively conversation on the road out of Inferno, into Purgatorio, and finally reaching Paradiso. What are they saying to one another? They talk about what it is like living in the void that secularity has left behind, about the struggles of finding the right path out of that void, and finally about the hope we can look for if we readers dare to journey with them. As a way of encouraging our own participation in this conversation, each chapter begins with a philosophical *précis*, a prologue of theoretical ideas to set the stage for a full encounter of what these writers are trying to tell us.

Why These Writers?

The choice of Kerouac, Percy, and McCarthy was purposeful—writers from markedly different backgrounds, writing in markedly different styles who, when brought together, put the catholic in Catholic. Simply placing them side-by-side reveals tensions that exist because several ways of being Catholic exist today, a pluralistic byproduct of secularity. Bringing these voices into dialogue helps to see how their perspectives and personalities both challenge and embolden one another—on questions of what secularity means, how best to live one's faith in this new context, how to live into hope, and what that hope might look like. The desire of this project is that we too enter their dialogue, feeling our way into their pilgrimage of heart, mind, and will. A few brief sketches of these writers will have to suffice.

Jean “Jack” Louis Kerouac (1922-1969), born in Lowell, Massachusetts, was the son of two Anglo-French-speaking Quebecois immigrants. A cradle Catholic whose faith veered more strict Jansenist, his childhood was haunted by “Jesus suffering and heroic, dark, dark Jesus and his cross,”[5] and the personification of that suffering in his own life—the death of his older brother Gerard, considered “a saint by the nuns.”[6] By the time he reached Columbia University, from which he never graduated, Kerouac had strayed from practicing his faith, even as its power held a grip on his imagination. He become a central voice of the Beats, a post-war generation who resisted 1950s conformity and materialism, and who considered themselves spiritual questers. Kerouac always maintained that the Beat name reflected his Catholic, beatified roots. By the time he published his second novel, *On the Road*, christened by *The New York Times* as “the most beautifully executed, the clearest, and the most important utterance yet” of his Beat generation,[7] he had spread his wings, exploring Buddhism, the American West Coast, and his fair share of musical, sexual, and drug-induced experiences. Yet, it is no small irony this American icon of literary wanderlust spent many of his adult years living at home with his mother, calling himself “not “beat” but strange solitary crazy Catholic mystic,” something of a Thoreauvian monk living in the woods, living with “mellow hopes of Paradise.”[8] He died

---

[5] Jack Kerouac, *The Town and the City* (London, UK: Penguin Classics, 2018), 117.

[6] Jack Kerouac, “Kerouac’s Introduction,” in *The Portable Jack Kerouac*, ed. Ann Charters (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2007), xxiv.

[7] Gilbert Millstein, “Books of the Times,” *The New York Times*, Sept. 5. 1957, 27.

[8] Kerouac, “Kerouac’s Introduction,” xxv.

at the age of 47 from complications related to the alcoholism that plagued him for much of his short life.

Walker Percy (1916-1990) hailed from a prominent Southern Protestant family, but one that was plagued by a legacy of suicide. His grandfather, his father (when Percy was thirteen), and two years later, likely, his mother, all committed suicide—a fate that hung over Percy his entire life. Despair to the point of self-annihilation is a theme in many of his works, including *Love in the Ruins*, his third novel. Trained as a physician at Columbia University, Percy sought to be a psychiatrist, a dream deferred upon contracting tuberculosis while interning at Bellevue Hospital in New York. But his experience recovering at a sanitarium in upstate New York would be a gift, a time to read and think. There, he absorbed the great existentialist thinkers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: Dostoevsky, Kafka, Sartre, Camus, Mann, Heidegger, Marcel. But few claimed his heart more than Kierkegaard, who helped Percy see that so much of modern thought (for Kierkegaard, the bogey-man was Hegel) comprehended everything but the one thing worth knowing—in Percy's words: "what it is to be born and to live and to die."[9] It was not long after that he, along with his wife, Bunt, entered the Catholic Church: "The reason I am a Catholic is that I believe that what the Catholic Church proposes is true."[10] Unlike Kerouac and McCarthy, Percy did not fashion himself a writer until mid-way through life, but he found encouragement for his new vocation. Flannery

---

[9] Paul Elie, *The Life You Save May Be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 142.

[10] Walker Percy, "Why Are You a Catholic?" in *Signposts in a Strange Land*, ed. Patrick Samway (New York, NY: Picador, 1991), 304.

O'Connor wrote to him as a fellow Catholic, urging him to rely on his new-found faith, to tap into the saints and mystics who knew the human heart and were the "artists of the artists."[11] That Percy did from start to finish. His seven novels—the first, *The Moviegoer*, won the National Book Award in 1962—and many works of nonfiction are explicitly shaped by his Catholic beliefs.

Charles Joseph "Cormac" McCarthy, Jr. (1933-2023), born to a well-to-do Irish Catholic family in Rhode Island, spent his childhood in Knoxville, Tennessee. Like Kerouac, McCarthy was educated in Catholic schools until leaving for college, but he strayed even further than the Beat mystic, saying of his faith that it "wasn't a big issue" for him growing up, even though his younger brother, Bill, became a Jesuit and was nearly ordained a priest.[12] Eventually, McCarthy would become one of the great writers of his generation, earning a National Book Award in 1992 for *All the Pretty Horses* and a Pulitzer Prize for *The Road* in 2007. But though, like Kerouac, he came to writing early, his renown came late in the game. His early novels, with their Faulknerian tones, earned critical praise but few readers. Kept alive through prizes and grants, he wrote what many consider to be his masterpiece, the brutally violent *Blood Meridian* (1985), before finding late breakthrough success with *All the Pretty Horses*, which sold well in no small part due to its Hollywood adaption. But newfound fame did not change McCarthy, who was likely the most reclusive of our three writers, living in the Southwest and keeping company

---

[11] Patrick H. Samway, S.J., *Walker Percy: A Life* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), 161.

[12] Nick Ripatrazone, *Longing for an Absent God: Faith and Doubt in Great American Fiction* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2020), 141-2.

largely with scientists rather than fellow writers. If McCarthy ever mingled with other authors, it was with those long dead. He absorbed and retrofitted the language and questions of the King James Bible, Shakespeare, Dostoevsky, Melville, Conrad, and Faulkner through his writing.[13] And while it is unclear what place, if any, faith played in his day-to-day life (McCarthy rarely gave interviews), his Catholic upbringing is apparent throughout his body of work. In those few times when he did speak openly on the the core existential questions—about God, the relationship of good and evil, transcendent meaning and order—he remained uncertain, but never "devoid of hope."[14] That uncertainty leaning-into-hope is especially visible in his later novels and plays, starting with *The Road*, the novel he dedicated to his young son, John.

Even in these short biographical notes on the lives of Kerouac, Percy, and McCarthy offer a study of contrasts: the French-speaking immigrant hoping to find God and authenticity with his beatnik friends in that most American style, on the road; the Southern gentleman who converted to Catholicism and writing and felt that his literary vocation was "ass-kicking for Jesus' sake;"[15] the writer's writer, a country rough-rider who may not have darkened many church doors as an adult, but whose art reveals a person who never stopped wrestling with biblically big questions that shoot to the core of

---

[13] Dwight Garner, "Cormac McCarthy, Novelist of a Darker America, Is Dead at 89," *The New York Times*, June 14, 2023, A, 1.

[14] Steven Frye, *Understanding Cormac McCarthy* (Columbia, SC: The University of South Carolina Press, 2009), 5.

[15] Jay Tolson, *Pilgrim in the Ruins: A Life of Walker Percy* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 301.

the faith that shaped him. That contrast is our win as we search not for easy answers, but for exactly the kind of gritty nuance these three offer in concert.

Novels As Culture Objects

Like their creators, *On the Road*, *Love in the Ruins: The Adventures of a Bad Catholic at a Time Near the End of the World*, and *The Road*, are beautifully different novels asking the key questions of faith and existence, but in wildly different styles. *On the Road* reads very near to an epistolary novel, which makes sense given that one of its chief inspirations was a letter Kerouac received from his pal Neal Cassady, the man behind Dean Moriarity. It sparks with jazz rhythm and a spontaneous prose as it charts the cross-country journeys Sal Paradise has with Dean and their eclectic group of friends. *Love in the Ruins*, as its long-form title suggests, is an instructive satire set in a dystopic future—a journey that takes place in a few days. Its leading man, Dr. Tom More, is a figure not unlike Percy: a psychiatrist prone to despair and feeling unstuck in modern America. *The Road*, also set in the future, but without the satirical laughs Percy offers, exists in the post-apocalypse, the aftermath of a civilization-shattering event that has rendered America a Darwinian hellscape of survival by any and every means. In sparse verse-like prose, it chronicles the boy and the man, unnamed everymans who seek more than mere survival—they seek to hold onto and carry the light of life itself.

For all of their obvious differences, each novel follows very similar trajectories: men on pilgrimages who begin their journeys feeling lost, even as they move in the hope that something more exists. Each stage of the way is considered: why they feel lost, what struggles they face in trying to become un-lost, and what hope they find in the end. But

more than literary criticism is necessary to trace their travels. Philosophy, sociology, history, literature, and all the branches of theology, including the Catholic spiritual tradition, will guide this story. This project intends to look at these novels as what sociologist Wendy Griswold termed "cultural objects"—that is, "socially meaningful expressions" from human beings telling a story through the "audible, or visible, or tangible"[16] Such cultural objects, and their creators, never exist in a vacuum, "but are anchored in a particular context," a "social world" that shaped them, and is reciprocally shaped *by* them.[17] This is our primary concern—how the story of secularity shaped Kerouac, Percy, and McCarthy and the cultural objects they fashioned *and* how these cultural objects respond to that story, offering meaningful hope to we who receive them.

---

[16] Wendy Griswold, *Cultures and Societies in a Changing World* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 1994), 11-14.

[17] Ibid., 14-15.

Chapter 1: Inferno

A View Beneath the Ruins

Before stepping into the worlds of our three novels, it is important to begin grasping the story of modern American secularity—those forces that shaped the lives of Kerouac, Percy, and McCarthy, thus shaping the plots and characters that emerged from their imaginations. Few thinkers have told this story better than philosopher Charles Taylor. His monumental work on the subject, *A Secular Age*, is certainly interested in understanding how religious influence declined in our culture and what prompted the sudden stampede of worshipers from the pews. But, at its heart, the text is most interested in interrogating the social forces that shaped the widespread possibility of not believing in God: the "move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace."[18] Taylor is unconvinced by "subtraction story" theories asserting that Enlightenment progress—in science, politics, history, and so on—revealed religious belief as a primitive sham. Instead, he argues that something changed in the "social imaginary," or "the way ordinary people "imagine" their social surroundings," that allowed for the conditions of a new secular age.[19] Understanding that shift is key to grasping what happened and what this change means for we who also inhabit this new epoch.

---

[18] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 2-3.

[19] Ibid., 171-2.

For Taylor, religious belief is defined in terms of "transcendence"—moving "beyond human flourishing" to "some higher good," which necessitates belief in a "higher power" and life beyond that bounded order "between birth and death."[20] For our pre-modern ancestors, the social imaginary was shot through with transcendent meaning. They lived in a hierarchically ordered cosmos, not a vast, vacuous universe; they lived in socially thick—"we're all in this together"[21]— communities deeply entrenched with sacred, ritualistic participation; their world was enchanted, populated by angels and demons (i.e. "cosmic forces"); and they conceived of time differently—as both ordinary (secular) *and* higher: a kind of gathering *kairos*. Lastly, pre-modern life possessed a healthy tension between human flourishing for its own sake and religious motivations to transcend that end, to be transformed.

So what happened? To put it in Christian terms, the intricate interplay between grace and nature, inseparable in pre-modern times, began unraveling. Our modern, "meaning-shorn" world took on a more immanent character, shaping a new kind of self in accordance with it.[22] Instead of a "porous" self vulnerable to the cosmic forces of an enchanted world, the modern self became "buffered," atomized within an increasingly disenchanted world. The self—once outward-facing, utterly dependent for understanding, value, and meaning upon a cosmos created, ordered, and sustained by an Ultimate Source—gradually turned inward, eventually becoming determined by its own noetic horizons.

---

[20] Ibid., 20.

[21] Ibid., 42.

[22] Ibid., 773.

As Taylor notes, ironically the genesis of these shifts in the social imaginary came from within, born of the very house they came to deconstruct. Though many conditions set the stage for our secular age, intra-religious reform was chief among them. The roots of this reform reach back to the voluntarism of Scotus and the nominalism of Occam, each raising questions about intrinsic meaning in the world while bifurcating the order of God and of nature. Even prior to the Protestant Reformation, reforms in religious practice sought to empower ordinary believers seeking holiness and moral perfection. But, because such reforms increasingly relied on enforced "codes" and systematic fear to yield their desired outcomes, they slowly flattened the distinctions that once made society dynamic in a fevered "rage for order."[23] Finally, deism, that eighteenth-century theological response to 'rationalistic' impulses, turned Christian society on its head by effectively banishing God from human affairs or history, thus diluting the purposes of human life into the order of mutual benefit and, in the process, snuffing out grace, mystery, and miracles, ultimately rendering that once-holy call to renunciation as a means of transformation into a despised practice. This was the soil from which modernity burgeoned forth, and with it what Taylor calls the Modern Moral Order, that free reign of enlightened self-interest that placed human reason and will at the apex of a world shorn of higher meaning.

Thus, when Nietzsche answers the madman's cry "Where is God?" with an emphatic "*We have killed him*—you and I! We are all his murderers," he is not putting the

---

[23] Ibid., 63.

knife in God's back.[24] Rather, he is lamenting what few had been willing to admit: the modern autonomous self, growing from the terrain tilled by theological and ecclesial reform, allowed for the conditions for disbelief in God to be possible, something inconceivable in earlier epochs. Consequently, the conditions for belief in God also changed and, with it, the way the modern person related to the world, to others, and to one's very self.

To be sure, the story of modern secularity's rise is not all loss. Taylor stresses that liberalism (i.e., individual right and liberties, basic equalities, and democratic systems) is the product of a Modern Moral Order. But this disenchanted world, in which a "pluralism" of beliefs is possible, is also a disorienting one precisely because "the bulwarks of belief" have crumbled under the weight of secularizing forces. To believe in anything at all is an exercise of fragility as one stares down a plurality of options once unknowable, including the option of not believing at all. Taylor argues that the modern "malaise" arising from these conditions is not just something we can think about—we can feel it: the "terrible flatness" of our ever-homogenized society, the "emptiness" within endless cycles of consumeristic "desire and fulfillment," the "ugliness" of the mass-produced industrial aesthetic.[25] We can feel it precisely because we have internalized the social norms we have externalized onto society—a self-perpetuating

---

[24] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josefine Nauckoff (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 119-120.

[25] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 309.

dialectic.[26] When we consider in summary what has changed in this secular age, it becomes easier to see the forces shaping this new feeling, this new identity. The cosmos, once shot through with meaning, has given way to a cold, mysterious universe; the socially thick community has broken down under the weight of an atomized, lonely individualism; a triumphant materialist rationalism has not only robbed the world of its once supernatural character, it has also stripped away its metaphysical properties; and time, untethered from a "higher" *kairos*, now moves in endless loops of *chronos*. And though modern secularism, in a break from rigid Platonism, rightly values ordinary human flourishing as its own good, the malaises of our new epoch betray the costs of limiting meaning to that all-too-human *telos* alone—the incandescent transformations of *agape* reduced to mere civility, and this only under the best of circumstances.

For Andrew Delbanco, the effects of secularization have taken on a particularly American flavor. In *The Real American Dream*, he traces a history of "diminution," using the virtue of hope as his guiding light. It begins with our early European Christian colonial settlers, who for all their melancholic hangups, grounded their humble hopes firmly in God. Such faiths largely stemmed from a Calvinistic belief that the human being was an impotent mess until submitting to a higher good. Here was the core of our earliest history: "the radical helplessness disclosed by self-love can only be transcended by loving God, and that love of God is manifested in love of other persons."[27] Then,

---

[26] Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of A Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York, NY: Anchor Books, 1967), 4.

[27] Andrew Delbanco, *The Real American Dream: A Meditation on Hope* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 37.

somewhere in the wake of revolution, as the American character was finding expression through Transcendentalist ideals, societal hopes were slowly transferred to the nation itself. Delbanco sees Lincoln's Second Inaugural, powerfully tapping into the Christian imagination, as the artifact *par excellence* of this shift. Accordingly, the "redeemer" nation, empowered with a divine mission, became the "new symbol of hope."[28]

But then something happened—a kind of "privatization of hope,"[29] such that hope, once collectively moored to God, then Nation, shrank to the parameters of self alone. Here Delbanco sees the erosion of institutional trust, peaking in the turbulent 1960s, as the fulcrum for a kind of "secularization of the state"[30] Yet, the tumultuous, epochal changes of the 1960s did not come out of nowhere. Even at the start of that decade, John Courtney Murray, S.J.—who fervently professed that American civil and legal principles, particularly those enshrined in our founding documents, were the descendants of the natural law tradition (a "universal moral law" with "the eternal reason of God" as its "ultimate origin")—lamented that wide dissent from these principles and foundations was a growing possibility.[31] Delbanco hints at this change when he talks about the loss of an "inner rationality" that drove national "self-realization in the form of

---

[28] Ibid., 77.

[29] Ronald Aronson, *We: Reviving Social Hope* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 17.

[30] Delbanco, *The Real American Dream*, 92.

[31] John Courtney Murray, S.J., *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1960), 42.

universal human rights."[32] For Murray, losing this philosophical "consensus" was tantamount to forgetting who we are as "a society, a state"—a nation "under God."[33]

Murray was far from the first to issue such jeremiads. The generations preceding him were already howling into the wind: G.K. Chesterton declaring that modern man is one who "has forgotten who he is;"[34] C.S. Lewis warning that the erosion of "inner rationality," what he called "the Tao," would generate "Men without Chests" bent on a final, lethal conquest, "the abolition of Man."[35] Without any humility before transcendent reality—be it God, an eternal, natural law, or even a nation-state charged with sacred purpose, there would be nothing to hope in, nothing to derive meaning or purpose—only the fierce will of an individual. Indeed, when Delbanco speaks of our present hope as something that "has narrowed to the vanishing point of the self alone," he is not speaking of that Transcendentalist Self romanticized by Emerson and Whitman, the Self of multitudes, of nonconformity, of deep connection to Nature and the souls of Others.[36] Instead, he is speaking of a self wandering in the wasteland of Taylor's modern malaise—an unreflective self prone to "somnolent likemindedness" and thus "all and nothing at the same time;" a self skilled at "deconstructing old stories," but utterly inept at building up new ones; a self without a "we," and thus without stories or symbols to ground its identity; a self locked in a "soul-starving present," bereft of its past and unconcerned with

---

[32] Delbanco, *The Real American Dream*, 93.

[33] Murray, S.J., *We Hold These Truths*, 42-3.

[34] G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Nashville, TN: Sam Torode Book Arts, 2009), 49.

[35] C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2000), 25, 64

[36]Delbanco, *The Real American Dream*, 103

its future; and finally, a narcissistic self that has condemned itself "to the hell of loneliness."[37]

Richard Tarnas has summed up Western modernity as a culture that "lost its faith" and "found a new one, in science and in man."[38] But he notes how "the quest of independence, self-determination, and individualism," an ongoing venture since the Renaissance, took on a new, heightened character in the twentieth-century.[39] In a skirmishing toggle, modernism, moving into post-modernism, swayed between a searching existentialism and a despairing, resigned nihilism, with Nietzsche as its "central prophet."[40] Even theology, he contends, has succumbed to these new horizons, particularly under the weight of a brutal history:

> In a world shattered by two world wars, totalitarianism, the holocaust, and the atomic bomb, belief in a wise and omnipotent God ruling history for the good of all seemed to have lost any defensible basis. Given the unprecedentedly tragic dimensions of contemporary historical events, given the fall of Scripture as an unshakeable foundation for belief, given the lack of any compelling philosophical argument for God's existence, and given above all the almost universal crisis of religious faith in a secular age, it was becoming impossible for many theologians to speak of God in any way meaningful to a modern sensibility: thus emerged the seemingly self-contradictory but singularly representative theology of the "death of God."[41]

These are the ruins upon which Kerouac, Percy, and McCarthy were writing—a "post-atheistic" world reeling from "the aftermath of the death of God," according to

---

[37] Ibid., 105-107; 111; 117.

[38] Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the Ideas That Have Shaped Our World View* (New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 1991), 320.

[39] Ibid., 388.

[40] Ibid., 388-9; 395.

[41] Ibid., 389.

theologian Paul Crowley, S.J., where God has been "dislocated," and we who strive for meaning, even faith, feel the grief of loss:

> "…not the sense of loss that comes with death, but the sense of disorientation and emptiness that comes when we no longer have the thoughts or words to put anything together….like the feeling one has on waking from a dream where everything seemed so clear, but in the waking state one is unable to remember with exactitude all the characters or quite what transpired—a gnawing sense of irretrievable loss."[42]

What does that loss look like, feel like? What does that loss do to those living in it, whether they know they are living in it or not? What has secularization, cultural diminishment, the forgetting of an "inner rationality," and a cosmic loneliness meant to Americans still seeking hope, meaning, and a sense of something more than this?

---

[42] Paul G. Crowley, S.J., *The Unmoored God: Believing in a Time of Dislocation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017), 29-30.

Lost in America

It is no coincidence that Kerouac's *On The Road* opens on a note of loss: "I first met Dean not long after my wife and I split up. I had just gotten over a serious illness that I won't bother to talk about, except that it had something to do with the miserable weary split-up and my feeling that everything was dead."[43] It is a novel haunted by loss: Sal's marriage is broken and he is a college dropout; Dean's childhood has been lost to crime and reform schools; both have lost their fathers, who haunt them throughout the novel. There is an indefatigable myth that Kerouac's novel is a celebration of bad boys chasing kicks—sex, drugs and jazz. This view fails to see the book for what it is—a lamentation, a "ghost story,"[44] the road chronicles of two drifters who are "lost in America."[45] As Louis Menand has keenly observed, the characters of *On the Road* were not rebels, but "misfits."[46] What characterizes them is not a sense of cool self-assurance, but a wandering restlessness, a soul-deep disquiet they cannot seem to shake.

Sal is so often lost (and aware that he is lost) that this becomes something of a trope. His initial journey west ends in a rainy dead-end on Route 6 (*OTR*, 10). When he finally gets going, he wakes up in a cheap Iowa hotel room and "didn't know who I was," believing, in a moment of terror, that "I was just somebody else, some stranger, and my

---

[43] Jack Kerouac, *On The Road* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1991), 1. Hereafter, *OTR*.

[44] John Leland, *Why Kerouac Matters: The Lessons of the Road (They're Not What You Think)*, (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2007), 161.

[45] Denis McNally, *Desolate Angel: Jack Kerouac, The Beat Generation, and America* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Books, 2003), 134.

[46] Louis Menand, *The Free World: Art and Thought in the Cold War*, (New York, NY: Picador, 2021), 487.

whole life was a haunted life, the life of a ghost" (*OTR*, 15). Not long after, Sal and his friend Eddie meet a man who asks, "you boys going to get somewhere, or just going?" to which Sal thinks to himself: "We didn't understand his question, and it was a damned good question" (*OTR*, 20). Later in the novel, when Sal gets caught up in the wake of Dean's chaotic romances—yet another manifestation of a chronic unease—he again feels "mixed up," like "all was falling:" "I had nothing to offer anybody except my own confusion" (*OTR*, 126). Not long after, Sal confesses to himself "that we didn't know anything about ourselves" (*OTR*, 145).

It might be tempting to chalk this up to a bildungsroman impulse of the novel—boy innocent finding his legs. But then why does this lostness take on new fervors the further the story progresses? Consider Sal's late-in-the-novel desire to cure his disillusionment by trading places with a person of color:

> …wishing I were a Negro, feeling that the best that white world had offered was not enough ecstasy for me, not enough life, joy, kicks, darkness, music, not enough night…I wished I were a Denver Mexican, or even a poor overworked Jap, anything but what I was so drearily, a "white man" disillusioned. All my life I'd had white ambitions…I was only myself, Sal Paradise, sad, strolling in this violet dark, this unbearably sweet night, wishing I could exchange worlds with the happy, true-hearted, ecstatic Negroes of America (*OTR*, 179-180).

To be sure, Sal (and likely Kerouac) misses the mark here—our contemporary mores cringe at this naïve romanticization of the Other, a wholesale ignorance of the true Black, Mexican, and Asian experience in 1940s America. But we can still retrieve the feelings behind this misbegotten lament: the paucity Sal feels deep in his gut—a sense that, even for all his advantages as a mid-century white American male, he still feels utterly lost. Near the end of their pilgrimage, Sal asks Dean: "Where we going, man?" to which Dean,

that "personification of restlessness,"[47] tragically replies: "I don't know but we gotta go" (*OTR*, 240).

What fuels this lostness? Late in part one of the novel, Sal encounters "the Ghost of the Susquehanna" a "shriveled little old man" who is headed for "Canady," even as he plods along in the wrong direction (*OTR*, 104-5). He tries to offer a course correction, but the old man refuses, leaving Sal to look upon him as a "poor forlorn man, poor lost sometimeboy, now broken ghost of the penniless wilds" especially as he remembers how Franklin, Washington, Boone and Bradford once occupied those same wilds (*OTR*, 105). The next morning, after Sal is thrown out a railroad station where he spends the night, he thinks to himself:

> Isn't it true that you start your life a sweet child believing in everything under your father's roof? Then comes the day of the Laodiceans, when you know you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked, and with the visage of a gruesome grieving ghost you go shuddering through a nightmare life. I stumbled haggardly out of the station; I had no more control. All I could see of the morning was a whiteness like the whiteness of the tomb. I was starving to death (*OTR*, 106).

The Laodiceans, an early Christian community called to conversion by a vision of John in the Book of Revelation, were rebuked for their "lukewarm" faith: "For you say, 'I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.' You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked" (Rev 3:17 NRSV). In other words, this church, smugly complacent in their material satisfactions, are revealed to be spiritually destitute. Is Sal

---

[47] Ben Giamo, "What IT Is?," in *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Jack Kerouac's On the Road*, ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia, PA: Chelsea House Publishers, 2007), 185.

suggesting that America is Laodicea for the modern age, with the old, misdirected Ghost of the Susquehanna as its walking embodiment?

Something is lost in America. Sal suddenly finds himself in Times Square "seeing with my innocent road-eyes the absolute madness and fantastic hoorair of New York with is millions and millions hustling forever for a buck among themselves, the mad dream—grabbing, taking, giving, sighing, dying, just so they could be buried in those awful cemetery cities beyond Long Island City" (*OTR*, 107). This is D.H. Lawrence's American soul up close: "hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer."[48] Except that, by Sal's reckoning, the killer is a suicide. It may be tempting to lay the blame of the "millions hustling forever" on cold capitalism, but by bringing in the Laodiceans, Kerouac begs us to avoid such ideological traps. The real sickness is not in the system, but in the American self as a godless mania grips the country, starving it to death. No wonder Sal, facing the madman ghost, "was sick and tired of life" (*OTR*, 106)—no one had bothered to tell him that his awful cravings could never be satisfied in a life of "grabbing, taking, giving, sighing, dying." No one had bothered to tell him that he was living in a world in which it was harder and harder to find meaning and hope beyond what passed for a complacent modern American existence.

* * *

If *On the Road* begins with quiet lament, Percy's *Love In the Ruins* commences with a question of catastrophic concern: "Now in these dread latter days of the old violent

---

[48] D.H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (New York, NY: The Viking Press, 1961), 62.

beloved U.S.A. and of the Christ-forgetting Christ-haunted death-dealing Western world I came to myself in a grove of young pines and the question came to me: has it happened at last?"[49] There is no subtlety here: Percy, hyper-aware that something has been lost in our secular age, does not just want to raise the alarm—he wants to shout "FIRE!" within the brains of his readers. The question he asks is about whether humanity really has entered, or is about to enter, its own death throes. "These are bad times" (*LIR*, 5), thinks Tom More just pages into his story as he details a society so fractured and lost that it seems that the Yeatsian gyres have indeed turned such that "the center did not hold" (*LIR*, 18).[50] Not that Tom is anything like his sainted namesake in these bad times. He declares himself a bad Catholic fallen away from the faith:

> Some years ago, however, I stopped eating Christ in Communion, stopped going to mass, and have since fallen into a disorderly life. I believe in God and the whole business but I love women best, music and science next, whiskey next, God fourth, and my fellowman hardly at all. Generally I do as I please (*LIR*, 6).

Percy is having a little fun jumbling up the proper order of loves laid out by St. Thomas Aquinas: God, then ourselves, then our neighbor, and finally our bodily life,[51]

---

[49] Walker Percy, *Love in the Ruins: The Adventures of a Bad Catholic at a Time Near the End of the World* (New York, NY: Picador, 1971), 3. Hereafter, *LIR*.

[50] This not-so-hidden reference to W.B. Yeats' "The Second Coming" raises the specter that ours is an age where "The falcon cannot hear the falconer;" i.e. where we can no longer hear Christ, or God, or the "inner rationality," that once moored us, and thus we are doomed as "Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, / The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere / The ceremony of innocence is drowned" as "The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity." Yeats, who had his own unique sense of history and spirituality, was nonetheless a kind of Nietzschean prophet fit for use in the world Percy aims to depict. W. B. Yeats, "The Second Coming," in *The Oxford Book of Irish Verse*, ed. Donagh MacDonagh and Lennox Robinson (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1958), 138-139.

[51] St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 2a2ae, 25, 12.

but he is dead serious about the consequences of this disorderedly life. Aquinas argued that only properly ordered loves could bring about happiness and, according to Percy, his novel is entirely "about the pursuit of happiness."[52] That makes Tom something akin to a fictional embodiment of Chesterton's quip that the modern world is not so much "evil" as is it "full of wild and wasted virtues."[53] But Tom is more than proof that happiness cannot come with doing as I please; he is lost because he has forgotten the truth of himself: "A man, wrote John, who says he believes in God and does not keep his commandments is a liar. If John is right, then I am a liar" (*LIR*, 6).

And yet, there are flickers of hope—a sense that Tom, who is still a "believer" despite his lapsed status (*LIR*, 6), contains a vestige of old hope even as the world around him seems to have moved on, blithely accepting its new lot. Consider Tom's conversation with his friend, the "neobehaviorist" Max Gottlieb,[54] who is described as something of an atheistic Thomas Aquinas, "ranged, orderly, connected up" (*LIR*, 106). As his friend, Max is trying to help Tom by suggesting that he be relieved of his "guilt feelings" regarding a drunken extramarital tryst Tom had with a young woman, Lola, in the kidney-shaped bunker of a golf course on Christmas Eve. Tom became depressed and suicidal after the affair, which puzzles Max who sees Tom's "*affaire* of the heart" as "a natural activity" according to his secular imaginary, not the old-world stuff of "guilt" and "sin" that

---

[52] Walker Percy, "Concerning *Love in the Ruins*," in *Signposts in a Strange Land*, ed. Patrick Samway (New York, NY: Picador, 1991), 248.

[53] Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 25.

[54] Whose last name, ironically, means "God's love," a love augmented to the (max)imum.

burdens Tom (*LIR*, 116). But for Tom, this suicidal depression stemmed less from his guilt than from his *not* feeling guilty:

> "Then what worries you, if you don't feel guilty?"
> "That's what worries me: not feeling guilty."
> "Why does that worry you?"
> "Because if I felt guilty, I could get rid of it."
> "How?"
> "By the sacrament of penance."
> "I'm trying to see it as you see it."
> "I know you are."
> "What I don't see is that if there is no guilt after *une affaire*, what is the problem?"
> "The problem is that if there is no guilt, contrition, and a purpose of amendment, the sin cannot be forgiven."
> "What does that mean, operationally speaking?"
> "It means that you don't have life in you" (*LIR*, 117).

Delbanco sees this scene as a confrontation between modernity and that last remnant of the pre-secular: the "modern man (Max), for whom pleasure without guilt is the essence of the good life" and the "anachronistic man (Tom) who has dropped into the modern world as if through a time warp—a lapsed believer who still has a vestigial sense that there may be something beyond his own sensations from which he is cut off at peril to his soul."[55] Yet, the dialogue reveals more than just the difficulty of believing a world where scientific rationalism is seen as the "sane" option—Tom is speaking about the absence of "feeling," that something has changed in him, something now absent in his personhood, something the he once valued but now seems lost, maybe even irretrievably

---

[55] Delbanco, *The Real American Dream*, 101.

lost.[56] A gulf has opened up between Tom and the story he took to be real, and the values shaped by that story. Without guilt he cannot be truly contrite; without feelings of contrition, he cannot resolve to amend his life; without a purpose of amendment, he cannot be forgiven; without being forgiven, he is unable to enter into communion with his church, with God. Delbanco is thus correct to note that at the heart of his fears is the loss of everything that once moored his life: God.[57] Having lost God, his only meaning is that of a wandering, pleasure-seeking self in an immanent world without meaning beyond itself. This is the cause of his grief. This is why he feels so lost—like he has no "life" inside of him.

Max, the modern man, wants to "cure" him of his guilt—to bring him into the light of rationalism and science and out of the dark superstitions of the pre-secular world. Tom resists:

> "If you would come back to get in the Skinner box, we could straighten it out."
> "The Skinner box wouldn't help."
> "We could condition away the contradiction. You'd never feel guilt."
> "Then I'd really be up the creek" (*LIR*, 118).

* * *

While *Love in the Ruins* begs the desperate question of whether the apocalypse is immanent, *The Road* settles the issue from page one: the end is here. Its first sentence fittingly begins with the man waking in the woods on a dark, cold night as if from a

---

[56] This is a prime example of what Taylor calls the "nova effect," when the cross pressures between "orthodoxy" and "unbelief" press against each other, creating a disorienting fragilization that can be felt—the "malaise" of modernity. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 302.

[57] Delbanco, *The Real American Dream*, 101.

nightmare: “nights dark beyond darkness and the days more gray each one than what had gone before”[58] Punched out in a series of short, fragmentary sentences tucked into a series of chapterless page-breaking sections, even the style of McCarthy’s fable-like story evokes the world his characters inhabit: “barren, silent, godless” (*TR*, 4). Its nameless characters, the man and the boy, are not lost so much as they live in a lost world, a secular hellscape covered in the ash of its own ruin.

In the blackened aftermath of some cataclysmic event—“The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions” (*TR*, 52)[59]—the man and the boy traverse the deadened landscape “like pilgrims in a fable swallowed up and lost among the inward parts of some granitic beast” (*TR*, 3). Whether this world-shattering event was natural or unnatural is never divulged; we only know of its hallowing effects. Society has collapsed. The world, charred with burning, has become lifeless. Even sunlight cannot penetrate the darkness, such that “the banished sun circles the earth like a grieving mother with a lamp” (*TR*, 32). Unlike Sal and Dean, the man and the boy do not take to the road out of existential longing; they take to the road because unless they move they will die.

It is as though the primal yawp grows more barbaric with each succeeding generation. Kerouac’s despair of anemic post-World War II doldrums gave way to Percy’s

---

[58] Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (New York, NY: Vintage International, 2006), 3. Hereafter, *TR*.

[59] Steven Frye argues that the 1:17 might be a reference to Revelations 1:17, where at the end of times, the Son of Man returns declaring “Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last” (Rev 1:17 NRSV). This would be yet another allusion to the book of Apocalypse after Kerouac’s reference to the Laodiceans. Frye, *Understanding Cormac McCarthy*, 169.

biting, screaming dystopian satire on the spiritual lobotomization of post-1960s America, which, in turn, reached a fever pitch in McCarthy's barren, silent, godless ash-strewn world—"the walking dead in a horror film" (*TR*, 55). Have the effects of Taylor's theory gained momentum in our post-modern world? Is Delbanco's "diminution" accelerating? Is Crowley right that ours is now so "post-atheistic" that we are unmoored from God, and thus from God's eternal law, that "inner rationality" that once kept society tethered to something beyond the self? What is it that led McCarthy to such eschatological depths—to an early-morning vision he had in El Paso of the future his young son, John, might inherit: a wasteland burning away into oblivion?[60] These questions haunt *The Road*, and our pilgrimage to *The Road* through Kerouac and Percy.

It is not simply that "secular winds" (*TR*, 177) blow through McCarthy's novel, but that it is itself a "coldly secular" world (*TR*, 274). The metaphysical fabric has come undone; the logic, the very *Logos* grounding and sustaining the world, is near extinction. The man sees himself and the boy as "migrants in a fever land":

> The frailty of everything revealed at last. Old and troubling issues resolved into nothingness and night. The last instance of a thing takes the class with it. Turns out the light and is gone. Look around you. Ever is a long time. But the boy knew what he knew. That ever is no time at all (*TR*, 28).

As they pilgrimage forward, there is no cosmos, no thick community, no higher times, not even ordinary human flourishing, just "the crushing black vacuum of the universe," as they venture on "borrowed time" in a "borrowed world" with "borrowed eyes with which to sorrow it" (*TR*, 130). Their commandeered world, if it contained any vestige of

---

[60] Cormac McCarthy, interview by Oprah Winfrey, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, Harpo Production, June 5, 2007.

enchantment, has been reduced to a "void" with "everything uncoupled from its shoring" (*TR*, 11).

A little more than halfway through the novel, the man dreams of "the vanished world returned":

> Kin long dead washed up and cast fey sidewise looks upon him. None spoke. He thought of his life. So long ago. A gray day in a foreign city where he stood in a window and watched the street below. Behind him on wooden a table a small lamp burned. On the table books and papers (*TR*, 187).

His world has now grown quiet, the lamp gone out, out like Macbeth's "brief candle."[61] But it is the books and papers that bring up another, later memory:

> Years later he'd stood in the charred ruins of a library where blackened books lay in pools of water. Shelves tipped over. Some rage at the lies arranged in their thousands row on row. He picked up on of the books and thumbed through the heavy bloated pages. He'd not have thought the value of the smallest thing predicated on a world to come. It surprised him. That the space which these things occupied was itself an expectation. He let the book fall and took a last look around and made his way out into the cold gray light (*TR*, 187).

There is something linking that burning lamp gone out and the books and papers, which now lay in ruin, the words of the world reduced back to bloated pulp. Here is secular decay in a single potent metaphor—godless reasoning turning back on itself, the material elevated at the cost of the soul, myth and symbol lost, the principles of analogy laid to waste in a pool of filth. It is the modern project of de-construction reaching its apocalyptic fulfillment. The value of the smallest thing predicated on a world to come. All the man can see is lies—a thought he has had before: "Who has made the world a lie every word" (*TR*, 75).

---

[61] William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, 5.5.22.

All that stand between the man and utter lostness is memory, which is slowly fading into "numbness" and a "dull despair":

> The world shrinking down about the raw core of parsable entities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true. More fragile than he would thought. How much was gone already? The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality (*TR*, 88-9).

As with the memory of the charred ruins of the library, here the man is startled at the fragility of the world—the erosion of meaning at its most basic form, including the meaning of things he once held as true so that the *logos* disintegrates before his eyes. It is not just that the world in its material form is lost. The man knows that something much more valuable is in danger of perishing forever—something that cannot be seen or touched or even easily explained. And yet, ironically, it is reality itself—the thing that fails to nourish a starving Sal; the "life" of Tom that has left him feelings so empty inside. The man and the boy may very well be carrying this with them, but elsewhere in their blackened, broken world it has been extinguished—a world devoid of its sacred idioms whereby any trace of God has been burned and buried by raging madmen.

As only McCarthy can do, he encapsulates what this means in a single word. The man, walking out into the road and standing in the silence thinks: "The salitter drying from the earth" (*TR*, 261). As Allen Josephs explains, this word, salitter, "used almost exclusively" by the Lutheran mystic Jacob Boehme, "means divine essence, the stuff of God (not unlike the Tao or Brahman, or in quantum physics the matrix of Max Planck, or

even the so-called god-particle of recent physics)."[62] This is the totality of secularity, where everything is immanent and nothing is transcendent, everything profane and nothing sacred. The frailty and fragility pushed to its breaking. It is felt as Sal and Dean search for more and again as Tom tries to find life in his lifeless and disordered existence. It is something the man and the boy hold onto with cold, gray hands, all that *is* in the face of nothing but a muted hope. In those rare moments when the man does think of God, the best he can do is rage:

> Are you there? he whispered. Will I see you at last? Have you a neck by which to throttle you? Have you a heart? Damn you eternally have you a soul? Oh God, he whispered. Oh God (*TR*, 11-12).

Beat, Broken, and Staring Into the Dark Beyond

Sal and Dean, Tom, and the man and the boy, are all in their own way misfits in their own world, strangers in a land they no longer recognize. Some are better than others at knowing that they are lost and even understanding how they became lost, and yet all are clinging to a faith that feels like it is slipping away, all searching for a world that no longer exists.

In Kerouac's *The Town and the City*, his autobiographically-infused, Wolfean attempt at the Great American Novel, there is a scene late in the story when the protagonist, Peter Martin, who is modeled after Kerouac himself, is listening to his mother, Marguerite, describe her early life on her grandfather's farm in New Hampshire.

---

[62] Allen Josephs, "The Quest for God in *The Road*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Cormac McCarthy*, ed. Steven Frye (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 139.

Her every word is full of an American sublime that no longer exists: picking vegetables to make rich stew; drinking freshly-minted apple cider in the afternoons; homemade molasses candies, singing songs as a family, savoring nature and its bounties. Days ended with the family going to church for vespers. "That's the best life there is," she declares before telling her grown-up son, who lives with his girlfriend and hangs around with New York intellectuals: "You can have your Communists and your neurotics and all that stuff, but give me a good old church-going farmer for a man, a real man—."[63] Peter offers no response. The scene ends late at night as he steps into his back yard: "He smoked a cigarette in the cool night air, and stared at the great portrait of the man holding his head in pain, on the wall of the warehouse, as the Brooklyn night rumbled and roared about him."[64]

Peter (who becomes Sal in *On the Road*) has no response because he can barely grasp the world his mother describes—she may as well be speaking of life on another planet. She is like Charon straddling the sacred and the secular, the culture of community and the culture of self; all he has known is an individualistic secularity, and like the oversized portrait on that Brooklyn warehouse, it has left him holding his head in pain. He grows up to become Sal, looking to inhabit a brand of American manhood that no longer exists.[65] Which is what makes *On the Road* such a sad book, because ultimately it

---

[63] Kerouac, *The Town and the City*, 408-9.

[64] Ibid., 409.

[65] Kerouac, like his literary counterparts, has a lot in common with Tom More in this way. As John Leland notes, Kerouac "had very traditional values" but "he lived a life at odds with these values." The results speak for themselves. Leland, *Why Kerouac Matters*, 28,

is a story about "loneliness, insecurity, and failure."[66] And yet it is also "a story about guys who want to be with other guys,"[67] perhaps because they are all running into the same walls even as they are trying to find their way into the light.

In many respects that is what the whole Beat Generation was about—an "offspring of the Lost Generation," wrote Kerouac the year *On the Road* was published, and "just another step towards that last, pale generation which will not know the answers either."[68] Although if Kerouac saw the Lost Generation as cynical, even nihilistic, he saw the Beats as "picking it all up again" in the belief "that there will be some justification for the horror of life."[69] Kerouac was strong in his conviction that these Beats had more in common with Billy Graham's Crusaders than with run-of-the-mill street hoodlums: "I never heard more talk about God, the Last Things, the soul, the where-we-going than among the kids of my generation: and not the intellectual kids alone, *all* of them."[70]

And yet he betrays their secular predicament (likely without recognizing it): he claims that the Beats saw themselves as "creatures of God laid out in this infinite universe without knowing what for."[71] As Taylor himself might argue, that is a statement

---

[66] Louis Menand, "Drive, He Wrote: What the Beats Were About," *New Yorker*, September 24, 2007, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/10/01/drive-he-wrote.

[67] Ibid.

[68] Jack Kerouac, "About the Beat Generation," in *The Portable Jack Kerouac*, ed. Ann Charters (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2007), 562.

[69] Jack Kerouac, "Lamb, No Lion," in *The Portable Jack Kerouac*, ed. Ann Charters (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2007), 563.

[70] Ibid., 563.

[71] Ibid., 563.

that only a dweller of the secular age, well-acquainted with the malaises of modernity, could make. Kerouac and his lot, just like Sal and Dean (*OTR*, 138), believe in God—they even saw themselves as mystics of a new age, modern versions of "the cloistered saints of Chartres and Clairvaux."[72] But as children of a secular age, lost amid modern immanence, hoping for transcendent experiences where none could be found, they were beat—as in "poor, down and out, deadbeat, on the bum, sad, sleeping in subways,"[73]—even as they deeply yearned for much more, to be "*beato*," "beatific," "to be in a state of beatitude, like St. Francis, trying to love all life, trying to be utterly sincere with everyone, practicing endurance, kindness, cultivating joy of heart."[74]

Sal, like Kerouac, was "waiting for God to show his face."[75] But is he a St. Francis of Assisi of and for the modern secular world? In some senses, yes: he renounces the comforts of college and associates himself with other beat characters: like Remi Boncouer, a trapped "little boy" who "was browbeaten and thrown out of one school after another" and who knew "no end to his loss" (*OTR*, 70); and Old Bull Lee, full of drugs and psychoanalysis and crackpot ideas; and a whole host of hobos and hitchhikers and persons of color few from Sal's background would associate; and finally Dean himself, the "HOLY GOOF" (*OTR*, 194) and son of a "wine alcoholic" with a childhood record of "stealing cars" and "gunning for girls" when he was not in reform schools (*OTR*, 37), and

---

[72] Kerouac, "About the Beat Generation," 562.

[73] Jack Kerouac, "*Beatific*: The Origins of the Beat Generation," in *The Portable Jack Kerouac*, ed. Ann Charters (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2007), 570.

[74] Kerouac, "Lamb, No Lion," 562-3.

[75] Ibid., 563.

who matched his tragic, messy childhood with a tragic, messy adulthood, but of whom Sal feels real kinship—"he reminded me of some long lost brother" (*OTR*, 7). But though Sal and Dean hunt for transformation, they make none of the concessions St. Francis was ready to make. They act like lost boys, unwilling to give up treating women like playthings, or getting deliriously drunk and high, or fetishizing the Others they meet on the road. It is hard not to concede the veracity of Carole Gottleib Vopat's re-evaluation of the novel, claiming that "Sal Paradise goes on the road to escape life rather than to find it, that he runs from the intimacy and responsibility of more demanding human relationships, and from a more demanding human relationship with himself."[76] Whether that is where Sal remains at the end of his pilgrimage, this much is true: he feels lost for much is his journeying because, like that figure on the warehouse facing Peter Martin, he is too often holding his head in pain—the pain of being lost in a world where being a church-going farmer man, no less a St. Francis of Assisi, no longer makes sense. At the very least, he has found company with whom to share in his sufferings.

* * *

There is a strain in the work of Fyodor Dostoevsky—the nineteenth-century Russian writer whose Christian existentialism had an outsized impact on the works of Kerouac, Percy, and McCarthy—that views ideas with great suspicion. Ideas are powerful things shaping those they influence. Ideas make Raskolnikov commit senseless murder in *Crime and Punishment*; in *Demons*, ideas possess Stavrogin, Verkhovensky, and their

---

[76] Carole Gottlieb Vopat, "Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*: A Re-evaluation," in *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Jack Kerouac's On the Road*, ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2007), 3-4.

whole cabal, leading them to chaos and disaster; and ideas drive Ivan mad in *The Brothers Karamazov*, ideas which become more important than the people he loves. In the epilogue of *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov dreams of an "unknown and unseen pestilence" spreading throughout Europe, "creatures" with "spirits, endowed with reason and will" that infect the masses so that "everyone became anxious, and no one understood anyone else" and "each thought the truth was contained in himself alone" and none could agree "on what to regard as evil, what as good" so that they began "destroying themselves" and one another.[77] Such is the influence which ideas can have on individuals and a society.

For Percy, whose debt to Dostoevsky certainly outweighs both Kerouac and McCarthy, few ideas have had such power over the culture and the self as those of René Descartes. In his mock self-help book, *Lost in the Cosmos*, Percy quips of the modernist philosopher's famous first principle, *cogito ergo sum*: "God, how sick is the self of three hundred years of that cogitation, a very bad French connection."[78] But his critique of its impact, running throughout *Love in the Ruins*, is dead serious. Descartes, following the breakdown of metaphysics après Francis Bacon, began "by doubting everything."[79] Now at a distance it is strange to consider that his approach was to attain certainty by the route of total uncertainty. The problem with this approach is that once one begins in doubt, it

---

[77] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, trans. Richard Pavear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York, NY: Vintage Classics, 2021), 576.

[78] Walker Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book* (New York, NY: Picador, 1983), 150.

[79] Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind*, 276.

becomes impossible to escape doubt. Descartes' solution to this problem had even greater impact on modern thought—a dualism separating *res cogitans*, "thinking substance, subjective experience, spirit, consciousness, that which man perceives as within" from *res extensa*, "extended substance, the objective world, matter, the physical body, plants and animals, stones and stars, the entire physical university everything that man perceives as outside his mind."[80] In this view, there are no presuppositions of what is, only a from-the-inside-out empiricism whereby all meaning becomes subjective. Thus, there is no meaning in the world itself, only the meaning I put onto it. Or, as Tom More puts it, "the dread chasm that has rent the soul of Western man ever since the famous philosopher Descartes ripped the body loose from the mind and turned the very soul into a ghost that haunts its own house" (*LIR*, 191).

Here is one origin story of Taylor's "buffered" self; Percy seeks to explore the fallout. As he notes in *Lost in the Cosmos*, "in a post-religious age, the only recourses of the self are self as transcendent and self as immanent."[81] In *Love in the Ruins*, this takes a more definable shape in Tom's pathological discovery: "More's syndrome, or: chronic angelism-bestialism that rives soul from body and sets it orbiting the great world as the spirit of abstraction" (*LIR*, 383). Tom begins to notice how some of his patients suffer from angelism, or "self as transcendent," succumbing to a kind of disembodied abstraction beyond the material world as a pure, detached mind, spirit, or soul (like angels), while others suffer from bestialism, or "self as immanent," rendering existence to

---

[80] Ibid., 277-8.

[81] Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos*, 122.

a merely material enterprise, and usually becoming entangled in hedonistic exploits or endless cycles of consumerist consumption (like beasts). Tom notes how some suffer from both ailments simultaneously, "extremely abstracted" and "inordinately lustful" all at once (*LIR*, 27). In order to identify and cure these soul maladies, Tom invents his "Qualitative-Quantitative Ontological Lapsometer" (*LIR*, 30), a play on the Latin *lapsus*, *-a*, *-um*, or "fall," which is Percy's fun way of drawing our attention to the Biblical and theological origin of this suffering. Much of the novel follows Tom as he notes the real impact of this invisible post-Cartesians schizophrenia in the characters he meets—even in himself.

Theologian and literary scholar Ralph C. Wood argues that Percy's fictional soul-sickness may have derived from a few sources, particularly Pascal's famed definition of the human as *ne ange, ne bête*, "neither angel, nor beast," but that it was likely inspired by a source to which Percy frequently turned: Søren Kierkegaard, the eighteenth-century Danish existentialist philosopher.[82] Like Hegel before him, he recognized our existence in a dialectic of polarities,[83] but, unlike Hegel, he did not view these polarities as great opposites and thus in need of some higher synthesis into a third quid, which would only create new polarities that would play out in an infinite regression of dialectics. For

---

[82] Ralph C. Wood, "Søren Kierkegaard, Walker Percy's *Love in the Ruins*, and Transparency Before God," in *Kierkegaard and Christian Faith*, ed. Paul Martens and C. Stephen Evans (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), 99-101.

[83] Wood identifies several that Percy borrows from the Dane philosopher: The Eternal/ The Temporal; The Infinite/The Finite; Possibility (Freedom)/Impossibility (Necessity); Self-consciousness/Un-self-consciousness; Soul/Body; Activity/Passivity; Subjectivity/ Objectivity; The Aesthetic/The Ethical; Inwardness/Outwardness. Wood, "Søren Kierkegaard, Walker Percy's *Love in the Ruins*, and Transparency Before God," 100.

Kierkegaard, these polarities find their one true synthesis in God alone.[84] From the perspective of Christianity, it was only in the Fall and under the weight of sin that this synthesis fell into disarray—thus Percy's addition of two new polarities that wreck havoc when they lack a synthesis: *angelism* and *bestialism*. Kierkegaard believed that true synthesis of these polarities in God would bring about salvation—quite literally the "salve," or healing that we long for in this fallen state.[85] Early in *Love in the Ruins*, Tom, in a nod to St. Augustine's notice of the two loves, recognizes how "the first thing a man remembers is longing and the last thing he is conscious of before death is exactly the same longing" (*LIR*, 21). Here is the modern explanation of the restless heart—a self split into two diametric forces, each leading a person away from the cure of their infinite longing.

Percy's "angelism-bestialism" is not just comedic fodder as Tom More documents what seems to be tearing his (and our) world apart; it is a useful way of thinking about how modern secularity shapes the self, leaving it feeling disoriented, lost, full of longing yet never fulfilled. Consider how Sal and Dean often fall into their own version of angelism-bestialism, caught, in their dialectical Beat energies, between being beaten down (beast) and being beatific (angel). Likewise, the man and the boy in *The Road* tend to operate in dialectical terms: the man often as "self as immanent" and the boy as "self as transcendent." Percy was onto something here—the way the ideas of Descartes,

---

[84] Percy quotes Kierkegaard's assertion of this (from his *Sickness Unto Death*): "the self can only become itself it is does so transparently before God." Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos*, 156.

[85] Ibid., 100-101.

bifurcating mind and body, were a consequence of *and* an aggravating agent in our secular age, exasperating feelings of lostness because it rendered the self into a ghost haunting its own house and the material world into an extension of subjective will and manipulation. As Max says to Tom: "Belief. Truth values. These are relative things" (*LIR*, 113).

* * *

McCarthy's *The Sunset Limited*, "a novel in dramatic form" published the same year as *The Road*, puts in dialogical form the predicament of finding meaning in this modern secular world. It consists entirely of a single conversation between two men: White, a suicidal professor who is full of nihilistic despair, and the man who saved him from death (and in their conversation continues to try to save him), Black, and ex-convict firm in his beliefs as a humble, if existentially searching, Christian. In language reminiscent of the man's own thoughts in *The Road* about the "frailty of everything," all "more fragile than he would have thought," the atheistic White laments the irretrievable loss of things he used to believe in, "Culture things, for instance. Books and music and art. Things like that":

White Those are the kinds of things that have value to me. They're the foundations of civilization. Or they used to have value. I suppose they dont have so much any more.

Black What happened to em?

White People stopped valuing them. I stopped valuing them. To a certain extent. I'm not sure I could tell you why. That world is largely gone. Soon it will

be wholly gone.

Black I aint sure I'm followin you, Professor.

White There's nothing to follow. It's all right. The things that I loved were very
frail. Very fragile. I didnt know that. I thought they were indestructible.
They werent.

Black And that's what sent you off the edge of the platform. It wasnt nothin
personal.

White It is personal. That's what an education does. It makes the world personal.[86]

Just a few lines later, White marks the point of no return: "Western Civilization finally went up in smoke at Dachau but I was too infatuated to see it. I see it now."[87] Of course, just as the 1960s cannot be entirely blamed for a shift in the culture, neither can the holocaust. What we have been exploring is that the shifts that led to these events were already in the works for centuries. People did not suddenly stop valuing in the things White valued; their value was being questioned, de-constructed, and eroded for a long time. White is just another character in our story who feels lost because the world he thought he knew has been fading before his eyes; in truth, the lights had been flickering long before he arrived on the scene.

In *The Road*, set in the post-apocalyptic world where the things White values are very nearly "wholly gone," only the man and the boy seem to stand in the way of their

---

[86] Cormac McCarthy, *The Sunset Limited: A Novel in Dramatic Form* (New York, NY: Vintage International, 2006), 25-6.

[87] Ibid., 27.

total oblivion. For White, there is no hope of being the last receptacle of "civilization;" it is better to simply let it go: "You give up the world line by line. Stoically. And then one day you realize that your courage is farcical. It doesn't mean anything."[88] That is how White feels in his world, our world—a world where belief in God can be nonsensical and belief in much of anything else untenable. In *The Road* then, McCarthy ups the stakes, because it is not just a world in which the horrors of Dachau have happened; rather, it is a world where desperation in the bleak aftermath of near extinction, matched with the erosion of modern security, has led to brutal savageries that pit human against human in a gruesome contest of survival. It is, in the telling of the man and the boy, a world of "good guys" and "bad guys," where the latter rule the roost, choosing rape and murder and cannibalism over their own extinction:

> …all stores of food had given out and murder was everywhere upon the land. The world soon to be largely populated by men who would eat your children in front of your eyes and the cities themselves held by the cores of blackened looters who tunneled among the ruins and crawled from the rubble white of tooth and eye carrying charred and anonymous tins of food in nylon nets like shoppers in the commissaries of hell (*TR*, 181).

The man and the boy encounter the "bad guys" on the road—wielding red scarves and spears and marching with the spoils of their evil deeds: slaves, "the goods of war," a dozen women, "some of them pregnant," and a "consort of catamites" in "dog collars," "yoked to each other" (*TR*, 92). In perhaps the most gruesome scene in the novel, the man and the boy, searching a home for any goods or food they might use, stumble upon a cold, damp cellar where naked, half-living human bodies are being harvested limb by

---

[88] Ibid., 131.

blackened limb, “an ungodly stench” filling the darkness, as each cry for help they cannot receive (*TR*, 110). It is Cartesian devaluation of the material world *ad absurdum*.

For the character of White in the *The Sunset Limited*, these horrors would constitute humanity showing its true colors:

> White The darker picture is always the correct one. When you read the history of the world you are reading a saga of bloodshed and greed and folly the import of which is impossible to ignore. And yet we imagine that the future will somehow be different. I’ve no idea why we are even still here but in all probability we will not be here much longer.[89]

It is a bleak pessimism, bleeding into nihilism, that is shared by one major figure in *The Road*: the wife of the man and the mother of the boy. She gives birth to the boy in the wake of world-ending catastrophe, but in an honest confrontation with the way of this new world, she and the man sit up for “hundreds” of nights “debating the pros and cons of self destruction with the earnestness of philosophers chained to a madhouse wall” (*TR*, 58), a clear allusion to Plato’s cave.[90] At a certain point in their journeys, the mother hits a limit, just as White hits his point of no return in *The Sunset Limited*. She sees no possible reason for continuing on in the world that has come to be:

> Sooner or later they will catch us and they will kill us. They will rape me. They’ll rape him. They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us and you won’t face it. You’d rather wait for it to happen. But I cant. I cant (*TR*, 56).

---

[89] Ibid., 112.

[90] The allusion matters. Is McCarthy subtly saying that nihilism is always a choice made in a darkness that only feels like reality?

Declaring death as her "new lover," the mother of the boy kills herself with "a flake of obsidian," (*TR*, 57-8), but not before dispensing a last bit of advice to her husband:

> I am done with my own whorish heart and I have been for a long time….My heart was ripped out of me the night he was born so dont ask for sorrow now. There is none. Maybe you'll be good at this. I doubt it, but who knows. The one thing I can tell you is that you wont survive for yourself….A person who had no one would be well advised to cobble together some passable ghost. Breathe it into being and coax it alone with words of love. Offer it each phantom crumb and shield it from harm with your body. As for me my only hope is for eternal nothingness and I hope it with all my heart (*TR*, 57).

The mother of the boy, with her "whorish heart" ripped out her because she must wait, in her telling, for the inevitable horrors to come, issues one of the great challenges to God put forth in our modern secular age: the needless suffering of children. It is the same (if intensified) claim made by Ivan Karamazov, who after rehearsing his own rebellion, tells his saintly brother: "It's not that I don't accept God, Alyosha, I just most respectfully return him the ticket."[91] It is the product of a secularized, world-denying, "beyond good and evil" view rendering the choice between freedom or fulfillment as the only possible option.[92] It thus ignores the possibility that fulfillment can be achieved *through* freedom—a particular exercise of freedom. The mother of the boy slightly nods toward this alternative with her advice to the man, but even then she sees it as a game of make-believe—a mind-forged god made up to engineer meaning in a world where none remains. As for her, like White, like Ivan Karamazov, she cannot summon the will even

---

[91] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pavear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), 245.

[92] Perhaps the best demonstration of this opinion can be found in Ivan's parable of "The Grand Inquisitor," which decries the standards Christ set for humanity (alongside the freedom God gave us in this world), favoring instead a more realistic utilitarianism.

for that. Her only hope is for nothingness[93] in the absence of faith—faith in anything at all.

In her introduction to *A Memoir of Mary Ann*, the story of the Dominican Sisters who cared for a young girl, Mary Ann, who lived with and died from a torturous cancer, Flannery O'Connor notes the source and destiny of this brand of nihilism:

> One of the tendencies of our age is to use the suffering of children to discredit the goodness of God, and once you have discredited his goodness, you are done with him….Busy cutting down human imperfection, they are making headway also on the raw material of good. Ivan Karamazov cannot believe, as long as one child is in torment; Camus' hero cannot accept the divinity of Christ, because of the massacre of the innocents. In this popular pity, we mark our gain in sensibility and our loss in vision. If other ages felt less, they saw more, even though they saw with the blind, prophetical, unsentimental eye of acceptance, which is to say, of faith. In the absence of faith now, we govern by tenderness. It is a tenderness which, long since cut off from the person of Christ, is wrapped in theory. When tenderness is detached from the source of tenderness, its logical outcome is terror. It ends in forced-labor camps and in the fumes of the gas chamber.[94]

Is the nihilism of the mother—who laments that she did not kill her son when she had the chance (*TR*, 56)—all that different from the murderous cannibals who have made her life "a horror film" (*TR*, 55)? Both live in a post-atheistic mindset of loss where God no longer exists or cares, no longer anchors goodness or meaning in any real sense. A Nietzschean will is their new freedom, nihilism their new hope. It is not how the man or the boy view the world or their place in it—just as it is not the view of Black or Alyosha Karamazov—but neither do they have many answers in the face of such a brutal attack on

---

[93] White says exactly the same thing at the end of *The Sunset Limited*: "Now there is only the hope of nothingness. I cling to that hope." McCarthy, *The Sunset Limited*, 141.

[94] Flannery O'Connor, "Introduction to *A Memoir of Mary Ann*," in *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970), 226-7.

their fragile beliefs. With the bulwarks of belief diminished, the mind supreme over the material world, the self the sole organizing principle of anything like hope, the man faces the void with a brutal honesty: "On this road there are no godspoke men. They are gone and I am left and they have taken with them the world" (*TR*, 32).

Who Are the Mad Ones?

We have observed the lostness of Sal and Dean and Sal's belief that America is some kind of modern-day Laodicea—seemingly strong on the outside, but deadened from within; we have noted how Tom More feels like there is no life inside of him, and that his fragmented world seems on the verge of some great catastrophe; and we have seen the results of that catastrophe, the man and the boy pilgrimaging in a lost world where meaning is stricken from reality, where life is not just leaving them, but leaving all things. It has left them like men holding their heads in pain, like schizophrenic creatures disembodied and entombed all at one, and like the last good guys up against an army of bad guys, with nihilistic despair always knocking at the door. Here is the wasteland of modern secularity—a decay that seems to deepen in each generation, the point of no return fast approaching. And still Sal, Tom, and the man and boy keep on going, keep on searching to retrieve the value of old things lost, keep on trying to remember the names and order of things that people once clutched like treasure.

Dostoevsky was right that ideas can be like a plague that arrives unseen and unnoticed until their effects take hold and the sickness ravages body and mind. So what

happens when you notice the illness and seek the cure? In perhaps the most famous passage of *On the Road*, young Sal remarks that:

> …the only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, that burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars and in the middle you see the blue centerlight pop and everybody goes "Awww!" (*OTR*, 5-6).

But who are the mad ones? Is it Sal and his misfits or those who cast them as misfit? Is it Tom More refusing to be cured of his soul sickness or those who thinks he requires a cure? It is the man and the boy who stubbornly cling to values of a world now vanished or those who have made nihilism their only hope? Why is it that the protagonists of these novels come to resemble the only sane ones in a world full of maniacs? But as Chesterton noted, "curing a madman is not arguing with a philosopher; it is casting out a devil."[95] To various degrees, each is trying to do just that.

Love in the Ruins braves casting the scene in old, cosmic terms. Fr. Ronaldo Smith, Tom's parish priest, falls silent in the middle of a homily during the Mass, only to tell his congregation that "the channels are jammed and the word is not getting through" before walking back into the sacristy, still in his chasuble, and muttering to himself (*LIR*, 183-4). He winds up in the care of Max Gottlieb, Tom's neobehaviorist friend, and speaks honestly about what is causing his disturbance: "They're jamming the air waves" (*LIR*, 184). Tom tries to help Max explain, but he is still lost:

> "They?" asks Max. "Who are they?"
> "They've won and we've lost," says Father Smith.
> "Who are they, Father"

---

[95] Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 17.

> "The principalities and powers."
> "Principalities and powers, hm," says Max, cocking his head attentively. Light glances from the planes of his temple. "You are speaking of two of the hierarchies of devils, are you not?"
> The eyes of the psychiatrists and behaviorists sparkle with sympathetic interest.
> "Yes," says Father Smith. "Their tactic has prevailed."
> "You are speaking of devils now, Father?" asks Max.
> "That is correct."
> "Now what tactic, as you call it, has prevailed?"
> "Death."
> "Death?"
> "Yes. Death is winning, life is losing."
> "Ah, you mean the wars and the crime and violence and so on?"
> "Not only that. I mean the living too."
> "The living? Do you mean the living are dead?"
> "Yes."
> "How can that be, Father? How can the living be dead?"
> "I mean the souls, of course."
> "You mean their souls are dead," says Max with the liveliest of sympathy.
> "Yes, says Father Smith tonelessly. "I am surrounded by the corpses of souls. We live in a city of the dead" (*LIR*, 185-6).

To a certain degree, Percy is again channelling his inner-Kierkegaard here in describing modern despair as a "sickness in the self," a "sickness unto death."[96] But with a mystical clarity, Father Smith wants to say that it is more than just a philosophical or sociological phenomenon; there is something deeply spiritual involved, forces that dwelt and battled in a once-enchanted world.

This is precisely how twentieth-century Catholic theologian Henri de Lubac, S.J. framed the scene in his own treatment of atheistic humanism in *Le Drame de l'humanisme athée*:

> What is in the foreground—in reality, if not always in appearance—is no longer a historical, metaphysical, political or social problem. It is a *spiritual* problem. It is

---

[96] Søren Kierkegaard, *Sickness Unto Death*, trans. Alastair Hannay (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1989), 51.

> the human problem as a whole. Today it is not one of the bases or one of the consequences of Christianity that is exposed to attack: the stroke is aimed directly at the heart.[97]

For de Lubac, there is nothing less than spiritual battle involved, which is what Father Smith is trying, in vain, to express. Death is winning. Life is losing. Charles M. Stang sees this binary at work in *The Road*, an echo of that ancient Christian text, *The Didache*, which begins with the two roads that are open to any traveler: "there are two ways, one of life and one of death, and there is a great difference between them."[98] Sal is trying to find the way of life, and so too is Tom as well as the boy and the man. But first they must pass through the way of death, which, according to Father Smith, is the way that is winning most pilgrims.

How does Sal find life amidst death? How does Tom unjam the channels and exorcise the demons that possess him? How do the man and the boy reconstruct the wisdom fading away into oblivion, wet pulp from a charred library? De Lubac, speaking of the spirit, the heart, lends us a small clue. In *The Sunset Limited*, Black admits the one does not need to read the Bible to know its wisdom:

> 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 this 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 of heart. A whole man wouldnt need it at all.[99]

---

[97] Henri de Lubac, S.J., *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, trans. Edith M. Riley, Anne Englund Nash, and Mark Sebanc (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1995), 113.

[98] Charles M. Stang, "Ash and Breath: Christ on 'The Road,' *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, Winter/Spring 2011, https://bulletin.hds.harvard.edu/ash-and-breath-christ-on-the-road/.

[99] McCarthy, *The Sunset Limited*, 67-8.

We see glimpses of this logic play out in *The Road*, where "along the blacktop in the gunmetal light, shuffling through the ash," the man and the boy are "each the other's world entire" (*TR*, 6). And holding onto something pure, something good—what they called "the fire," (*TR*, 83)—they slowly discover the Spirit of God alive within their hearts—that root, that source, of all that has disappeared from the earth. As de Lubac knew:

> Christians have not been promised that they will always be in the majority. (Rather the reverse.) Nor that they will always seem the strongest and that men will never be conquered by another ideal than theirs. But, whatever happens, Christianity will never have any real efficacy, it will never have any real existence or make any real conquests, except by the strength of its own spirit, *by the spirit of charity*.[100]

[100] de Lubac, S.J., *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, 129.

Chapter 2: Purgatorio

Being On the Road

Kerouac, Percy, and McCarthy wanted to bring their readers into those feelings of lostness that permeate life in modern secularity, but they did not wish to stop there; their faiths compelled a response. And so their characters, unwilling to settle for life in the ruins, move. They move because they are looking for something more, or attempt to retrieve something lost, or simply because their survival depends upon it. But their pilgrimages feel more like an exercise in purgation, and so these writers sought to reveal the struggle of responding to hope in our times. Their hope never vanishes, even as the conditions grow bleaker. According to American fiction writer David Foster Wallace, this is the obligation of any serious artist today:

> ….we'd probably most of us agree that these are dark times, and stupid ones, but do we need fiction that does nothing but dramatize how dark and stupid everything is? In dark times, the definition of good art would seem to be art that locates and applies CPR to those elements of what's human and magical that still live and glow despite the times' darkness. Really good fiction could have as dark a worldview as it wished, but it'd find a way both to depict this world and to illuminate the possibilities for being alive and human in it.[101]

In her own manner, Flannery O'Connor said the same thing about the vocation of the Catholic writer, who, "in so far as he has the mind of the Church, will feel life from the

---

[101] David Foster Wallace, "An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace," interview by Larry McCaffery, in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. Stephen J. Burn (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 28.

standpoint of the central Christian mystery; that it has, for all its horror, been found by God to be worthy dying for."[102]

To be sure, just as Kerouac, Percy, and McCarthy were shaped by the stories of modern secularity, so too were they shaped by the ways the culture adapted in the wake of these epochal shifts, these movements in Taylor's "social imaginary." How Sal, Tom, and the boy and the man traverse their respective roads is conditioned by the cultural responses that inform both the challenges and the possibilities they face in seeking hope in their dislocation. This is Taylor's "imagined place of the sacred" embedded in the "social imaginary," which has shifted over time through the forces of secularity.[103] In the "ancien régime" (pre-1800), when religion was enmeshed in all aspects of the social structure, connection to the sacred "entailed belonging to a church."[104] But, as secularization shaped the culture, this old order gave way to an "Age of Mobilization" (1800-1960); religion became less enmeshed within social structures, even as it maintained a sense of importance to it, particularly as an expression of the nation-state. Thus emerged the era of denominations, of joining "the church of your choice."[105] Notice how these shifts closely follow Delbanco's trajectory from God to Nation. Here is the

---

[102] Flannery O'Connor, "The Church and the Fiction Writer," in *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970), 146.

[103] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 486.

[104] Ibid., 486.

[105] Ibid., 450

birth of the American civil religion, with its references to "the divine Design"[106]—one faith among many churches.[107]

As of 1960, Taylor believes we are now in a new age—the "Age of Authenticity." In this age, the sacred is no longer confined to a Church or State, but has become an expression of my own individuality. This is the beginning of a "spiritual but not religious" anti-conformity, where "the spiritual as such is no longer intrinsically related to society."[108] Such are the consequences of the "buffered self," which, aroused by Romantic, self-expressive sensibilities, but cut off from a meaningful thick and sacralizing community and fueled by post-war consumerism, means that I can be anything and everything. Taylor, quoting a New Age speaker, reveals its shallower trends: "Only accept what rings true to your own inner Self."[109] Here is Delbanco's "all and nothing at the same time" self. But Taylor is not convinced that all is lost; there is a rage against the modernist conformity that is healthy, even salvific. Our age emphasizes spirituality precisely because of its "profound dissatisfaction with a life encased entirely in the immanent order."[110] And it prizes the seeker because it fundamentally believes that

---

[106] Ibid., 458.

[107] Though, as Taylor himself notes, certain "churches" fell outside the margins of acceptability. This was especially true of Catholicism in the United States at the time, which was associated with the immigrant class and bore the weight of anti-Roman prejudices that pre-dated the Age of Mobilization.

[108] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 490.

[109] Ibid., 489.

[110] Ibid., 506.

there must be more to "empty, flat" life, which feels "devoid of higher purpose."[111] That strikes true to the lostness that permeates the experiences of Sal, Tom, and the man and the boy. Taylor sees ours as an age of the "quest," and thus marked by a return of the "pilgrimage," a shift we see reflected in the way Kerouac, Percy, and McCarthy all chose to structure their novels.

As each novel reveals, some of this spiritual questing takes on a blatant subjectivism, a lamentable version of "Sheilaism" that locates transcendent wisdom in the self alone,[112] emboldening strains of a cultural narcissism where, in the view of social theorist Christopher Lasch, "the world appears as a mirror of the self."[113] But, as Taylor notes, and our novelists seem to agree, that is not the whole story. Plenty of modern quests also return seekers back to the pews, where they find institutions offering counter-balances to the more self-absorbed tendencies of our present culture: "the new framework has a strong individualist component, but this will not necessarily mean that the content will be individuating."[114] The fuller picture is that ours is an age of pluralism: a pluralism of beliefs from which to choose *and* a pluralism of how one practices those beliefs.[115]

---

[111] Ibid., 506.

[112] Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008), 221.

[113] Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991), 46.

[114] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 516.

[115] As Taylor notes concerning how Catholic moral teaching often runs against the grain of modern thought and belief: "What Vatican rule-makers and secularist ideologies unite in not being able to see, is that there are more ways of being a Catholic Christian than either have yet imagined." Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 504.

This kind of pluralism, unimaginable in earlier epochs, challenges belief—those "fragilizing" effects of secularity. But it also empowers believers to more actively embrace their beliefs and commitments.[116]

Perhaps, in part, this explains why ours is an age of seeking. As American sociologist Robert Wuthnow argues, the spirituality of seeking "emphasizes *negotiation*": "rather than knowing the territory, people explore new spiritual vistas," and this encourages individuals "to negotiate among complex and confusing meanings of spirituality."[117] In an age of unprecedented pluralism, identity and self-definition must be discovered, understood, and reinforced in ways that were simply unnecessary before—thus all the "searching and selecting."[118] This is distinct from a spirituality of "dwelling" which "emphasizes *habituation*," marking out more "settled times" because the sense of the sacred feels fixed, determined.[119] Wuthnow claims that a healthy spirituality holds these opposites in tension, echoing the wisdom of the Rule of Saint Benedict that "dwelling and seeking are both part of what it means to be human."[120] There is something

---

[116] This is the flip side of a loss of an all-encompassing belief tied so firmly to a social structure: belief now becomes an authenticating choice, a choice that must be frequently re-affirmed in the face of the pluralism of other options, including the option not to believe at all.

[117] Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 4.

[118] Ibid., 10.

[119] Ibid., 4.

[120] Ibid., 6. Consider how the Catholic Church embraced this mentality in the modern era by referring to itself as "the pilgrim church" in the Second Vatican Council. Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, November 24, 1964, 48, 50, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

at the heart of belief that is always reconciling its many internal contradictions—a reality we will see as Sal, Tom, and the man and the boy traverse unsettled terrain, yet always looking to find a place to rest their heads. Here is yet another feature of our secular age: never feeling at home, but always looking for a home.

Even if one is operating within a particular belief system, holding onto the tension of seeking and dwelling is rarely easy. It is often our tendency to choose one way over another, or more likely, to have the choice made for us by the cultural stories shaping our beliefs and values.

Timothy Radcliffe, OP, the English Catholic priest and former master of the Dominican friars, has captured how this dynamic operates in the post-Vatican II Catholic Church. He identifies two major trends: the more centripetal, dwelling "Communion" Catholics and the more centrifugal, seeking "Kingdom" Catholics. "Kingdom" Catholics, who identify the church as "the pilgrimage of the People of God," tend to be more "outward-looking," seeking the work of the Holy Spirit operating on the peripheries of the human experience; they stress the Incarnation and welcome resistance to rigid conformities that border on fundamentalism.[121] "Communion" Catholics, on the other hand, tend to desire a communion with "the inner life of the Church," and are thus more inward-looking, seeking at the core of traditional Catholic ritual and teaching a sense of identity; they stress the Crucifixion, for in it they see the suffering that comes with resisting destructive forces of modern libertarianism and relativism.[122] As Radcliffe reminds us, the tension

---

[121] Timothy Radcliffe, O.P., *What is the Point of Being a Christian?* (London, UK: Continuum, 2005), 167-175.

[122] Ibid., 167-175.

between these camps is rooted in familiar post-Enlightenment divisions, which cast some as inheritors of enlightened reason, while deriding others as old, stubbornly backward, and illiberal.[123] But, just as Cartesian dualism rendered the soul a ghost haunting its own house, failures of imagination to see certain progress as beneficial while also defending core principles have wrecked havoc not just on civil life but on ecclesial unity. That tragic irony is that neither side feels satisfied; each feels a sense of disappointment, alienation, and rootlessness. Rather than recognize this common feeling of loss as place to reconnect, to rediscover the lost tension between and outward-looking and an inward-looking spirituality, each tragically blames the other for their fate.[124]

These dynamics play out both within the novels of Kerouac, Percy, and McCarthy and also between them. And this is good. In our secular, pluralistic age, there are many paths to the authenticity we all desire, many ways to balance the modern demands of ordinary flourishing and those timeless calls of faith toward piety, renunciation, and transformation—that healthy tension which Taylor calls "maximum demand."[125] That is the struggle of Sal, Tom and the man and the boy—each in their own way seeking and dwelling, looking outward and inward, jostling between acceptance and resistance, affirmation and denial, fear and faith. As we follow them in their pilgrimages, we too

---

[123] Ibid., 165.

[124] Ibid., 168-173.

[125] That is, "how to define our highest spiritual or moral aspirations for human beings, while showing a path to the transformation involved which doesn't crush, mutilate or deny what is essential to our humanity." Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 639-640.

ought to experience these same conflicts, yet, like them, always striving to find the tensions that keep us moving toward hope.

The Pearl of Great Price

Early into *On the Road*, Sal hears Dean describing himself as "*hungry*," "*starving*," and longing to "*eat right now*" (*OTR*, 8). There is lovely double connotation here: Dean is no doubt speaking as the famished young buck looking to fill his empty belly, but for Sal there is another meaning—the desire to eat well, to eat "right" so as to be satisfied in a way he has been unable to find thus far. These dual purposes seem to be the foundation of his journeys with Dean. Just a few lines later he hopes, "somewhere along the line I knew there'd be girls, visions, everything; somewhere along the line the pearl would be handed to me" (*OTR*, 8). It is no accident that Kerouac names his protagonist Sal (as in Salvator, "Savior") Paradise. He seeks nothing less than salvation—the pearl he yearns to find on the road.

What is salvation to Sal? Like Kerouac, who gave him an immigrant's name,[126] it is the desire for acceptance in a land where he is always an outsider looking in. It is, as Ann Charters argues, a realization of a kind of American dream "of unlimited freedom," personified by that restless wanderer Dean.[127] It is true companionship among his Beat misfits and a home for one who woefully sings "home I'll never be" (*OTR*, 255). It is that all-elusive IT—a kind of felt truth in euphoric, otherworldly experience. And it is authenticity: individuality known, accepted, and truly and beautifully expressed. Sal, that late-American Romantic, is the very embodiment of a Thoreauvian seeker who cannot

---

[126] Like Kerouac, the French-speaking Catholic, it has a double outsider status: foreign in race and religion.

[127] Ann Charters, "Introduction," in Jack Kerouac's *On The Road* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1991), xxi.

dwell until he has sucked the marrow out of life: "[Dean] and I saw the whole country like an oyster for us to open; and the pearl was there, the pearl was there" (*OTR*, 138).

What's Your Road, Man?

Kerouac surrounds Sal with a vast pluralism of literary, musical, historical, and political figures, book, movie, and song titles, a slew of choice drugs and alcohols, peoples of diverse ethnic backgrounds, and finally, a broad taste of religious influences. Sal cannot get enough—he feasts on the complexities of modern American life, gobbling down his Nietzsche with Dostoevsky, his Spengler with Kafka, his Saroyan with Proust. Sal takes in a Beethoven opera one day and rocks to Slim Gaillard the next; he goes to see *Sullivan's Travels*, reads *Le Grand Meaulnes*, and finishes it off with Chicken Jazz'n Gumbo; he quotes from the Christian Bible, but also speaks of the Torah, the Tao, the Prince of Dharma, and the Mayan Codices; he refers to DiMaggio and Stan Getz in one breath and Kinsey and St. Bonaventura in the next; he interacts with hobos and homosexuals, Methodist ministers and Jesuit college students, Mexican-American sweethearts and Black musicians. Everything is an adventure; everything is a chance to learn and grow and find out who he is and where he is going.

And, if this were not enough, Sal weaves a whole world of mythology out of his journeys, re-enchanting his world with spirits, ghosts, prophets, saints, angels, devils, and visions, not to mention the Virgin Mother and Jesus, a Shrouded Traveler and Doctor Sax,[128] Mind Essence and the Word. Sal, like Kerouac, borrows from the pluralism of

---

[128] A fantasy figure from Kerouac's childhood who features prominently in the 1959 novel which bears his name.

influences to tell his own story, to find and fulfill his own sense of identity. This is Taylor's "expressive individualism" personified as Sal works "to become his own invention,"[129] a pre-cursor to an Age of Authenticity just around the corner.

Though this is self-creation, there are many collaborators. Sal is not only interactive with the pluralistic culture around him, but also with those characters who bring it to him, people like Carlo Marx, Old Bull Lee, and Rollo Greb.[130] They are his co-misfits, a rag-tag gang of lost ones living on the peripheries of postwar America, not yet spoiled by an emergent "affluence and consumerism."[131] They are not play-acting their beatness; these are not David Brooks' "Bobos," comfortable posers with a taste for "higher selfishness."[132] Not at all. Like Sal, they are poor writers seeking in sex, jazz, and drugs a chance to reconnect with the divine, and who then gather with other down-and-out seekers to talk about and understand their experiences. Like their real-life counterparts, they were "more than literary innovators or bohemian rebels;" they were also "wandering monks and mystical seers."[133]

None compare to the energy, the raw intensity, the outright mania of Dean, who is Huck Finn to Sal's Tom Sawyer—a reckless adventurer who speaks in jazz staccatos, radiates triumphant optimism, and tests the limits of every freedom he is granted. Perhaps

---

[129] Leland, *Why Kerouac Matters*, 83.

[130] It is well-documented that Kerouac based these and other characters directly off of real-life figures like Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs, and Alan Ansen.

[131] Menand, "Drive, He Wrote."

[132] David Brooks, *Bobos in Paradise* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 117-124.

[133] Stephen R. Prothero, "On the Holy Road: The Beat Movement as Spiritual Protest," *Harvard Theological Review*, 84:2 (1992), 220.

this is why Dean so often evades definition: throughout the novel, Sal compares Dean to W.C. Fields, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Groucho Marx, and mad Captain Ahab. Not exactly like meeting like. And yet, they each represent something inherent in the American psyche: the sober with the silly, the jokester with the madman, the dreamer with the juggler. For Sal, they combine into something profound: "a new kind of American saint" (*OTR*, 38). And this is why Sal cannot get enough of Dean, why he is his chief travel companion in a quest to find the pearl of great price.

In his initial journeys with Dean, Sal is a student at the feet of the master. Dean strikes him as something different from his other companions:

> …all my New York friends were in the negative, nightmare position of putting down society and giving their tired bookish or political or psychoanalytical reasons, but Dean just raced in society, eager for bread and love; he didn't care one way or the other, "so long's I get that lil ole gal with that lil sumpin down there tween her legs, boy," and "so long's we can *eat*, son, y'ear me? I'm *hungry*, I'm *starving*, let's *eat right now!*"—and off we'd rush to *eat*, whereof, as saith Ecclesiastes, "It is your portion under the sun" (*OTR*, 8).

As I suggest above, Dean and Sal ultimately hear different things in this statement: one material, the stuff of sex and hunger, and the other spiritual, tied to desire and longing. But in this moment, they combine into a *carpe diem* urge that imagines the world as a gift and life as an ephemeral blessing either to be used or squandered. Dean so encapsulates free-spirited optimism—"a wild yea-saying overburst of American joy" (*OTR*, 7)—that Sal keeps missing him on the road. When they finally unite, Dean delivers. Their talk is ecstatic—about God, America, home: "I never dreamed Dean would become a mystic" (*OTR*, 121). Their adventures are mad—parties, jazz, booze, drugs, sex, and stealing cars: "everything happened" (*OTR*, 126). The anticipation of a mystical breakthrough seems

immanent: “everything was about to arrive—the moment when you know all and everything is decided forever” (*OTR*, 128). There is no doubt in their minds: this is “our pilgrimage,” a chance to follow “the holy road” (*OTR*, 139).

But there is a shadow cast beneath these bright lights—lost fathers, the threats of jail and poverty, and the abdication of responsibility haunt their journeys. As Sal watches Dean recklessly swinging between wives, even as children enter into the balance, and notes the catalog of abuses, including physical abuse, he starts to see Dean for who he is:

> Only a guy whose spent five years in jail can go to such maniacal helpless extremes; beseeching at the portals of the soft source, mad with a completely physical realization of the origins of life-bliss; blindly seeking to return the way he came….Prison is where you promise yourself the right to live. Dean had never seen his mother’s face. Every new girl, every new wife, every new child was an addition to his bleak impoverishment. Where was his father?—old Dean Moriarty the Tinsmith, riding freights, working as a scullion in the railroad cookshacks, stumbling, down-crashing in wino alley night, expiring on coal piles, dropping his yellowed teeth one by one in the gutters of the West (*OTR*, 132).

Sal is right that Dean is like an addict, trying to plug a hole left by his wreck of a childhood and its enduring trauma. But even here Sal is all too ready to excuse the cost of Dean’s misadventures: “Dean had every right to die the sweet deaths of complete love of his Marylou. I didn’t want to interfere, I just wanted to follow” (*OTR*, 132). But those on the receiving end of Dean’s cruelty know the fuller truth: “You see what a bastard he is? said Marylou. Dean will leave you out in the cold anytime it’s in his interest” (*OTR*, 170). Sal would learn that soon enough: “I lost faith in him that year” (*OTR*, 171).

The HOLY GOOF

As Tim Hunt, a scholar of American literature, astutely notes, if anyone grows from this pilgrimage, it is Sal, not Dean: “Dean, at times the guide, at times the goal, at

times the obstacle, gives Sal a focus for his search and gives [*On the Road*] much of its energy, but Dean does not grow in the way Sal does."[134] Dean is like a victim of Tom More's angelism-bestialism, which is perhaps why he is a saint and visionary one moment, and "a burning shuddering frightful Angel" (*OTR*, 259) in another. And so he is either lost in purely sensual exploits, no matter the cost, or he transcends the demands of earthly dwelling like a Nietzschean superman "beyond good and evil, blame and expectation"[135]: "bitterness, recriminations, advice, morality, sadness—everything was behind him, and ahead of him was the ragged and ecstatic joy of pure being" (*OTR*, 195). It does not go unnoticed by more responsible parties. Dean faces the brutal confrontation with his puerile negligence in a public shaming by Galatea Dunkle, the wife of their friend Ed, who calls him out for a host of "foolish" and "awful" antics: "You have absolutely no regard for anybody but yourself and your damned kicks" (*OTR*, 193-4). Galatea, who does not see "a care" in Dean's heart, not even for the women and children he has wronged, laments that "it never occurs to you that life is serious and there are people trying to make something decent out of it instead of just goofing all the time" (*OTR*, 194).

But when Galatea charges Dean with a particular harsh crime—"I don't think there's a care in your heart,"—Sal cries foul, at least internally: "this was not true; I knew better and I could have told them all" (*OTR*, 194). To Sal, Dean is nothing short of a holy fool: "Dean, by virtue of his enormous series of sins, was becoming the Idiot, the

---

[134] Tim Hunt, *Kerouac's Crooked Road: The Development of Fiction* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010), 23.

[135] Vopat, "Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*: A Re-evaluation," 6.

Imbecile, the Saint of the lot" (*OTR*, 194). The saintliness of the holy fool, or the "HOLY GOOF" (*OTR*, 194) in Sal's words, is a deeply Dostoevskian notion,[136] itself founded on an old Russian Orthodox belief that saw great sinners as vessels for great redemption, thus enjoying a special closeness to the divine heart. Dostoevsky held a particular fascination in his fiction for the sinner over the sinned, and here Kerouac (via Sal) leans into that view with Dean. Having been reamed out for his sins, Dean becomes unusually silent, "ragged and broken and idiotic, right under the lightbulbs, his bony mad face covered with sweat and throbbing veins, saying, Yes, yes, yes, as though tremendous revelations were pouring into him all the time now" and indeed Sal becomes "convinced they were" (*OTR*, 195). Sal looks at his companion and sees a kind of vision: "He was BEAT—the root, the soul of Beatific" (*OTR*, 195).

There is great spiritual wisdom here: a recognition that Dean, humbled by his profound brokenness, can confront his own lostness in order to be found, that he can look into the depths of his beatness in order to gain a true beatific vision. Like stray Augustine, he might take up and read and weep beautiful tears; like proud Ignatius, he might find the depths of his authenticity in the confusion of being loved and forgiven despite his many sins. "No one is ever holy without suffering," declares Cordelia in Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*.[137] Her brother, Sebastian, a contemporaneous fictional model of the holy fool, lives his final days caught in the borderlands between sin and salvation. Or

---

[136] Kerouac shows his hand by calling Dean "the Idiot," a clear allusion to one of Dostoevsky's most famous holy fools, Prince Myshkin, the titular character in *The Idiot*.

[137] Evelyn Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited: The Sacred and Profane Memories of Captain Charles Ryder* (London, UK: Penguin Books, 1962), 294.

perhaps Dean would heed the wisdom of real-life American holy fool Thomas Merton[138] who found new life waiting for him on the other side of a hedonistic wasteland:

> Whoever you are, the land to which God has brought you is not like the land of Egypt from which from you came out. You can no longer live here as you lived there. Your old life and your former ways are crucified now, and you must not seek to live anymore for your own gratification, but give up your own judgement into the hands of a wise director, and sacrifice your pleasures and comforts for the love of God and give the money you no longer spend on those things, to the poor.[139]

It may also be that Sal who, like Kerouac, had come under the spell of Buddhism, saw the four noble truths come alive in Dean's great failure—that all existence *is* suffering, a suffering born of desire and ignorance, but which can cease with the proper path.[140] Is there a great *metanoia* in Dean, an embrace of the life of a holy fool, the cessation of suffering through the eight-fold path? Hardly. It is Sal who grows; it is Sal who loves the unlovable in Dean and who can see him as a child of God and a teacher of great spiritual truth. One can hear Dostoevsky's elder Zosima here:

> Brothers, do not be afraid of men's sin, love man also in his sin, for this likeness of God's love is the height of love on earth…If you love each thing, you will perceive the mystery of God in things.[141]

---

[138] Merton and Kerouac travelled in similar circles, having studied English literature at Columbia University just a few years apart. Later, their shared interest in Eastern philosophies, particularly Buddhism, deepened their Catholic convictions.

[139] Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain: An Autobiography of Faith* (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace, 1998), 254.

[140] Here we can see the pluralism of beliefs that Kerouac (via Sal) richly embraces: Dostoevsky's Russian Orthodoxy meeting Kerouac's Roman Catholicism meeting newfound Buddhist interest.

[141] Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 319.

What opens up Sal, here as in other places, is his compassion—he *suffers with* Dean, and in this way finds the holy road, perceiving "the mystery of God in things" along the way.

Pray for Deliverance

Confessions are a binding force in the friendship between Sal and Dean. Leland notes how "their role as friends and pilgrims is to suffer, confess and forgive."[142] The dynamic can be seen in a small scene halfway through the novel when, during a pitstop, Dean makes a remark about Sal's age that upsets the latter out of proportion to the comment. Over their pitstop meal, Sal bursts with atypical anger, making his displeasure known. But it's Dean's response that is so strange—the typically starving Dean leaves his hot-roast-beef sandwich and storms off in tears. He admits as much to Sal, who thinks Dean was just cursing him: "No, man, no, man, you're all completely wrong. If you want to know, well…I was crying" (*OTR*, 214). At first, Sal refuses to believe it:

> "Ah hell, you never cry."
> "You say that? Why do think I don't cry?"
> "You don't die enough to cry." Every one of these things I said was a knife at myself. Everything I had ever secretly held against my brother was coming out: how ugly I was and what filth I was discovering at the depths of my own impure psychologies.
> Dean was shaking his head. "No, man, I was crying" (*OTR*, 214).

There is truth in Sal's words—Dean does not seem to "die enough," that is, mortify himself in the pursuit of transformation, in humble submission to something that transcends base needs. Having lost the balance he had before when Dean was a HOLY GOOF in need of love instead of a public shaming, Sal finds himself again in an honest assessment of his own failings. *He* is the one who is now mortified, as though a knife

---

[142] Leland, *Why Kerouac Matters*, 53.

were cutting out the ugly filth that kept him from seeing Dean as his brother. As he believes and accepts Dean's confession, Sal too confesses:

> Ah, man, Dean, I'm sorry, I never acted this way before with you. Well, now you know me. You know I don't have close relationships with anybody any more—I don't know what to do with these things. I hold things in my hand like pieces of crap and don't know where to put it down. Let's forget it (*OTR*, 214).

"Power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9 NRSV), wrote St. Paul, a wisdom that seems to radiate in this scene as brothers become vulnerable to one another and thus find a sense of their own authenticity. But where Dean so often falls short in striking the balance amid that tension between savoring ordinary human flourishing *and* being willing to "die enough" in order to be transformed, Sal seeks it with his whole heart. The truth of his own failures seems to bring Sal into something beyond his suffering, not to mention his reliance on and reverence of Dean. One day, walking around San Francisco after being abandoned by Dean and Marylou, Sal has an ecstatic vision of his ancestral mother—"my strange Dickensian mother" from a centuries-old epoch (*OTR*, 172). Sal hears her disown him before blasting him with a litany of hurt:

> You are no good, inclined to drunkenness and routs and final disgraceful robbery of my fruits of my 'umble labors in the hashery. Oh son! did you not ever go to your knees and pray for deliverance for all your sins and scoundrel's acts? Lost boy! Depart! Do not haunt my soul; I have done well forgetting you (*OTR*, 172-3).

Rather than fill him with dread and shame, the vision fills Sal with wonder and awe, like he has been immersed in some "bright Mind Essence" and thus on the road to somewhere new. He describes the ecstasy as one "I always wanted":

> …the complete step across chronological time into the timeless shadows, and wonderment in the bleakness of the mortal realm, and the sensation of death

> kicking at my heels to move on, with a phantom dogging its own heels, and myself hurling to a plank where all angels dove off and flew into the holy void of uncreated emptiness (*OTR*, 173).

This moment leaves Sal feeling "sweet, swinging bliss, like a big short of heroin in the mainline vein; like a gulp of wine late in the afternoon" (*OTR*, 173). He *is* delivered: from fears of death, from selfish concerns and a lack of empathy, from bleak loneliness and lostness in mid-century America. And yet it is just a moment: "I was too young to know what had happened" (*OTR*, 173).

Even still, it is moments like these that keep Sal moving. Kerouac seems to be channeling (and translating) that hallowed wisdom of another Massachusetts saunterer who railed against so-called American civilization, Henry David Thoreau:

> We should go forth on the shortest walk, perchance, in the spirit of undying adventure, never to return,—prepared to send back our embalmed hearts only as relics to our desolate kingdoms. If you are ready to leave father and mother, and brother and sister, and wife and child and friends, never to see them again,—if you have paid your debts, and made your will, and settled all your affairs, and are a free man, then you are ready for a walk.[143]

Now the anthem is: you are ready for the road. Kerouac is trying to say that now, more than ever, these times call us to move or die. And that to pilgrimage, to be a seeker, means putting it all out there, risking everything, holding no bars to the discomfort of facing one's failures and frailty to be transformed. Not longer after Sal's vision of his "strange Dickensian mother," he and Dean cross the Colorado-Utah border, and behold: "I saw God in the sky in the form of huge gold sunburning clouds above the desert the seemed to point a finger at me and say, Pass here and go on, you're on the road to

---

[143] Henry David Thoreau, "Walking," in *The Portable Thoreau*, ed. Jeffrey S. Cramer (New York, NY: Penguin Classics, 2012), 558.

heaven" (*OTR*, 181). Pass and *go on*. To stay still is to risk becoming as smug and lukewarm as those "wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked" Laodiceans and their latter-day postwar American counterparts. To move, to seek, to quest, is to chance deliverance from sin and suffering—the pearl: a taste of heaven on earth.

* * *

To Be Onto Something

In *The Moviegoer*, Walker Percy's National Book Award-winning novel preceding *Love in the Ruins* by a decade, Binx Bolling, the wayfaring thirty-year-old stock broker and lapsed Catholic lost in the "merde" of midcentury American living, decides to embark on a quest, what he calls "the search":

> The search is what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life…To become aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair.[144]

On the surface, this "search" out of despair in order to be "onto something," out of slumber and into waking—a theme reflected in the four-day pilgrimage of Tom More—seems to have much in common with the "holy road" seeking of Sal Paradise. In one sense, it does—in Wuthnow's emphasis of a spirituality of negotiation, or in that most general sense of Taylor's authenticity, that is, seeking to reclaim a lost enchantment, a lost sense of transcendence that feels harder to achieve in the secular age. But philosophically, Kerouac and Percy's view of "the search" may well have been happening on different planets.

---

[144] Walker Percy, *The Moviegoer* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1998), 13.

Kerouac, the cradle Catholic who wildly embraced pluralism in all its forms, is a model of Taylor's depiction of the self-expressive Romantic. His American precursors were Emerson—"I hope in these days we have heard the last of conformity and consistency"[145]—and his fellow anti-conformists Thoreau and Walt Whitman. He embraced a decidedly "Kingdom Catholic" view of the world, hovering on the margins both in what and how he believed *and* in whom he sought companionship. All of this comes out quite clearly in *On the Road*, not least because it is such an autobiographical novel. Percy, the convert to Catholicism, was a seeker too, but he was seeking a dwelling, a home to rest his weary head. Faulkner was his American literary ancestor[146], but he owed at least as much to Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard, existentialist thinkers who attempted to reveal just how desperately secular modernity needed pre-modern Christian beliefs and values. He lived and wrote in a more "Communion Catholic" mode, which is why the lost heroes of his novels are not classic American rebels of the Transcendentalist bent (think Twain's Huck Finn or Hawthorne's Hester Prynne), but ultimately conform in the end to the practices and teachings of the Roman Catholic Church.

The Center Did Not Hold

---

[145] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in *Nature and Selected Essays*, ed. Larzer Ziff (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2003), 125.

[146] Percy seems to answer the call Faulkner issued in his speech accepting the Nobel Prize of Literature: "There are no longer problems of the spirit. There is only one question: When will I be blown up? Because of this, the young man or woman writing today has forgotten the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself which alone can make good writing because only that is worth writing about, worth the agony and the sweat." William Faulkner, "Banquet Speech," December 10, 1950, https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1949/faulkner/speech/.

It would be far too simplistic to call Kerouac the optimist to Percy's sardonic pessimist—both were too sophisticated for such neat characterization. But Percy, doctor of body and soul, had a diagnostician's skill when peering into "post-modern" and "post-Christian" America, and his assessment was less than auspicious:

> The present age is demented. It is possessed by a sense of dislocation, a loss of personal identity, an alternating sentimentality and rage which, in an individual patient could be characterized as dementia.[147]

Still, Percy considered America "the last and best hope of the world" not because it avoided contamination of "the age of the theorist-consumer," but because it still managed to preserve "a certain innocence and freedom."[148] And this means that in the secular wasteland there is still hope of discovery: "in the present age the survivor of theory and consumption becomes a wayfarer in the desert, like St. Anthony; which is to say, open to signs."[149]

If Kerouac celebrates the pluralism of signs, each pointing in new, unexpected directions, Percy, who sets *Love in the Ruins* in an indiscriminate future, where theory and consumption tie public life up into a Gordian knot of intractable extremes, sees pluralism as an inherent danger precisely because it distracts us from recovery of a true

---

[147] Percy, "Why Are You Catholic?", 309.

[148] Ibid., 308-310.

[149] Ibid., 314.

telos.[150] The novel seems to ask: how is pluralism possible when culture contends with such different understandings of what constitutes the good? With eerie prescience, Percy satirically imagines an America where "Americans have turned against each; race against race, right against left, believer against heathen" (*LIR*, 17). The two major political parties, morphed into extreme versions of themselves, pit über conservative "Knotheads" against the "Left Party," a shortened version of "LEFTPAPASANE," mocked by the Right as meaning "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, The Pill, Atheism, Pot, Anti-Pollution, Sex, Abortion Now, Euthanasia" (*LIR*, 18). These extremes have divided the country into "Left states and Knothead states, Left towns and Knothead towns…Left networks and Knothead networks, Left movies and Knothead movies" (*LIR*, 18).

Even the Catholic Church has succumbed to the pressures of fragmentation, splitting into three distinct camps: the "American Catholic Church," headquartered in Cicero, Illinois, "which emphasizes property rights and the integrity of neighborhoods, retained the old Latin mass, and plays *The Star-Spangled Banner* at elevation;" the "Dutch schismatics who believe in relevance but not God," comprised of former priests and nuns; and finally the "Roman Catholic remnant, a tiny scattered flock with no place to go" (*OTR*, 5-6). There is more than just humor at play here. The political philosopher

---

[150] McIntyre offers a helpful foundation to this in his critique of "emotivism," a post-Cartesian subjectivist assessment of morality without teleological aims: "Given this deep cultural agreement, it is unsurprising that the politics of modern societies oscillate between a freedom which is nothing but a lack of regulation of individual behavior and forms of collectivist control designed only to limit the anarchy of self-interest." MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 35.

James Schall, S.J. sees Percy, here as in other novels, paying literary homage to Flannery O'Connor's "apparently exaggerated, if not deranged, southern characters":

> Our culture is itself so distorted that we need to be shocked by what appears to us to be abnormal to see just how abnormal our chosen everyday life has become. The only way we can see the disorder of our souls is to stretch them out, make them bigger than life, even make them to seem like monsters.[151]

The race wars, the urban decay, the psychiatric takeover of all aspects of life, and the ludicrously self-serving antics of the novel's central character, all point to a satirization that is meant to compel us to seek as Tom seeks, to be thrown out of our everydayness, our malaise, and to see and experience what he sees and experiences in order to question, as he does, whether our post-modern, post-Christian existence allows us to pursue and find happiness.

As Long As You Feel Good

Where Kerouac seems to relish allowing Sal to encounter a host of philosophical schools, religious beliefs, and cultural temperaments, all in pursuit of a higher good that transcends these pluralistic particulars, Percy calls into question whether, in our current broken state, we are capable of discerning between goods, or worse, if we can even know what *is* good anymore. The lack of a true center of gravity, no unifying system of beliefs and values, no coherent narrative and ritual organized around a Church or Nation is already deeply problematic. But for Percy, this problem is compounded when considering

---

[151] James V. Schall, S.J., "On Dealing with Man," in *A Political Companion to Walker Percy*, ed. Peter Augustine Lawler and Brian Smith (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2013), 80.

that the self alone constitutes what is true or good—a buffered, schizophrenic self that places a "dread chasm between body and mind," thus sundering the soul from the human being (*LIR*, 90). So if we are "in a deranged age—more deranged than usual, because despite great scientific and technological advances, man has not the faintest idea of who he is and what he is doing,"[152] then how can we possibly find our own way out of this mess? Over the course of *Love in the Ruins*, Percy wants to say: we cannot, at least not alone.

In comedic fashion, Percy does this by showing what happens when we try to fly by our own lights, caught up in the unquestioned everydayness of our "deranged age." Tom discovers More's syndrome, or angelism-bestialism by observing certain traits in his psychiatric patients and then measuring them with the help of his lapsometer to see what is going on because "there still persists in the medical profession the quaint superstition that only that which is visible is real," and so "uncaused terror cannot exist" (*LIR*, 29). In Patient #1, P. T. Bledsoe, a middle-aged conservative executive who suffers from rage, headaches, and paranoia that Blacks, Communists, and Jews are after him, Tom recommends a radical change of scenery, a move to Australia, were Bledsoe has copious land:

> …most people nowadays are possessed, harboring as they do all manner of demonic hatred and terrors and lusts and envies, that principalities and powers are nearly everywhere victorious, and that therefore a doctor's first duty to his patient is to help him find breathing room and so keep him from going crazy. If P. T. can't stand blacks and Bildebergers, my experience is that there is not time enough to get him over it even if I could (*LIR*, 31).

---

[152] Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos*, 76.

In Patient #2, Ted Tennis, a graduate student with a penchant for abstraction that leads to "free-floating terror, identity crisis, and sexual impotence" (*LIR*, 32), his problem is one of angelism. He has "so abstracted himself from himself and from the world around him" that he only sees "things as theories and himself as a shadow," so that he cannot appreciate ordinary life, including intimate relations with his wife: "he orbits the earth and himself" (*LIR*, 34). To ground him again, Tom prescribes Ted an "ordeal"—an adventure of survivable terrors over a single long walk.

Patient #3 and Patient #4 are Charley Parker, a successful golf pro and middle-aged "blond stud pony of a man," who has "every reason to be happy," but is not—"I mean like this morning I looked at at myself in the mirror and I said, Charley, who in the hell are you? What does it all mean?"—and his son, Chuck an MIT dropout who has taken to the swamps with his girlfriend, their lovechild, and cannabis to live in "perfect freedom and peace," and convince themselves that they have found the "good life" and God: "don't you see that I am God, you are God, that prothonotary warbler is God" (*LIR*, 38-50)? Though Chuck thinks he has liberated himself from the quiet despair haunting his father, it does not take Tom long to see through his blindness: each is shot through with the effects of angelism-bestialism.

Each of these patients reveals the consequences of either failing to see life as more than mere immanence, transcendence, or some unbalanced combination of the two. But Tom and his ex-wife, Doris, best exemplify angelism and bestialism in the extreme. Together, they suffer an unbearable loss: the death of their beloved daughter, Samantha, to cancer. While Tom falls into depression and slips into bestial escapism, Doris moves in

the opposite direction, succumbing to a disembodied spiritualism through books.[153] Just before leaving Tom, she declares, with Gnostic pride: "I'm going in search of myself" (*LIR*, 65). Political theorist and Percy scholar Brian Smith wryly notes how Doris' "search" is like "a failed mirror" of Binx's search in *The Moviegoer*—for though both see life around (and in) them as "dead" (*LIR*, 65), Doris flees the messiness of our incarnate life while Binx plunges into it.[154] With all her talk of being "true to ourselves," being "a searcher" and "pilgrim," of "the real me," all while rendering love as "spiritual" and the search as more important than the "truth" (*LIR*, 66-71), Percy seems to use Doris as a prime example that not all seekers are created equal; there is a terrific cost in being a pilgrim of authenticity if your idea of authenticity is disconnected from reality, lost in a Cartesian mind-loop that looks at the material world with a nihilistic disdain. In this way, the grieving Doris has much in common with the grieving, despairing mother of the boy in *The Road*. Both are quick to reject the goodness of material reality *and* the goodness of the Creator of that reality: "That's a loving God you have there, she told me toward the end, when the neuroblastoma had pushed one eye out and around the nosebridge so that

---

[153] Here again is Dostoevsky's deep influence on Percy showing: ideas change people, possessing them for better or worse, especially when the individuals imbibing them are vulnerable, as Doris is. Like Dostoevsky, Percy seems to suggest that one way to escape the possession of destructive ideas is to be possessed by the "right" ideas—like Sonya in *Crime and Punishment* or Aloysha in *The Brothers Karamazov*. The truth already possesses Tom; his journey is becoming humble before that truth.

[154] Brian A. Smith, *Walker Percy and the Politics of the Wayfarer* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017), 71.

Samantha looked like a two-eyed Picasso profile" (*LIR*, 72).[155] But it is not a surprise to Tom that she cannot make sense of his Catholic beliefs. In his own quest to seek God, Tom begins to grasp Doris' angelism and the manner in which it robs her imagination:

> What she didn't understand, she being spiritual and seeing religion as spirit, was that it took religion to save me from the spirit world, from orbiting the earth like Lucifer and the angels, that it took nothing less than touching the thread off the misty interstates and eating Christ himself to make me mortal man again and let me inhabit my own flesh and love her in the morning (*LIR*, 254).

But for much of the novel, Tom suffers from his own detachment from reality—an ugly bestialism that renders him a drunk and lecher: "Doris went spiritual and I became disorderly. She took the high road and I took the low" (*LIR*, 72). He initially tries to confine his new-found lusts to the marriage bed, but once her angelism takes hold and she leaves, both his drinking and his sexual urges become unhinged. When not downing cheap whiskey or cocktails of warm Tang mixed with vodka, duck eggs, and Tabasco, Tom carries on affairs with young women, his loves in the ruins. His preferred (and surely charming) rendezvous is an abandoned, dilapidated Howard Johnsons motel, where he treats his ladies more like playmates than persons.[156] Percy adds something to this lost-in-immanence—an ugly (if often comic) pride in science morphing into scientism as Tom becomes convinced that he can cure the root despair in others through diagnostic skill and his saving lapsometer. Tom not only believes that his wits will save

---

[155] Recall the words of Flannery O'Connor from quotes in the last chapter: "In the absence of faith now, we govern by tenderness. It is a tenderness which, long since cut off from the person of Christ, is wrapped in theory. When tenderness is detached from the source of tenderness, its logical outcome is terror."

[156] Tom's lusty affairs share much in common with a rampant misogyny littering the pages of *On the Road*, with Dean as its chief offender.

the world, but will win him money and fame as well. It is only in time that he realizes how faulty his logic has become. Thinking back on his namesake, he asks: "Why can't I follow More's example, love myself less, God and my fellowman more, and leave whiskey and women alone?" (*LIR*, 23)

Principalities and Powers

But Percy was not just interested in societal or philosophical disrepair—as a believer, he felt that the deeper problem was spiritual, that our fragmented society and divided self, covered in false post-Enlightenment pride, left us vulnerable to evil forces. As Tom sees it, "these are bad times" because "principalities and powers are everywhere victorious" as "wickedness flourishes in high places" (*LIR*, 5). Just as Kerouac re-enchants Sal's world with mythical figures and other-worldly visions, Percy incarnates the forces of good and evil battling for the souls of humanity. It may take the reader a while to notice how Art Immelmann, who arrives amidst a lightning storm and appears "like a drug salesman" who seems like a man out of the past—"an odd-looking fellow, curiously old-fashioned" (*LIR*, 165-6)—is none another than Mephistopheles, if a rather comic version of the devilish character. But Immelmann provides more than comedic relief; he is also Percy's reminder that though secularity has rendered Satan into a pre-modern myth, princes of evil still exist, and their strategy has not changed. Immelmann gets Tom to sign a contract—his pact with the devil—using an old playbook, what Ignatius of Loyola called "snares" meant to "bind" men in "chains": "First they are to tempt them to covet riches…that they may the more easily attain the empty honors of this

world, and then come to overwhelming pride."[157] Riches, honors, and pride possess Tom as his scientism blossoms into outright heresy, giving Art room to declare his malevolent mission:

> …in the same moment one becomes victorious in science one becomes victorious in love. And all for the good of mankind! Science to help all men and a happy joyous love to help women. We are speaking here of happiness, joy, music, spontaneity, you understand. Fortunately we have put behind us such unhappy things as pure versus impure love, sin versus virtue, and so forth. This love has its counterpart in scientific knowledge: it is neutral morally, abstractive and godlike— (*LIR*, 213-4).

But Immelmann only suggests the godlike nature of Tom's work; it is Tom who chooses to believe and act on those suggestions. As Immelmann readily admits: "we never never 'do' anything to anybody. We only help people do what they want to do. We facilitate social interaction in order to isolate factors" (*LIR*, 363). With almost blatant honesty, Immelmann declares his ultimate intentions, with echoes of an all-too-familiar narcissism, a seeking that stops with the self: "we're dedicated to the freedom of the individual to choose his own destiny and develop his own potential" (*LIR*, 363). Percy shows his cards: human flourishing defined as personal happiness alone—"Didn't God put us here to be happy? Isn't happiness better than unhappiness?" (*LIR*, 364)—is deeply problematic, a utilitarian trap that can lead to individual and societal choices that

---

[157] Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*, trans. Louis J. Puhl, S.J. (Chicago, IL: Loyola University Press, 1951), § 142.

undermine humanity's teleological aim within a Christian context[158]; seeking happiness without a higher good to humble and order that aim is nothing short of suicidal. Tom, who has suffered tragic loss in the death of his daughter and then the departure and death of his wife, is vulnerable to Immelmann's slick attacks, in no small part because they sound healthy and normal in his context—his modern, secular culture has conditioned him to desire precisely this kind of escapism and narcissistic self-fulfillment.

But Percy provides small, if significant, rebellions. The Love Clinic, a human sexuality research lab ironically anesthetized of anything like love, while yielding plenty of comedy, also points to a purely materialist, transactional view of sex—all biology, no mystery; all nature, no grace. The "Gerry Rehab" treats cranky, misanthropic, malcontent, and lonely senior citizens via the Skinner box, using electrodes to condition the elderly into a submissive bliss. Those who successfully respond to the treatment happily return to senior centers; the unsuccessful get shipped off to "Happy Isles" to be euthanized in a state of painless bliss. In both cases, the novel seems to question if sex and dying without suffering is still a human experience. Without God, without a suffering Jesus, without the martyrdom of St. Thomas More, how do we make sense of unhappiness, of the pains that come with being human in this world? That question reaches a fever pitch in a battle within the hellaciously named "Pit."

---

[158] Richard Leonard, S.J., noting a correlation between the contemporary chase for happiness, which has become a cottage "industry," and a significant rise in depression and suicides, wonders if Christian parents should stop saying that they want their kids to be happy and articulate, instead "I want my children to be faithful, hopeful, loving, just and good," virtues which "not always lead to happiness," but to something better still: "joy." Richard Leonard, S.J., "Happiness Has Become an Industry That is Selling All of Us a Lie," *The Tablet*, September 30, 2017, 9.

Tom describes "The Pit" as a "relic of medieval disputations," a monthly "clinical-pathological conference" with the feel of a "bullring" as hundreds of "students, professors, nurses and staff members" look on (*LIR*, 198). There he faces off against behaviorist Dr. Buddy Brown as they try to understand the curious case of Mr. Ives, an elderly man who, according to Buddy, suffers from "antisocial behavior;" he will not walk or talk. Buddy, who thinks Mr. Ives has suffered a stroke, pins him down as a prime candidate for Happy Isles. But Tom resists; thus the public dispute in The Pit. For Buddy, the problem comes down to suffering, which he views as a needless infringement on happiness.[159] When Tom argues for a discharge, Buddy snaps back: "To suffer another thirty years…To cause other people suffering?" (*LIR*, 223) Tom is undeterred; better to suffer with the chance of life than be euthanized. Once again, Tom plays the part of the anachronistic man stuck in the modern world, mocked by his colleagues for thinking there is more to reality than meets the eye. "How is my metaphysical ontology? Or is it my ontological metaphysics?" Buddy snickers (*LIR*, 226).

It is no small irony that Tom uses his lapsometer to conclude that Buddy's diagnosis and prescription are faulty, that Mr. Ives' "penial selfhood, as well as other cerebral centers, is intact" (*LIR*, 228). Slipping Mr. Ives medicinal help, the old man finally begins to talk again, discussing his passion in linguistics and a desire to solve an ancient riddle in that field. Those in The Pit soon learn why Mr. Ives rebelled:

---

[159] Buddy and Art Immelmann thus share a common point of view, which is no mistake of Percy's. It is also noteworthy that Percy and Kerouac share a similar view about suffering, that in certain contexts it contains a salvific value. McCarthy shares in this deeply Catholic perspective.

> "Doctor," says Mr. Ives, hunkering down in his chair, monkey eyes glittering, "how would you like it if during the most critical time in your experiments with the Skinner box that won you the Nobel Prize, you had been pestered without letup by a bunch of chickenshit Ohioans? Let's play shuffleboard, let's play granddaddy golf, Guys and Gals à go-go. Let's jump in our Airstream trailers and drive two hundred miles to Key West to meet more Ohioans and once we get there talk about—our Airstream trailers? Those fellows wouldn't let me alone (*LIR*, 231-2).

Fed up with this less-than-stimulating, less-than-humanizing distraction in his emeritus years, Mr. Ives, the linguistics connoisseur, went into silent rebellion:

> "Why have you neither walked a step nor uttered a word during the past month?"
>
> Mr. Ives scratches his head and squints up the slope. "Well sir, I'll tell you." He lays on the cracker style a bit much to suit me. "There is only one kind of response to those who would control your responses by throwing you in a Skinner box."
>
> "And what would that be?" asks the Director sourly, knowing the answer.
>
> "To refuse to respond at all" (*LIR*, 234).

There is something heroic in Mr. Ives' non-cooperation, a quiet martyrdom that clenches at his human dignity while keeping the ghost within alive.[160] The scene awakens something in Tom, who attempts to stop the devilish Art Immelmann from handing out his lapsometers to anyone who will take them as a means of sowing chaos. Tom, like a modern Prometheus, tries to stomp out flames that ignited long ago, but he is still onto

---

[160] There is an implicit critique of the Baconian, Cartesian project to master nature, including human nature, into willful submission. Mr. Ives' silence gives voice to Lewis' keen observation that human nature "will be the last part of Nature to surrender to Man." Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 59.

something—the subtle lie behind the way Max, Art, and Buddy look at the world, a world that has turned the effects of sin into a sickness ready to be therapeutically cured.[161]

* * *

The Way of Life and the Way of Death

Like Kerouac and Percy, the milieu guiding McCarthy's *The Road* is a seeking-toward-authenticity, a move-or-die momentum manifested in its most literal sense. In early drafts, the novel's working title was *The Grail*,[162] connoting both its pilgrimage and messianic overtones. Pieces of this grail motif survive. In an early scene in the novel, after a horrifying encounter with a "bad guy," the man looks down at his sleeping boy, "stroking his pale and tangles hair" and declares to himself: "golden chalice, good to house a god" (*TR*, 75). But the title that McCarthy eventually selected allows for an expands the notion of a holy pilgrimage. As Stang observes, the road, or way (*hodos*) was one of the most important symbols in early Christian communities.[163] In the Acts of the Apostles, Christians were known as "any who belonged to the Way" (Acts 9:2 NRSV). Jesus meets people on the road, as he does on the way to Emmaus in the Gospel of Luke so that his disciples say: "were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road" (Lk 24:32 NRSV)? And in the Gospel of John, when Thomas asks Jesus

---

[161] This move "from a hermeneutic of sin, evil, or spiritual misdirection, to one of sickness" is a troubling one for Taylor—a therapeutic urge of our secular age that pathologizes what would have been considered appropriate responses to vice (e.g. shame) in past epochs in a way that ultimately threatens the dignity of the person. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 620.

[162] Josephs, "The Quest for God in *The Road*," 134.

[163] Stang, "Ash and Breath."

where he is going, begging to understand "how can we know the way?" Jesus responds: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (Jn 14:5-6 NRSV). Each of these aspects of the road—as a community, an encounter, and salvation—play out in the novel.

Kerouac and Percy express particular emphases in their pilgrimages—Sal a kind of "Kingdom" Catholic seeker embracing pluralism at the margins in order to discover and live into self-authenticating experiences; Tom More the "Communion" Catholic stuck in a fragmentation of self and society, but searching for a re-humanizing redemption. But McCarthy eludes this binary. To borrow a middle-road term from sociologist Jerome Baggett, the boy and the man are more like "indwelt seekers"—grounded in their beliefs, but always trying to make sense of them according to unfolding experiences.[164] Though the boy and the man strive to be "good guys" in a bleak wasteland filled with "bad guys," much of the drama of the novel surrounds a lengthy dialogue about what exactly that means for situations that arise in their journeying. They live by a basic "good guy" code —"we dont eat people" (*TR*, 285). But while the man deals with the world as it is, stopping at nothing to protect his son—"My job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God. I will kill anyone who touches you" (*TR*, 77)—the boy prophetically lives according to the world as it could be if humans rediscovered their humanity again.[165] Yet, though McCarthy fills the pages with sacred

---

[164] Jerome P. Baggett, *Sense of the Faithful: How American Catholic Live Their Faith* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009), 67.

[165] "Their humanity" as conceived by the Western Christian tradition—Taylor's "maximum demand" that celebrates human flourishing, but always with a balance toward transformation oriented toward the transcendent.

language and imagery, enchanting a world shorn of both material *and* meaning, an apophatic sensibility permeates the story.[166]

Fear and Trembling

McCarthy moves beyond the battle lines drawn up by Kerouac and Percy. The world is no longer brimming with the modern pluralism that excites a questing Sal while fracturing the America of Tom More. Instead, it is a totally deconstructed wasteland, only slightly haunted by the vestiges of old regimes. The boy, born into this new world, is thus without whatever learning lay waiting in ruins of the charred library his father finds. He knows no church, no scriptures, no sense of the metaphysical order even as McCarthy endows him with a preternatural proclivity to speak and act as if he did.[167] As the unforgiving will-to-power survivalism of the bad guys equates human beings with bodies for breeding and bread—the theoretical endpoints of a converging utilitarianism and materialism—the boy always sees the deeper truth of reality. Part of that no doubt comes from his father, who has taught the boy that they will never resort to such desperation, even if they are starving. But part of it also derives from within the boy—a living internal *Logos* that grants him hope.[168] If the bad guys live according to the belief that God is dead and therefore "everything is permitted,"[169] "carrying charred and anonymous tins of

---

[166] L. Lamar Nisly, ""The Sacred Idiom Shorn of its Referent": An Apophatic Reading of *The Road*," *Christianity and Literature* 68, no 2 (2019), 312.

[167] Josephs, "The Quest for God in *The Road*," 138.

[168] It is interesting to note that while the man often speaks of "luck," the boy embodies something more mysterious—a genuine hope founded on faith.

[169] Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 69.

food in nylon nets like shoppers in the commissaries of hell" (*TR*, 183), the boy and the man carry something else:

> We're going to be okay, aren't we Papa?
> Yes. We are.
> And nothing bad is going to happen to us.
> That's right.
> Because we're carrying the fire.
> Yes. Because we're carrying the fire (*TR*, 83).

The fire that the man and boy carry is like an arch-symbol in their story—it is the sacred fire of truth, goodness, and beauty, connoting ancient biblical symbols of God (Gen 15:17; Ex 3:2; Ex 19:18; Deut 4:24; Deut 9:3; Acts 2:3; Heb 12:29); it also signifies more secular fires: knowledge, of freedom, of life and hope—a Promethean possession.

But, even as the man places his trust in this hope, he is not without doubts. He is never driven to the nihilistic despair of the boy's mother who announces just before her death,"I'd have taken him with me if it werent for you" (*TR*, 56); still he does venture into the darkness of this desolate new world with fear and trembling. There is something of an Abrahamic quality to the man, and nowhere is that parallel move evident than in the dark moments when he contemplates if it is best to sacrifice the boy on the altar of mercy in a merciless, blood-thirsting world.[170] After their gruesomely horrifying encounter with a basement full of harvested bodies, an unholy lair of the bad guys, the man tries to teach the boy how to kill himself should he ever get caught by the roving cannibals:

> If they find you you are going to have to do it. Do you understand? Shh. No crying. Do you hear me? You know how to do it. You put it in your mouth and

---

[170] Manuel Broncano, *Religion in Cormac McCarthy's Fiction: Apocryphal Borderlands* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014), 128-131.

> point it up. Do it quick and hard. Do you understand? Stop crying. Do you understand (*TR*, 113)?

But though the boy says he does understand, the man looks at him and knows that that is just not true: "All he saw was terror. He took the gun away from him. No you dont, he said" (*TR*, 113). Terror engulfs the man as he worries what will happen if they are caught. He considers what he would do:

> Can you do it? When the time comes? When the time comes there will be no time. Now is the time. Curse God and die. What if it doesnt fire? It has to fire. What if it doesnt fire? Could you crush that beloved skull with a rock? Is there such a being within you of which you know nothing? Can there be? Hold him in your arms. Just so. The soul is quick. Pull him toward you. Kiss him. Quickly (*TR*, 114).

American literary scholar Michael Lynn Crews notes that in an early draft of the *The Road*, McCarthy makes a fragmentary, parenthetical note to the Christian existentialist philosopher who so inspired Percy: "(Kierkegaard: Abraham and Isaac)."[171] The Danish philosopher's famous treatise on the Binding of Isaac (Gen 22: 1-19), *Fear and Trembling*, meditates on the "paradox" of faith that the man finds himself at such moments, a move away from a "teleological" ethic whose subjectivism has turned the world upside down:

> Now the story of Abraham contains a teleological suspension of the ethical. There has been no lack of keen heads and thorough scholars who have found analogies to it. Their wisdom amounts to the pretty proposition that basically everything is the same. If one will look a little closer, I doubt very much whether one will find a single analogy in the whole world except a later one that proves nothing if it is certain that Abraham represents faith and that it is properly expressed in him, whose life is not only the most paradoxical that can be thought but so paradoxical that it cannot be thought at all. Abraham acts by virtue of the absurd, for the absurd is precisely that he as the single individual is higher than the universal.

---

[171] Crews, *Books Are Made of Books*, 249.

> This paradox cannot be mediated, for as soon as Abraham sets out to do that he must admit that he was in a state of temptation, and if that is so, he never gets to the point of sacrificing Isaac, or if he has sacrificed Isaac he must then repentantly return to the universal. He gets Isaac back again by virtue of the absurd.[172]

So too does the man get the boy "back again by virtue of the absurd," by placing his faith in something more than the sum of his (admittedly well-grounded) fears. He must suspend the Hobbesian ethics that rule a world given over to "bloodcults" who in brutish, fight-to-the-death, battles "must have all consumed one another" (*TR*, 16). But in doing so, the man takes a leap of faith, making a claim through faith, hope, and love rather than by his subjective fears. Just as the Binding of Isaac suspends ancient bloodcults to usher in a new promise, the man's conquest by love similarly heralds a new sacredness of the human.[173] The man keeps this faith to the last.

Even when he succumbs to death, leaving the boy to the wilds in a radical act of hope, his mind does not change: "I cant hold my dead son in my arms. I thought I could but I cant" (*TR*, 279).

The Word of God

McCarthy scholar Edwin Arnold notes that "the world is a wild place in McCarthy's fiction, and its God a wild and often savage and mostly unknowable God, but a God whose presence constantly beckons."[174] Arnold wrote that assessment over a

---

[172] Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, ed. C. Stephens Evans and Sylvia Walsh, trans. Sylvia Walsh (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 49.

[173] Crews, *Books Are Made of Books*, 249. Crews notes that below the reference to Kierkegaard, McCarthy wrote "Ancient bloodcults," thus linking the two worlds in an ingenious fashion.

[174] Edwin T. Arnold, "Blood and Grace: The Fiction of Cormac McCarthy," *Commonweal*, November 4, 1994, 14.

decade before *The Road* was published, and yet it rings particularly true for McCarthy' later novel, where the world is as brutish as the one he wrote about in *Blood Meridian*, and where the characters have seemingly little connection to the divine, save a few words of outrage for God's absence (*TR*, 11), and yet the sacred is everywhere—in biblical allusions, in sacramental imagery, and in the debates the man and boy have about faith and freedom in their "barren, silent, godless" world (*TR*, 4). As such, McCarthy channels a trend in post-modern theology that seeks to move beyond the very rationalistic approaches to God that pushed the divine away. Contemporary Catholic theologian David Tracy is of help here:

> The incomprehensible God returns to fragment, even shatter, the *theos*, at once grounding and domesticated, in modernity's onto-*theo*-logy. The incomprehensible God returns the demand that modernity disown once and for all its overly ambitious claims to understand the reality of God. The incomprehensible God, allied to the hidden God, returns to demand attention.[175]

Rather than a focus on the noetic *logos*, Tracy, echoing de Lubac's call for the return of "the spirit of charity," focuses on the "God who is love," an excessive love that moves us toward "the God beyond rationality," and into the apophatic God that is once again beyond us, beyond our finite universe, and beyond our knowing.[176]

Tracy, of course, owes this approach to early Church Fathers like Pseudo-Dionysius and Augustine, though even the scholastic tradition sought to preserve this old wisdom. In one of his earliest questions on God, Aquinas argued that "we cannot know

---

[175] David Tracy, "Approaching the Christian Understanding of God," in *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspective*, Second Edition, ed. Francis Schüsslter Fiorenza and John P. Galvin (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 126.

[176] Ibid., 127.

what God is, only what he is not."[177] It also evokes a great Christian spiritual tradition best exemplified in the works of St. John of the Cross, whose "dark nights" became the basis of his own apophatic poetic expression:

> Where have You hidden,
> Beloved, and left me moaning?[178]

But though John of the Cross experienced this hidden God, no longer sensed or felt, he learned to keep faith even in trying circumstances and the feeling of abandonment:

> …seek Him in faith and love, without desire for the satisfaction, taste, or understanding of any other thing than what you ought to know Faith and love are like a blind man's guides. They will lead you along a path unknown to you, to the place where God is hidden.[179]

These words, like Tracy's, like Kierkegaard's "teleological suspension of the ethical," all find expression in the pilgrimage of the man and the boy who must pick up the pieces after modern secularity has left them not only rudderless but terrified. They must grope in the dark like John of the Cross' blind man, and yet, when the man trusts in his love that sees beyond a loveless world, when the boy voices a hope and faith that sees beyond the hopeless and faithlessness of the road where "there are no godspoke men" (*TR*, 32), they feel again the sacredness of their own hearts, the sense of their own humanity, and even

---

[177] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, introduction to question 3. I am quoting here from Brian Davies and Brian Leftow, eds., *Summa Theologiae: Questions on God* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 28.

[178] John of the Cross, "The Spiritual Canticle," in *The Collected Works of St John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanagh, O.C.D. and Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1979), 410.

[179] Ibid., 420.

the humanity of others by merit of their own virtue.[180] They are what remain of the "discalced" men of old, "pilgrims of some common order" (*TR*, 24), "like mendicant friars sent forth to find their keep" (*TR*, 126). Like John of the Cross, member of a mendicant, discalced order, they seek out the God hidden beneath the ash. For the man, finding the hidden is never a far journey: "He knew only that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke (*TR*, 5).

I am the One

While the man believes "that the boy was all that stood between him and death" (*TR*, 29), he struggles to understand the extent to which his son holds him back from spiritual death too. In a scene involving the only named character in *The Road*, an old man described as a "starved and threadbare buddha" (*TR*, 168) who initially identifies as Ely, the tension between what the boy knows and what the man believes bubbles to the surface. As critics have noted, the old man's name and role suggests Elijah, that prophetic progenitor to Jesus,[181] but his faithless words—"there is no God and we are his prophets" (*TR*, 170)—perhaps suggests something more sinister: Satan tempting Jesus in the wilderness.[182] Still, it is the boy who beckons the man toward kindness for the old man: "He's scared, Papa. The man is scared" (*TR*, 162). Though the man puts limits on this

---

[180] I am thinking here of an observation made by Chesterton: "…charity means pardoning what is unpardonable, or it is no virtue at all. Hope means hoping when things are hopeless, or it is no virtue at all. And faith means believing the incredible, or it is no virtue at all." G.K. Chesterton, *Heretics* (Nashville, TN: Sam Torode Book Arts, 2010), 67.

[181] Broncano, *Religion in Cormac McCarthy's Fiction*, 137; Stang, "Ash and Breath;" Frye, *Understanding Cormac McCarthy*, 176.

[182] Frye, *Understanding Cormac McCarthy*, 176.

kindness—he tells the boy that no, they cannot "keep him" (*TR*, 164)—they do offer him the hospitality of their food and company: "tell us where the world went" (*TR*, 166).

Ely, who claims he was "always on the road," saw their present apocalypse coming—"This or something like it. I always believed it" (*TR*, 168)—confirmation of his prophetic role in their story, even as he did not act on his own prophecy: "People were always getting ready for tomorrow. I didnt believe in that. Tomorrow wasnt getting ready for them. It didnt even know they were there" (*TR*, 168). Stang rightly connects this wisdom to Jesus' own teachings about worldly anxiety as the killer of faith:[183] "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing" (Matt 6:25 NRSV). Jesus advocates a freedom in following the way of faith that Ely seems to voice: "So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today" (Matt 6:34 NRSV). Except of course that Ely belies no faith —at least none in God (*TR*, 170). He has freedom but no faith.

The man, confronted with this faithlessness, when beside him sits the manifestation of his own faith, tries to convert the old man. Indicating the boy, the man asks Ely, "what if I said he's a god" (*TR*, 172)? But, Ely is unfazed— he is "past all that now":

> Where men cant live gods fare no better. You'll see. It's better to be alone. So I hope that's not true what you said because to be on the road with the last god would be a terrible thing so I hope it's not true. Things will be better when everybody's gone (*TR*, 172).

---

[183] Stang, "Ash and Breath."

Advocating a softer nihilism than the boy's mother, Ely nonetheless sees no reason for God in a world deprived of true humanity. And perhaps that is McCarthy's point—the age of reasoning a way to God is over in the face of apocalyptic horror at the hands of human beings. The only way back to faith is through unreasoning, here demonstrated in the boy's *agape*, which makes little sense in a world ruled by anxieties about tomorrow. This mystifies the man, who admits to Ely that the animating force behind the boy's love remains enigmatic:

> You should thank him you know, that man said. I wouldnt have given you anything.
>
> Maybe I should and maybe I shouldnt.
>
> Why wouldnt you?
>
> I wouldnt have given him mine.
>
> You dont care if it hurts his feelings?
>
> Will it hurt his feelings?
>
> No. Thats not why he did it.
>
> Why did he do it?
>
> He looked over at the boy and he looked at the old man. You wouldnt understand, he said. I'm not sure I do.
>
> Maybe he believes in God.
>
> I dont know what he believes in.
>
> He'll get over it.
>
> No he wont (*TR*, 173-4).

That is what makes the boy so special in the eyes of the man—he has a love that never lets go, a love that he does not seem to grow out of no matter how many traumatic horrors he encounters. This preternatural innocence eventually becomes a point of confrontation with the man.

Late in the novel, after they have reached the shores of an ocean, and after a terrifying episode where the boy was so ill that the man feared he would die so that, with "clenched fists on top of his skull" he "fell to his knees sobbing in rage" (*TR*, 250), the

two are robbed of the little they possessed. Not longer after noticing their is cart gone, they catch up with the thief and the man, full of crazed fury, holds him up at gunpoint and demands not only a return of their things, but also threatens to kill him: “Goddamn you, he said” (*TR*, 256). The boy, crying, pleads with the man to spare him. He pulls no trigger, but the man spares the thief no mercy, even as he pleads for his life:

> I’m starving man. You’d have done the same.
> You took everything.
> Come on, man. I’ll die.
> I’m going to leave you the way you left us.
> Come on. I’m begging you (*TR*, 257).

To the man, this sin—a theft that nearly left himself, and infinitely worse, the boy, destitute—is simply unforgivable. But to the boy, what is equally unforgivable is the merciless response of the man who leaves the thief with nothing, not even the stinking clothes on his back. He sobs; he cannot stop, even as the man tells him to stop.

It is not the first time the man has drawn lines around the boy’s big-hearted compassion, but still enraged at being so out of control, if even for a few scary minutes, new tensions surface between the worries of the man and the love of the boy:

> What do you want to do?
> Just help him, Papa. Just help him.
> The man looked back up the road.
> He was just hungry, Papa. He’s going to die.
> He’s going to die anyway.
> He’s so scared, Papa.
> The man squatted and looked at him. I’m scared, he said. Do you understand? I’m scared.
> The boy didnt answer. He just sat there with this head bowed, sobbing.
> You’re not the one who has to worry about everything.
> The boy said something but he couldn’t understand him. What? He said.
> He looked up, his wet and grimy face. Yes I am, he said. I am the one (*TR*, 259).

Just as he said of Ely, the boy sees fear in the thief and feels deeply for him. This is compassion in the truest sense—he *suffers with* these strangers. It is reminiscent of the compassion that Sal feels toward the HOLY GOOF Dean. It is compassion for the one who, according to worldly logic, least deserves it. The Gospels portray this kind of compassion in the person of Jesus, who looks on the pitiful of the world—grieving widows (Lk 7:13); robbed and beaten strangers (Lk 10:33); lost wayward sons (Lk 15:20); and aimless crowds (Mk 6:34)—and feels a suffering in himself: *esplanchnisthē*, like his guts wrench inside of him. There is no doubt that the man feels this way toward the boy, especially when he senses danger. But the boy feels this toward those to whom they have no attachment, and according to the ways of their brutish, terrifying world, ought not feel attachment. The world has become a harsh Darwinian game of survival, and so the man worries. As Stang notes, he is like the opposite of Ely—he has faith but no freedom; he is always worried about tomorrow.[184] Worrying is like his core vocation, which is perhaps why he does not understand the boy at first in their tense encounter—it is like the boy's ways are beyond his own comprehension.

In a moment rich with messianic overtones, the boy finally reveals that "I am the one," which, on the surface, is a merely a response to the man—that he has something to worry about too. But as worded, the statement richly alludes to Johannine statements by Jesus about his own identity (Jn 6:35; 8:12; 8:24; 8:58; 10:9; 10:11; 10:14; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1; 15:6) that were themselves referring back to the name of God when appearing to

---

[184] Stang, "Ash and Breath."

Moses in a burning bush (Ex 3:14). What kind of messiah has the boy come to be? If the boy worries, it is about the man falling into the lovelessness of this world, a tribalism that has only produced cycles of violence

that have deconstructed the human beyond recognition. The boy, like Jesus, seeks to break this cycle, to love the enemy (Mt 5:44), to turn the other cheek (Mt 5:39), to give food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, welcome to the stranger, clothing to the naked (Mt 25:35-6). To put it in Taylor's language, the man rightly wants himself and the boy to flourish, which, in their world, means to survive; but the boy seeks more than mere survival. He even seeks more than just "we dont eat people." He wants to take the risk of a reckless love, no matter the costs—to transform the human person through an expansive and animating love, a love that is "harsh and fearful" for those who live it,[185] but the only humanizing force left on the road.

[185] Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 58.

Chapter 3: Paradiso

Dwelling in Hope

Even by virtue of their seeking, Sal, Tom, and the man and the boy give witness to their faith that something exists beyond the sum total of their lost, rudderless despair, their mad anxiety of hunting through the darkness in the quest for light. Kerouac, Percy, and McCarthy rooted that faith in the "energizing memories"[186] of their Catholic identity, the stories that reminded them who they were and for what we were created. No matter if their Catholicism is more seeking or dwelling, more "Kingdom" or "Communion," or someplace in between, as the theologian Walter Brueggmann argues, "when we suffer from amnesia, every form of serious authority for faith is in question, and we live unauthorized lives of faith and practice unauthorized ministries."[187] To be a prophetic voice is to reanimate lost memories so as to allow the "tradition to be the primal way out"[188]—out of the lost, maddening despair of feeling disconnected from God, ourselves, and one another. This is not a call to nostalgia, looking back with longing like Lot's wife; it is more the Abrahamic call of looking outward, the call to rest in what is true, no matter how much it feels discordant with present circumstances. Such truth is always critical of the present while overcoming current complacency toward something more. This has always been the way of the prophet. In the words of Abraham Heschel, "he begins with *a*

---

[186] Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2018), 1.

[187] Ibid., 1-2.

[188] Ibid., 2.

message of doom; he concludes with *a message of hope*."[189] In this way, the voices of Kerouac, Percy, and McCarthy function with a prophetic vigor.

We have paid tribute to their message of doom, but now we must ask: what does it mean to bear a message of hope? Is it merely about warm feelings, a sense of optimism, and the pride of human progress, or is dwelling in hope more about re-framing the forces that shape us, changing the way "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28 NRSV) in response to our secular age? Hope, after all, can be many things. It can be bound up in an emotion, one that was often derided in classical antiquity as little more than presumption, an illusion distracting us from present reality.[190] Perhaps that is why Aquinas, following in the footsteps of Augustine, considered hope a virtue, and thus something that causes our actions to be good.[191] As such, hope is not just about us—it has a collective feature to it. Writing out of that Catholic intellectual tradition, theologian David Elliot argues that hope is both outward-looking *and* onward-looking—the Church as "a pilgrim people jointly seeking the kingdom."[192] Perhaps that is why Augustine believed that hope "is given to the humble."[193] For as literary theorist Terry Eagleton puts

---

[189] Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 2001), 14.

[190] Adam Potkay, *Hope: A Literary History* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 5.

[191] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 2a2ae, 17, 1.

[192] David Elliot, "Hope in Theology," in *Historical and Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Hope*, ed. Steven C. van den Heuvel (New York, NY: Springer Publishing Co, 2020), 132.

[193] St Augustine, *Expositions on the Book of Psalms*, Vol. V., trans. Members of the English Church (Oxford, UK: John Henry Parker, 1853), Psalm CXIX, Discourse XV, 2 (Ver. 50).

it succinctly, "hope consists of desire plus expectancy."[194] Desire is quite different from presumption; expectancy is further still from despair.

But, hope is not just some nebulous ideal. It is deeply connected to our sense of agency, claims contemporary philosopher Victoria McGeer: "it is about imaginatively exploring what we can and cannot do in the world."[195] This is why McGeer believes that hoping well is nothing less than "an art."[196] At the same time, as Delbanco has shown, hope is also deeply rooted in our social contexts, which shape the imaginations that shape our hopes (or lack of hope). Though our hope can often feel deeply personal, it is always grounded in the narrative that informs why I hope and for what I hope. That means that how we hope changes, which explains why Sal, Tom, and the man and boy end their pilgrimages filled with hopes they could not have imagined at the start of their journeying. To use the helpful language of the nineteenth-century Catholic theologian John Cardinal Newman, they move from a "notional assent" to a "real assent": "the heart is commonly reached, not through reason, but through imagination, by means of direct

---

[194] Terry Eagleton, *Hope Without Optimism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), 59.

[195] Victoria McGeer, "The Art of Good Hope," *The Annals of the American Academy*, 592 (1), March, 2004, 104.

[196] Ibid., 110.

impressions, by testimony of facts and events."[197] In order to hope as these characters do, their imaginations must undergo a radical transformation. And so their real assents must go beyond reason by way of the concrete and experiential. The journey of their imaginations does more than enlighten their minds; it opens up theirs hearts, affecting emotions that eventually stir them into action.

Is hope possible when the way we used to be in the world is no longer possible because modern secularity has not only eroded the bulwarks of belief, but even the conditions for belief itself? How do we escape the nihilistic despair of the boy's mother in *The Road*, or the drunken, lusty escapism of Dean in *On the Road* or its more refined spiritual counterpoint of Doris in *Love in the Ruins*? How do we avoid pinning out hopes on Sal's endless wanderlust, or Tom More's scientistic pride, or the harsh, compassionless survivalism of the man? In other words, how do we both recognize that the world we long for is gone, while believing that all is not lost? Few writers have grappled with such questions with the intensity of American philosopher Jonathan Lear, whose *Radical Hope* plunges us into what possibilities for hope exist in the throws of true cultural devastation. His book explores how Chief Plenty Coups, the last great chief of the Crow nation, was both forced to confront the existential disintegration of the Crow way of life—"a

---

[197] John Henry Cardinal Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 89. For Newman, "notional assent" is an entirely noetic affair that runs from "profession"—making intellectual claims without any real reflection—to "speculation," which involves a more robust display of reason. "Real assent," however, involves more than reason—it is about true insight, one that is felt, one that affects the whole person. For example, one who merely studies a Gospel passage can glean great insights, but if one imagines oneself in that same passage, the experience is wholly different. If "notional assent" involves part of us, "real assent" makes a powerful, authenticating claim on our sense of self.

breakdown in the field in which occurrences occur"[198]—as American Manifest Destiny policies devastated the Crow culture, and, at the same time, lead his people through the devastation with a vision of hope.

Lear is clear: the Crow's "conception of *what happiness is* could no longer be lived."[199] How the Crow conceived of human subjectivity could no longer be realized. To understand this *and* move forward, Plenty Coups, and his people, sought answers via an unlikely source: his childhood dreams. To the Crow, dream-visions experienced by young male members were inspired from a divine source and were the ways they made sense of nonsensical situations. In other words, they formed stories out of gibberish, thus becoming the governing principles of a deeply uncertain future. A young Plenty Coups had such a dream at such a time, a vision which acknowledged the end of the Crow way of life even as it gifted the Crow a sense of hope—what Lear calls "radical hope," for it allowed them to believe that "*we shall get the good back*," even though it left no indication what this might mean.[200] But because this vision came from a dream, originated in a benevolent divine source—God, or in Crow, Ah-badt-dadt-deah—and one that was received and interpreted by the tribe's elders, it was trusted. Indeed, Plenty Coups, who was at the center of this extraordinary experience, is the fullest expression of a "real assent" into hope that *becomes* virtuous, a hope that fully looks outward with full

---

[198] Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 34. In his notes on this concept, Lear likens this devastation to the destruction of the Temple—a kind of destruction that leaves people with a viable means of "orienting" themselves.

[199] Ibid., 44.

[200] Ibid., 94.

agency and yet without any sort of deception about what is coming. Lear explains what this means:

> In an age when secular readers often think that religious commitment breeds arrogant intolerance—as though the believers had a "direct line to God"—it is worth noting that Plenty Coups's form of commitment—at least, as we have imagined him reasoning—would lead him toward humility. He has to admit that he has little idea of what is coming—other than a "tremendous storm" that will knock down all the trees but one. The dream did not even explicitly predict that the Crow will survive—though that is how the elders interpreted it. In this way, Plenty Coups can both bear witness to the end of a traditional way of life and commit himself to a good that transcends these finite ethical forms. Precisely because Plenty Coups sees that a traditional way of life is coming to an end, he is in a position to embrace a peculiar form of hopelessness. It is basically the hope for *revival*: for coming back to life in a form that is not yet intelligible.[201]

It is no small irony that Plenty Coups's humility before his imagination-seizing dream-vision is the source not of timidity, of doing nothing, of laying down to die, but of a great magnanimity, of facing the future with courage, strength, and determination.

In their own ways, Kerouac, Percy, and McCarthy respond with something near this radical hope as their protagonists make a real assent and discover humility before new ways of imagining life in the ruins of modern secularity. But, because they are responding as Catholics, those imaginations take on a definite Catholic-Christian character. Just as Plenty Coups' hope originates in what he considers the Ultimate Source, Christian hope is called virtuous precisely because its ultimate foundation is in God and in God's saving power in history, what Christians calls salvation history. The chief figure of that history is Jesus of Nazareth, who himself was the hope that God would fulfill promises of old. And so Jesus came, in expectation of the prophets, "to bring good news

---

[201] Ibid., 95.

to the poor," and "to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind" and "to let the oppressed go free" (Lk 4:18 NRSV). The Reign of God that Jesus preached was bound up in his miraculous works, his teachings, and a steadfast solidarity with the poor and marginalized. But Jesus was also clear-sighted about how such hope would be received by the powers of the world—that they would never tolerate his (that is, God's) love for the whole of humanity. As he predicted, Jesus' life ended in humiliating defeat and failure. The cross upon which he died, *the* Christian arch-symbol, is the constant reminder against proud optimism in our best human endeavors to act with hope. Christianity thus lives within a central paradox of the human condition best summed up by theologian Herbert McCabe, OP: if you do not love, you are dead; if you do love, you will be killed.[202]

So where is there hope in this? For the Christian, the hope that moves beyond the cross is the resurrection, the Father's answer to Jesus' total love, that profound exaltation that becomes the saving power of eternal salvation against the tyrannies of sin and death. Christians dwell in that hope, participating in it by striving to live as Jesus lived, risking everything, even in the face of assured defeat in the struggle so as to be human as he was human. In this way and in this hope do they work to build a more merciful, just, and loving world, firm in the belief that God will not abandon them, "because we know that God will bring life out of such defeat and failure as he brought life out of the tomb of

---

[202] Herbert McCabe, O.P., "Prayer," in *God Still Matters*, ed. Brian Davies, O.P. (London, UK: Continuum, 2002), 67

Jesus."[203] In many ways, Christians live as Plenty Coups lived, with a brutal honesty about the ways of the world, yet firm in believing that we will get the good back, even as we have no real sense of what that will look like. Beyond eroding how and why the story of Christian hope is told, or rendering it into a rationalistic enterprise, thus killing its power, modern secularity endangers the Christian narrative most when it tacks on a pernicious brand of Enlightenment pride that Kerouac, Percy, and McCarthy all aim to resist. The contemporary philosopher Leszek Kołakowski articulates this danger with rare clarity and eloquence:

> The Gospels proclaim solidarity with the poor, the defenseless, the unfortunate and the oppressed; but we have no Gospel that promises a world without evil, suffering or conflict. The Gospels condemn those who enjoy lives of comfort and ease if they are deaf to the suffering and hungry or the disinherited; but we have no Gospel that preaches social equality or inequality, or contains a recipe for the ideal social system, in which all desires and aspirations are fulfilled and all obstacles to happiness removed. The Gospels denounce tyrants and persecutors; but we have no Gospel that substitutes one tyranny for another in the name of chiliastic delusions. A Christianity which tacitly accepts that God is an instrument for us to use in the furtherance of some cause, doctrine, ideology or political party is godlessness in disguise.
>
> In this sense one can say that both the traditional theocratic tendency within Christianity and the Christian "progressivism" have encouraged dechristianization —not because they adopted any particular political position, but because they are responsible for the secularization of Christian values. What people seek in religion is—*mirabile dictu*—God, not the justification of a political ideology or a 'scientific' explanation of the world. A Christianity that bows before intellectual and political fashions in pursuit of transient success participates in its own destruction. It can never surpass science by applying scientific criteria to Christian doctrine. And it can never surpass political ideologies by promising earthly happiness. When it is attempts to do so, it inevitably reveals its impotence and irrelevance. Christianity views the human condition in light of the Gospels and

---

[203] Herbert McCabe, O.P., "Hope," in *God, Christ, and Us*, ed. Brian Davies, O.P. (New York, NY: Continuum, 2003), 15.

> the book of Job, not in terms formulated by theocratic, technocratic or revolutionary utopias.[204]

Though Kołakowski speaks here in more political tones, his concern is one that our novels share: how to respond to the losses of modern secularity without resorting to strategies that would only further erode the sacred and tame the transcendent.

---

[204] Leszek Kołakowski, "Anxiety About God in an Ostensibly Godless Age," in *Is God Happy?: Selected Essays* (London, UK: Penguin Books, 2012), 190-1.

Evoking the Forms

Recall Chesterton's words that in the modern secular world "we have all forgotten what really are"; worse, "we forget that we have forgotten."[205] Here is Peter Martin holding his head in pain, yet unsure of what ails him, that early version of Sal who is like part seeking Percival and part wounded Fisher King. It is also Tom More riddled with disordered affections because he is in the grip of some spiritual amnesia, unsure who or what he is anymore. He senses a loss in that delicate synthesis that kept body and soul, existence and essence, together, but he blindly tries to fix this unnatural split between nature and grace using mechanisms that only deepen the gulf. It is the man coming to grips with the salitter, that stuff of life and life-everlasting, that is "drying from the earth," White's "things that I loved" that turned out to be more fragile than he thought. For all, it is the loss of the divine *Logos* buried beneath the *logia* of human beings, the hubris of Enlightenment reasoning that has turned back on itself—endless deconstruction in the name of progress, forever suspicious of anything that looks whole, total, or unified. Nietzsche sensed the coming night:

> Where are we moving to? Away from all the suns? Are we not continually falling? And backwards, sidewards, forwards, in all directions? Is there still an up and a down? Aren't we straying as though through an infinite nothing? Isn't empty space breathing at us? Hasn't it got colder? Isn't night and more night coming again and again?[206]

One of the questions each novel asks is what to do about suffering and death when all sense of their meaning has been shorn from the earth. If the stories and symbols

---

[205] Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 49.

[206] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 120.

have lost their power, then what is there except to rage like a wounded animal as Doris and the mother of the boy do, or to slip into a series of selfish and unsatisfying distracting pleasures as Dean and Tom do? The impulse to control the chaos we seem to have embraced is as futile as the man's failures to keep alive *and* maintain a sense of true humanity, or Sal's ignorance that HOLY GOOF Dean is both angel *and* devil, both modern saint *and* an utterly uncreative worn-out sinner. This might explain why the man is so mystified at the boy's compassion, or why Mr. Ives' silence is quickly labeled a psychological abnormality. They do not subscribe to the script of modern secularity; their way of proceeding is not just odd—it is outright dangerous.

In our last chapter, two initial responses surfaced. First, our three novels agree that we are incapable of saving ourselves. No amount of individual effort can pull us away from the brink of infinite nothing. Kerouac, Percy, and McCarthy answer the problem of the diminished self in part by championing the power of community—Sal's company of misfits, Tom's grown-up love in the company of Ellen Oglethorpe, the man and the boy who are "each the other's worlds entire" (*TR*, 6), and yet always looking for that last holdout of good guys. But for these writers, community is not just an antidote to cosmic loneliness; it also a means of being transformed. In authentic community, the atomized, privatized self cannot exist; our protagonists must die to their own selfishness and fear again and again. Here exists that beautiful tension that Taylor advocates, but which seems lost in the secular age: a healthy flourishing of the self, but also a call to go beyond that self in pursuit of something greater than the self alone. It is the Christian

belief that friendship with others must be always grounded first in friendship with God—serving and loving others out of an experience of being served and loved.

The second response is similar to the first: we will not find our way back to the good—that is, back to God—through clever reasoning. It was precisely a hyper-rationalism, however well intentioned, that tamed the mystery out of God, not to mention severing the human being into a bifurcated creature and the world into cold matter without intrinsic meaning or blessing. Each novel seems to be saying, as Tracy puts it so well, that we must "learn to disallow the *logos* of modernity" to control how we think about God "as we learn anew to be attentive to God as the incomprehensible, hidden, and radically, excessively loving God."[207] There is more than a hint of anti-intellectualism in these novels—a clear influence of Dostoevsky—that distrusts hubristic ideas that leave little room for silence or wonder. No amount of talking can capture the essence of Sal and Dean's IT; no manner of reasoning can help Tom explain his dilemma of feeling guilty about not feeling guilty to Max Gottlieb; the man is at a loss for words in trying to help Ely see what makes the boy so different and special in his eyes. They all share a common frustration, like Whitman's disdain for the "learn'd astronomer,"[208] who is full of proofs and figures, charts and diagrams, and the applause of the lecture-room, but who seems to have forgotten "the mystical moist night-air" and how to look up "in perfect silence at the stars."

* * *

---

[207] Tracy, "Approaching the Christian Understanding of God," 127.

[208] Walt Whitman, "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer," in *The Portable Walt Whitman*, ed. Michael Warner (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2004), 249.

Just as a young Plenty Coups goes questing in search of a dream-vision to help make sense of a worrisome present and find hope for the future, Sal and Dean chase experiences to expand the edges of their imaginations. For Dean, such visions can be summed up in a single small word: IT—as in "now, man, that alto man last night had IT" (*OTR*, 207) or "man, this will finally take us to IT" (*OTR*, 265)! Experiencing IT is about tapping into "the ragged and ecstatic joy of pure being" (*OTR*, 195),[209] particularly in the thick of jazz sessions where a kind of wild ecstasy expressed in the pure, unstructured abstraction of the music connects Sal and Dean with the feeling of timelessness:

> All of the sudden somewhere in the middle of the chorus he *gets it*—everybody looks up and knows; they listen; he picks it up and carries. Time stops. He's filling empty space with the substance of our lives, confessions of his bellybottom strain, remembrance of ideas, rehashes of old blowing (*OTR*, 207).

The experience is so riveting it is catching, for as Dean experiences IT, he suddenly feels its pull: "O man, I have to tell you, NOW, I have IT" (*OTR*, 208). Leland is on the mark in calling these ecstatic jazz-fueled visions "visceral, beyond reason,"[210] for while they are ineffable they are also deeply felt, known intimately to those who share in them.

But the music is only the match that catches the fire—as IT takes hold of their souls, Sal and Dean, in true confessional mode, disclose themselves in jazz staccatos, discovering the truth of themselves in the syncopation of lively, authenticating talk: "the car was swaying as Dean and I both swayed to the rhythm and the IT of our final excited joy in talking and living to the blank tranced end of all innumerable riotous angelic particular that had been lurking in our souls all our lives" (*OTR*, 209). These IT

---

[209] Giamo, "What IT Is?," 186.

[210] Leland, *Why Kerouac Matters*, 125.

experiences bring them into a gathering *kairotic* time and, with it, a brush with mystical serenity far from old anxieties. On the road, Dean tells Sal that "we know what IT is and we know TIME and we know everything is really FINE" and that it is others who "have worries," who are "counting the miles" and wondering "where to sleep tonight" and how they will pay for gas, what the weather will be, and "how they'll get there" (*OTR*, 209). Dean is an ecstatic riot, full of IT, as he plays the prophet, lamenting the way others fail to live:

> …they need to worry and betray time with urgencies false and otherwise, purely anxious and whiny, their soul really won't be at peace unless they can latch on to an established and proven worry and having once found it they assume facial expressions to fit and go with it, which is, you see, unhappiness, and all the time it all flies by them and they know it and that *too* worries them no end (*OTR*, 209-210).

Like Ely in *The Road*, Dean is hinting at a Christ-like faith that hands over the worries of life to God (Mt 6:25-34), to leave behind blind, small worries in order to be transformed by that which is outside of time and space and full of radiant, ecstatic peace. Sal catches on: "I told Dean that the thing that bound us all together in this world was invisible" (*OTR*, 211). They have "longer ways to go," but they know in their gut that "the road is life" (*OTR*, 212).

While these IT experiences offer glimpses of what could be, "spots of time" awakening them out of their secular slumbers, it is all too ethereal, immaterial. All that changes in their last and greatest adventure past "the end of America," and across "the mysterious bridge" to Mexico (*OTR*, 273). Like their whole pilgrimage in miniature, this Mexican leg moves from an innocent dream-like wonder to taking advantage of the place through its easy, cheap kicks to coming face-to-face with something primal, essential, and pure. In all cases, the place is truly a "magic land at the end of the road and we never

dreamed the extent of the magic" (*OTR*, 276). Even before the journey proper beings, Sal senses something about the "Indian" people who "were not at all like the Pedros and Panchos of silly civilized American lore":

> …the earth is an Indian thing. As essential as rocks in the desert are they in the desert of "history." And they knew this when we passed, ostensibly self-important moneybag Americans on the lark in their land; they knew who was the father and who was son of antique life on earth, and made no comment. For when destruction comes to the world of "history" and the Apocalypse of the Fellahin[211] return once more as so many times before, people will stare with the same eyes from the caves of Mexico as well from the caves of Bali, where it all began and where Adam was taught to know (*OTR*, 280).

While Sal again romanticizes the Other here, a shade of Montaigne-like fascination with native peoples, he nonetheless senses something in these Beat people of the world, something that only becomes clearer as they journey onward. It is only after the pair fill their gullets full of marijuana and cut-rate booze, dancing their cares away at a raucous brothel dance party, that they ascend up to a land before time.

It is there, in the heights of Mexico's summits, where "life was dense, dark, ancient," that Sal notices something critical of these people:

> They watched Dean, serious and insane at his raving wheel, with eyes of hawks. All had their hands outstretched. They had come down from the back mountains and higher places to hold forth their hands for something they thought civilization could offer, and they never dreamed the sadness and poor broken delusion of it. They didn't know that a bomb had come that could crack all our bridges and roads and reduce them to jumbles, and we would be as poor as they someday, and stretching out our hands in the same, same way. Our broken Ford, old thirties upgoing America Ford, rattled through them and vanished in the dust (*OTR*, 298-9).

---

[211] Kerouac read about the "Fellahin Indians" in Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West* (1922): a people "who escape history and are left the sole survivors when civilization inevitable destroys itself." Rachel Ligairi, "When Mexico Looks Like Mexico: The Hyperrealization of Race and the Pursuit of the Authentic" in *What's Your Road, Man?: Critical Essays on Jack Kerouac's* On the Road, ed. Hilary Holladay and Robert Holton (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2009), 152.

Here is Sal's fullest confrontation with what has vanished from his civilized, secularized world—the failures of history and progress reduced to the power of self-destruction as these last hidden people, with outstretched hands, reach unknowingly for a future that will displace them as it has displaced all misfits of history. Even Dean is distraught: "Ah, this breaks my heart!" (*OTR*, 298).

But one feature of their view of the hidden, enchanted past gives Sal a hope that all is not lost. In highly-charged, Catholic imagery, he looks out on some "Indian girls" hawking rock crystals and has a vision that brings IT down to earth:

> Their great brown, innocent eyes looked into ours with such soulful intensity that not one of us had the slightest sexual thought about them; moreover they were very young, some of them eleven and looking almost thirty. "Look at those eyes!" breathed Dean. There were like the eyes of the Virgin Mother when she was a child. We saw in them the tender and forgiving gaze of Jesus (*OTR*, 297).

Indeed, it is like the whole world is enfleshed with the sacred, the scenes around them, "biblical" as though it was "the golden world that Jesus came from" (*OTR*, 298-9). Sal is caught up in nothing less than what Tracy calls the "analogical imagination," a pervading sense that "the entire world, in all its variety, is now theologically envisioned as sacrament—a sacrament emanating from Jesus Christ as the paradigmatic sacrament of God, the paradigmatic clue to humanity and nature alike."[212] It is here, "where Adam was taught to know," that Sal is granted a vision of the totality of the world as he looks into the gaze of one who brings him close again to that Second Adam. It is that incarnate majesty of IT running through all things and people, the *kairos* in the everyday, the sacred bursting forth in those untouched by secularizing forces near "the end of the road" (*OTR*,

---

[212] David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York, NY: Crossroad Publishing, 1981), 413.

299). It is a vision that allows Sal to see himself and his purpose in life anew, to see Dean in all his splendor and shabbiness, and to view modern America in equal parts of tragic sadness and radiant sublimity.

* * *

For Kerouac, a "Kingdom" Catholic, the sacramental imagination comes to life in the eyes of poor, forgotten peoples—that analogue to the Christ in whom "all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible" (Col 1:16 NRSV). Percy and McCarthy will likewise turn to the sacramental imagination as a means of seeking hope, but according to their respective views of the world. Percy, a "Communion" Catholic, taps directly into the Church's sacraments; McCarthy, straddling the best of both traditions as an "indwelt seeker," creatively marries the two by recasting traditional ecclesial sacraments in more profane encounters.

Why sacraments and sacramentality? What does the old "white magic," seemingly out of place in a modern secular world, offer as a means of a hope? To begin with, they both reinforce and build upon the two initial responses mentioned above: sacraments place the burden of their saving grace on God, and they evade pure analytical reasoning. The earlier word for sacrament was *mysterion*, a reality that pointed to Jesus Christ as sacrament, not as some unknowable secret, but as "God's saving intent as revealed and realized in the course of the divine *oikonomia,*"[213] a truth beyond human comprehension. Even as theologians sought to rationally explore certain aspects of the reality behind sacramental acts, leading some reformed churches to minimize the magic in favor of reason, the Catholic Church maintained the mystery. And so the eucharist is not just a

---

[213] Herbert Vorgrimler, *Sacramental Theology* (Collegville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 31.

symbol of the body and blood of Jesus—it *is*, sacramentally, the self-gift of God in Christ; its reception is therefore the transformation of disparate persons into the body of Christ, a new community bound in fellowship with God. Confession is not just cheap therapy, the lonely portal of unburdening individual failings, but a humble acknowledgment that one's actions have harmed that body of Christ, the Church, and that God's great gift of mercy and forgiveness is the only means to heal the wounds. Like Scripture, sacraments reveal the story of God's saving power, but they do so without relying on words alone, meeting us in ordinary material reality—water, oil, bread and wine. In the words of theologian John Macquarrie, such sacraments "serve to remind us that spiritual realities always go beyond what we can understand and categorize."[214] But they also remind us that the material world is also charged with more than meets the eye—that the stuff of God is always lurking beneath the surface, hidden, but no less real.

For Tom More, angelism-bestialism, that hellish consequence from the separation of body from soul, has left him broken, lost, and looking for answers in all the wrong places—in loveless affairs, bound by a false, scientistic pride, and draining endless glasses of Early Times whiskey.

Though once he believed the promises of Christ "and held him to his word," that "if you eat me you'll have life in you" and indeed found "life in me" (*LIR*, 138), the tragic death of his daughter Samantha shook that belief. Yet, throughout the novel, it is the memories of Samantha that pull him back to life—memories of their attending Mass together, of reciting the catechism, and, when she was sick and dying, of her ultimate concern for the soul of her father. These memories pull Tom up from his palliated existence, and remind

---

[214] John Macquarrie, *A Guide to the Sacraments* (London, UK: SCM Press, 1997), 49.

him that his faith is more than just a crutch—it is the essence of who he is. In one of the last memories he has of his daughter, Tom remembers the promise she asked him to keep as she sees his faith slipping:

> "Just promise me one thing, Papa."
> "What's that?"
> "Don't commit the one sin for which there is no forgiveness."
> "Which one is that?"
> "The sin against grace. If God gives you the grace to believe in him and love him and you refuse, the sin will not be forgiven you" (*LIR*, 373-4).

The memory causes him to acknowledge the extent to which his heart broke in the dying of his daughter, and the settling of a great malaise, to quote *The Movegoer*, that "pain of loss" so that "the world is lost to you, the world and the people in it, and there remains only you and the world and you are no more able to be in the world than Banquo's ghost."[215] But Tom readily admits that his own malaise exists in a perverse satisfaction with death—suffering that grants him free reign to live his own death-in-life: "is there not also a compensation, a secret satisfaction to be taken in her death, a delectation of tragedy, a license for drink, a taste for both or taste's sake" (*LIR*, 374)?

His greatest fear, in the end, was not her death, but her cure:

> Suppose you asked God for a miracle and God says yes, very well. How do you live the rest of your life?
> Samantha, forgive me. I am sorry you suffered and died, my heart broke, but there have been times when I was not above enjoying it (*LIR*, 374).

Sounding eerily like the mother of the boy in *The Road* who brags about taking death as "a new lover" (*TR*, 57), Tom asks with maudlin sincerity: "Is it possible to live without feasting on death" (*LIR*, 374)? The question could sum up the whole novel, for it puts its

---

[215] Percy, *The Moviegoer*, 120.

finger directly on the pulse of life in the ruins, on the problem of a "death is winning, life is losing" (*LIR*, 185) imbalance.

Against this, Percy peppers seemingly ubiquitous references to Christmas in Tom's own pilgrimage out of despair—a leitmotif to set the score for what is to come. Christmas marks both the depths of his suicidal despair (*LIR*, 97), when he feels most cut-off from the grace of God's being-with-us, *and* his happy ending, when he feels imbued with that grace: "I'm dancing around to keep warm, hands in pockets. It is Christmas Day and the Lord is here, a holy night and surely that is all one needs" (*LIR*, 402). For the believing Christian, Christmas celebrates that meeting of immanence and transcendence in the the birth of the god-man, the Christ child who reconciles alienated humanity back to God. It is that fleshy, tangible presence that Tom finally feasts upon when he receives the eucharist: "I eat Christ, drink his blood" (*LIR*, 400). For what is the eucharist if not that uniquely suited response to the rupture between grace and nature, matter and form? Percy righty worried that once trapped in our modern post-Cartesian solipsism, we too easily forget the signs and symbols[216] that allow us to know who we are, and so we veer either into as "self as transcendent" or "self as immanent." But the true wayfarer, open to signs, will find in the sacraments sign and symbol— "not less than

---

[216] The sacramental work of theologian Louis-Marie Chauvet is of help here in distinguishing between signs and symbols: "The sign is situated on the side of "saying something about something," that is, on the side of the transmission of information or knowledge; the symbol is situated on the side of "saying to someone," that is, on the side of communication with a subject recognized as a subject and situated in its place as a subject." Louis-Marie Chauvet, *The Sacraments: The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body*, trans. Madeleine Beaumont (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2001), 76.

a symbol"[217]—uniting the near with the beyond, the body and spirit, and inviting those who participate in them to do to the same.

In his return not just to the sacraments, but a humble and honest belief in their power, Tom experiences a whole coalescence of hope—the experience of Newman's "real ascent," for at the end of his pilgrimage, what he knows it not purely rational; indeed, it is almost irrational. But it is a truth that has set him free, a puncture in his buffered self, a tonic that re-enchants his world and sets him on the path to new life. He has "all one needs," even as he still pours himself some Early Times and dances to Sinatra and the *Salve Regina* "like David before the ark or like Walter Huston doing a jig when he struck it rich in the Sierra Madre" (*LIR*, 420). Indeed he is rich, "like God's spoiled child" (*LIR*, 383).

* * *

Serving McCarthy's more apophatic approach, and owed to the fact that the man and the boy exist in a world where most human constructions, including religion, are reduced to the ash-heap, sacraments in *The Road* are not the well-worn rituals we find in Percy's *Love in the Ruins*, and yet, in ways that McCarthy clearly and purposefully styles, they evoke those rituals in language and in practice—or, to use the formula of ecclesial sacraments, in form and matter. In this way, it is like the sacraments return to their earlier *mysterion* expression, existing somewhere between that remnant holdout faith in Percy's novel and that more outward, pluralistic sacramentality embraced by Kerouac. The varied

---

[217] Macquarrie, *A Guide to the Sacraments*, 29.

signs and symbols of the *The Road* exist in both realms, but with one notable difference. They seek to communicate one overarching virtue: gratitude.[218]

Still, gratitude in the fearsome world of the man and the boy is rarely a typical affair. So early in their pilgrimage, when they confront a "bad guy" who refuses the man's warnings and means to do the man and the boy harm, and indeed, grabs the boy violently, the man shoots him square in the head so that the boy, "covered with gore," becomes "mute as a stone" (*TR*, 66). In short time, the man takes the boy into cold water, kneels, and washes him: "This is my child, he said. I wash a dead man's brains out of his hair. That is my job. Then he wrapped him in the blanket and carried him to the fire" (*TR*, 74). Grateful that the boy is alive, the man has three successive thoughts that make this moment more than a profane gesture.

First, the man injects sacramental meaning into the moment: "All of this like some ancient anointing. So be it. Evoke the forms. Where you've nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them" (*TR*, 74).[219] This baptismal scene, despite—perhaps even because of—its gruesome context, confers something upon the boy, just as the sacrament of baptism anoints one as a Christian, that is, a little Christ. In the Catholic context, oil is smeared on the head of the baptized as Christ was anointed priest, prophet and king. That is significant, because the next thought of the man as he

---

[218] When asked what message readers should away from *The Road*, McCarthy answered: "that we should be grateful." Frye, *Understanding Cormac McCarthy*, 165.

[219] There is something of boy's mother's words in this evoking of forms: "a person who had no one would be well advised to cobble together some passable ghost. Breathe it into being and coax it alone with words of love. Offer it each phantom crumb and shield it from harm with your body" (*TR*, 57).

strokes the boy's "pale and tangled hair" is: "golden chalice, good to house a god" (*TR*, 75). Apart from the aforementioned Grail motif, according to the Catholic sacrament of the eucharist, a golden chalice does indeed house God, just as Christ said it would (Mk 14:22-24). In the eyes of the man, the boy has indeed become priest, prophet, and king. And this plays into the man's final thought, about the "bad guy" assailant who tried to harm the boy "the first human being other than the boy that he'd spoken to in more than a year." But it is no homecoming; the man laments the brutish way of the world: "My brother at last. The reptilian calculations in those cold and shifting eyes. The gray and rotting teeth. Claggy with human flesh. Who has made of the world a lie every word" (*TR*, 75). Indeed, this "brother" man represents all that has gone wrong in their totally secularized, nihilistic, destroyed world. But the baptized boy, now anointed to be like a light shining into the darkness, "is the word of God" (*TR*, 5), a word for whom the man is eternally grateful.

A second sacramental scene continues in this way. It takes place mid-way through their journeys, after the two miraculously stumble upon a hidden trove of food and goods just when it seemed like they were running out of "luck," finding desperately needed provisions. The morning after their find, the man cooks up a veritable feast—"Coffee. Ham. Biscuits"—to which the boy can only say: "Wow" (*TR*, 144). Before digging in, the boy asks the man a question: "Do you think we should thank the people" (*TR*, 145)? At first the man is confused, but once he realizes that the boy is speaking of those who stored up this food but were never able to use it, he agrees and invites the boy "to say thank you":

> The boy sat staring at his plate. He seemed lost. The man was about to speak when he said: Dear people, thank you for all this food and stuff. We know that you saved it for yourself and if you were here we wouldnt eat it no matter how hungry we were and we're sorry that you didnt get to eat it and we hope that you're safe in heaven with God (*TR*, 146).

Though a seemingly ordinary, if sweetly innocent, boyhood prayer before a meal, the honest and heartfelt nature of the words of gratitude echo the prayers of the eucharist, that sacrament whose name comes from the Greek—*eucharistia*—for thanksgiving. Even in its brevity, it contains key aspects of the eucharistic prayers of the Catholic Church: a preface of thanksgiving; a statement (or creed) of faith; an admission of unworthiness; and a remembrance of the dead, who, through this act of communion, gather at the table. There is even great reverence in the act—quiet before he speaks, a clarity in his purpose. Eucharistic communion is entirely about friendship: with God and with one another—a friendship that transcends time and space, re-enchanting the world as it bridges the sacred and profane, heaven and earth. It is an act of pure hope, for it grants its participants access to the fullness of God's Kingdom. As McCabe puts it:

> We enter for a moment into the world of the future, into that kind of society in which we will simply be the body of Christ, in which there will be no admixture of evil, no alienation. Instead of our friendship being a ray of light amongst the darkness of sin, selfishness, cruelty and domination, as it is now, it will be the whole of our life, all our ways of being together. Into this world we enter for a moment sacramentally in the breaking of the eucharistic bread.[220]

The child indeed has become father of the man, for the boy ushers in this new age, this new vision with his words and actions. Sacraments, like those re-presented in *The Road*, call something out of us, shaping our being and our hope, for they bring us into a

---

[220] McCabe, O.P., "Washing and Eucharist," in *God, Christ, and Us*, ed. Brian Davies, O.P. (New York, NY: Continuum, 2003), 85.

new reality, a new way of looking at ourselves in relation to God, one another, and the destiny of salvation. That is what happens here—a humble submission to an ancient memorial, a call out of Brueggmann's amnesia without the failure to tame the mystery of the moment, to center the action in a gratitude that, by its nature, expands the heart into acts of profound generosity. It is not a coincidence that the boy partakes in these sacramental acts like Christ—baptized in the Jordan as a beloved Son (Mk 1:9-11), "giving thanks" for the meal that binds the community of blesseds as one (Mk 14:22-24 NRSV). For indeed, the boy is a sacrament in his own right—a God-given sign and symbol in a godless world, that incarnate word of God whose very being shines like a light "from some unimaginable future, glowing in that waste like a tabernacle" (*TR*, 273). Late in the novel, as the man lays dying, he shares a final supper with the boy—a viaticum, that food for the final journey. "He took the cup and drank" (*TR*, 277), writes McCarthy, using words reminiscent of the institution narrative of the Catholic eucharistic prayer. It is at once his cup of offering and suffering, but in this moment it is also the cup of hope:

> He lay watching the boy at the fire. He wanted to be able to see. Look around you, he said. There is no prophet on earth's long chronicle who's not honored here today. Whatever form you spoke of you were right (*TR*, 277).

Carrying the Fire

In his work on sacramental imagery in the works of McCarthy, theologian Matthew Potts argues that such moments clarify "the role of narrative for ethics," not because they delineate the reason or purpose of virtue, "but because they condition

humans as fundamentally dispossessed of themselves."[221] Indeed, sacraments tell stories, the kinds of stories that tell us who we are and where we have been, what is most essential, most valuable to us, and how to hope and dream and imagine. And because they do it in ways in that leave the mystery of God and our place before that mystery intact, its saving power can transform us, moving us beyond human flourishing to that place where the force of Christ-like *agape* defies the logic of secular living. Kerouac, Percy, and McCarthy show this clearly, this movement out of self-centered desperation into an altruistic extension of self, particularly reaching those society considers least.

Writing in those early, scary days of the COVID-19 pandemic, the scripture scholar N.T. Wright notes that when plagues and other disasters struck the ancient world, the philosophers went to work: Stoics selling their line of fatalism, so just be calm; Epicurians declaring that life is all random, so just enjoy yourself; Platonists warning that this life is a mere shadow, so just be ready for the next phase of reality. But the early Christians avoided saying why such things happened; instead, they asked "what," as in: "What can we do?" When the rich would run for the hills, it was early Christians, to the strange wonderment of many around them, who would tend to the stricken, even to the point of death:

> People were astonished. What was that about? Oh, they replied, we are followers of this man Jesus. He put his life on the line to save us. So that's what we do as well.[222]

---

[221] Matthew L. Potts, *Cormac McCarthy and the Signs of Sacraments: Literature, Theology, and the Moral of Stories* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2015), 177-8.

[222] N.T. Wright, *God and the Pandemic: A Christian Reflection on the Coronavirus and its Aftermath* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2020), 2-3.

In significant, mysterious ways, sacraments shape Christians to be like this—to be what they receive, to conform their lives to the Gospel, to be the hands and feet of the Jesus who heals them and brings them to new life.

For Sal, who found the magic in Mexico and the sacramentally incarnate gaze of Jesus looking into him, there is, at long last, the desire to grow up. Sick with dysentery after days of journeying, Dean leaves him at his hour of need: "When I got better I realized what a rat he was, but then I had to understand the impossible complexity of his life" (*OTR*, 302). It is a moment of nuanced clarity he was incapable of understanding at the early stages of his pilgrimage. He is ready for home, but not before receiving an extraordinary vocational vision:

> In the fall I myself started back home from Mexico City and one night just over Laredo border in Dilley, Texas, I was standing on the hot road underneath an arc-lamp with the summer moths smashing into it when I heard the sound of footsteps from the darkness beyond into it, and lo, a tall old man with flowing white hair came clomping by with a pack on his back, and when he saw me as he passed, he said, *"Go moan for man,"* and clomped back to his dark (*OTR*, 303).

Like the call of a prophet—Isaiah (Is 6) or Jeremiah (Jer 1) with a touch of William Blake, Sal's great vision contains the purpose of his journeys: the agony with the ecstasy, the dwelling place for all his seeking, the proper channeling of IT and the sacramentalizing of the world around him as he makes art out of the suffering of a groaning creation. Beat scholar Laurence Coup sees a "blues" hope in the calling: "'Go moan for man' embodies not only despair but also hope: the hope implicit in 'blues truth.' In finding ecstatic expression for one's downtrodden state, one transcends it: one moves from resignation to revelation."[223] As Leland remarks, reading *On the Road* has the

---

[223] Laurence Coupe, *Beat sound, Beat vision: The Beat spirit and popular song* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2007), 60.

feeling of encountering the fruits of Sal's prophetic call,[224] a text that purposefully brings the bones of dead men back to life (Ez 37:1-14) in order to enflesh the world with a new kind of vision for community.

But in order to do that, Sal must know downtrodden humanity, must feel in his gut why a moan is such an appropriate response. It is again a call toward compassion, but one of a certain, radical order. Which is perhaps why Sal, the college dropout, seeks other misfits of society with such enthusiasm—the hobos, winos, hitchhikers, and racially marginalized forgotten ones who populate the pages of *On the Road*. Standing at the fringes of social acceptability, Sal learns why his fellow misfits are suspicious of authorities who make wild promises as a means of hiding the snares to take advantage of powerless undesirables. The police, a constant source of agitation in Sal and Dean's journeys, become the symbol of a merciless and mistrustful ruling class. In a jarring scene late in the novel, Dean and Sal, "ragged and dirty," looking like vagabond prophets "as if we had lived off locust," find themselves in Detroit's Skid Row among the "Beat Negroes," "old white bums," "young longhaired hipsters," and "whores"—all those who had "nowhere to go, nobody to believe in" (*OTR*, 245). In Sal's honest assessment, "the beater solid core of dregs couldn't be better gathered" (*OTR*, 245).

After spending the night sleeping in a movie-house with these fellow Beats, Sal wakes up amid a "huge dusty pile" of trash, and imagines that he has become like the rubbish of the world:

> All the cigarette butts, the bottles, the matchbooks, the come and gone were swept up in this pile. Had they taken me with it, Dean would never have seen me again. He would have had to roam the entire United States and look in every garbage pail from coast to coast before he found me embryonically convoluted among the

---

[224] Leland, *Why Kerouac Matters*, 20.

> rubbishes of my life, his life, and the life of everybody concerned and not concerned (*OTR*, 246).

It is a startling vision, one that reminds him of a wartime memory when he was so drunk in a Boston bar that he wrapped his head around a toilet and fell asleep while "at least a hundred seamen and assorted civilians came in and cast their sentient debouchments on me till I was unrecognizably caked" (*OTR*, 246). But rather than cause him grief, the experience in the Skid Row movie theater, along with the disgusting memory of being treated like something less than human, opens Sal up to an almost liberating understanding of his place in the world: "What difference does it make after all?—anonymity in the world of men is better than fame in heaven, for what's heaven? what's earth? All in the mind" (*OTR*, 246).

It as though twin concerns orbit around each other in this solidarity with the Beat of the world. First is Kerouac's implicit resistance to what in our contemporary times Pope Francis has labeled the "throwaway culture," which he defines as "a mentality in which everything has a price, everything can be bought, everything is negotiable," and thus, this culture only "has room only for a select few, while it discards all those who are unproductive."[225] Though Kerouac would not have known this more recent language, he would have been aware of the Catholic-Christian basis of its expression: the inherent dignity of each person as a child of God. Secularizing forces may have eroded this way of looking at human persons, but Sal, in solidarity with the misfits of postwar America not

---

[225] Tribune News Service, "Pope Denounces 'Throwaway' Culture of Consumer Society," *Chicago Tribune*, July 9, 2015, https://www.chicagotribune.com/2015/07/09/pope-denounces-throwaway-culture-of-consumer-society/.

only shares in the pain of feeling discarded, but "moans" for these forgotten by sharing their story.

But in a second move, Sal, in embracing his state of anonymity, seems to be embracing a call to be something like a modern holy fool. Leland sees parallels with Sal's choice to be among those thrown away with St. Paul's challenge to the people of Corinth to cast aside their concerns to be wise and wealthy and die to the logic of the world like Christ crucified.[226] In a clever nod to the language of ancient Greek theater[227]—"God has exhibited us apostles as last of all" (1 Cor 4:9 NRSV)—Paul exhorts his flock to live a parallel existence in the world as Christians:

> We are fools for the sake of Christ, but you are sensible people in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are honored, but we are dishonored. To the present hour we are hungry and thirsty, we are naked and beaten and homeless, and we grow weary from the work of our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we speak kindly. We have become like the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things, to this very day (1 Cor 4:10-13 NRSV).

Notice Paul's final line in this playful admonition: he and fellow apostles are viewed as "the rubbish of the world," the very word and image Sal uses to describe his lowly state and that of his community of forgotten ones.

When the reporter Mike Wallace asked Kerouac why so many of the Beat Generation were "bums and tramps," Kerouac turned to this very image: "Oh, you see, Christ says go out and find the bums….find the blind and the cripples;" indeed, "Christ invites everyone, including the outcasts" which is why there is "no contradiction at all

---

[226] Leland, *Why Kerouac Matters*, 154-5.

[227] L.L. Welborn, *Paul, the Fool of Christ: A Study of 1 Corinthians 1-4 in the Comic-Philosophic Tradition*, ed. John M.G. Barclay, Early Christianity in Context (London: T&T Clark International, 2005), 50-1.

between Christ and the bebopper and a hipster."[228] Kerouac, who considered himself "a priest for life,"[229] created in Sal a character who lives that priesthood with a definable "Christlike humility and sacrifice,"[230] placing him in a full, prophetic communion with the Beat, the forgotten, the outcast, the "rubbish of the world."

* * *

In the early stages of outlining the novel that would become *Love in the Ruins*, Percy wrote to his childhood friend and fellow writer Shelby Foote:

> I have in mind a futuristic novel dealing with the decline and fall of the U.S., the country rent almost helplessly between the rural knotheaded right and the godless alienated left, worse than the Civil War. Of that and the goodness of God, and the merriness of living quite anonymously in the suburbs, drinking well, cooking out, attending Mass at the usual silo-and-barn, the goodness of the Brunswick bowling alleys (the good white maple and plastic balls), coming home in the evening, with twin rubies of the TV transmitter in the evening sky, having 4 drinks of good sourmash and assaulting one's wife in the armchair etc. What we Catholics call the Sacramental Life.[231]

In the same letter, he is thinking about St. Theresa of the Little Flower, whose saintly wisdom revealed that "the only road is the Little Way, viz., the only way to do great things is to choose to treat of little things well."[232] Even as the pieces start to form in his imagination, Percy is linking what he calls the Sacramental Life to the Little Way of holiness, that battle with discouragement in the name of sacred patience in *The Story of a*

---

[228] James Terence Fisher, *The Catholic Counterculture in America, 1933-1962* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 240.

[229] Ibid., 240.

[230] Leland, *Why Kerouac Matters*, 155.

[231] Walker Percy and Shelby Foote, *The Correspondence of Shelby Foote & Walker Percy*, ed. Jay Tolson (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Co, 1997), 129.

[232] Ibid., 129.

Soul. It is clear that Percy puts Tom on this little way—this pilgrimage of the soul—even as it takes him most of the novel to find the courage to return to the sacraments and begin life again.

Tom's courage begins with a question, a waking out of the slumber of his own wayward existence: "How can a man spend forty-five years as a stranger to himself" (*LIR*, 212)? But life was not always so rudderless for Tom—it is just that he has forgotten that still more fundamental question, one he finally recalls later in the novel when another memory of Samantha surfaces in his consciousness. He remembers how much his daughter delighted in coming home from school and showing off her "letter-perfect" catechism. But one question sticks out: "Why did God make you" (*LIR*, 350)? Here is the *telos* of Tom More, that vocational self-understanding that comes to him in a memory as Sal's comes to him in a prophetic vision. It is *the* fundamental question, but even the question contains great knowing—that we do not just exist, but that we were created by a Creator for a purpose. The Baltimore Catechism that Samantha would have known has a clean and precise answer: "God made me to know Him, to love Him, and to serve Him in this world, and to be happy with Him forever in heaven."[233] But perhaps this text-book answer is not enough for Tom—he must hear it anew, and from someone he can trust. That person is Ellen Oglethorpe, his companion in work and life, the only one of his "poppies" in which there is an honest love, a love that wakes him up to the truth:

> You need something. Chief, I don't understand what is happening to you. You have so much to offer the world. There is so much that is fine with you. You're a fine doctor. And God knows, if the world ever needed you, it needs you now. Yet

---

[233] Third Plenary Council of Baltimore, *A Catechism of Christian Doctrine*, No. 0 (New York, NY: Benziger Brothers, 1921), 7.

> all you want to do is live here in this motel with three women for months on end (*LIR*, 345).

As Ellen makes clear, God did not make Tom for a purposeless life in the ruins.[234]

But coming to the right answer of the catechetical question about why he exists involves a new kind of humility, a restored belief that he cannot possibly escape the ruins by himself. Part of that help no doubt comes from Ellen, whose love awakens him. Late in the novel, when she is about to go away with the devilish Art Immelmann—"I need a job and you evidently don't need me" (*LIR*, 376)—something snaps inside of him. In an instant, he sees Ellen for who she is, and Art for who is, and though he shouts at him—"Don't touch her!"—it is like he becomes paralyzed: "I can't seem to move" (*LIR*, 376). Helpless, he prays with all his might: "*Sir Thomas More, kinsman, saint, best dearest merriest of Englishmen, pray for us and drive this son of a bitch hence*" (*LIR*, 376). The prayer works like an exorcism. Ellen, there to observe it, calls him home to himself, asking More: "Do you think you're a saint" (*LIR*, 377)?

The Epilogue of *Love in the Ruins*, taking place five years after the events of the novel, reveals the "little way" of Tom More as he eats Christ, drinks his blood, and tries to live out of his Sacramental Life. He has married Ellen, with whom he has two children. He lightens up on the booze.[235] He and his family move into the old Slave Quarters—

---

[234] There is more than a hint of the wisdom contained in an ancient Holy Saturday homily that imagines Jesus descending into hell after his crucifixion to save its inhabitants from eternal damnation: "I command you: Awake, sleeper, I have not made you to be held a prisoner in the underworld." "The Lord's Descent Into Hell," trans. Pontifical University of Saint Thomas Aquinas, n.d., https://www.vatican.va/spirit/documents/spirit_20010414_omelia-sabato-santo_en.html.

[235] When he does drink, as in the final scene of the novel, it is celebratory and expansive instead of a numbing agent for his private existential despair.

humble digs for their simpler lifestyle. His scientistic pride is not altogether gone—"I still believe my lapsometer can save the world—if I can get it right"—but he does see the world as it is, something he could not manage before: "the world is broken, sundered, busted down the middle, self ripped from self and man pasted back together as mythical monster, half angel, half beast, but no man" (*LIR*, 382-3). Still, he is not hung up on fame, fortune, and honors, those easy snares of temptation. Instead, Tom is living a life of gratitude, like "Robinson Crusoe set down on the best possible island" (*LIR*, 383).

But life is no longer an autonomous enterprise anymore. With the help of others, he cuts through his buffered self. Rather than retreating from the bitter polarizations plaguing the nation,

Tom welcomes the invitation of a Black friend to manage his campaign for the U.S. Congress under more old-time political urges: helping people. Meanwhile, Tom continues his practice as a psychiatrist, seeing patients of poorer means who often complain of a familiar malady: "a feeling of strangeness, of not feeling [themselves], of eeriness, dislocation, etcetera, etcetera" (*LIR*, 393). His disordered life is thus more properly ordered again. Other people are no longer the utilitarian means for his own end, whether pleasurable or prideful; they are finally persons with a dignity to match his own[236] and, as Ellen could see, Tom has much to give to a world that needs him.

* * *

[236] This is not a new theme in the book. The world-denying nature of Doris, the bizarre, if comical trappings of the Love Clinic, and the silently rebellious Mr. Ives all point to Percy's real concern about how human beings are viewed in our modern secular world.

In *The Road*, evoking the sacramental forms out of a shared gratitude grants meaning to the pilgrimage of the man and the boy in a world that has largely forgotten how to look for the hidden God in the ordinary, those moments of grace that flash out in the dim-lighted existence of its apocalyptic landscape. This meaning is like an energizing force that propels the pair hopefully into an unknown future—a fighting belief that their journeying will not be for naught, that there is a reason to carry the fire, that there will be other good guys. "Carrying the fire" is thus less a secular motto than a fervent prayer, a recurring litany that reminds the pair who they are and what they are about.[237] The boy struggles to understand its full imaginative value—"Is it real?" "Where is it? I dont know where it is" (*TR*, 278-9)—but in his dying breaths, the man tells him what he knew all along: "Yes you do. It's inside you. It was always there. I can see it" (*TR*, 279). In their pact to be good guys, the man in that moment christens the boy "the best guy" (*TR*, 279).

As we have noted, the man is clear on his vocation—to protect and love the boy. This he does throughout their journey, even to the end, when he covers "him with his body" when a bad guy attacks them with a bow and arrow (*TR*, 263), fulfilling the mother of the boy's prophecy to

"shield [him] from harm with your body" (*TR*, 57). As he dies from a long, lingering lung-borne illness, no doubt exasperated by the injury he sustains from his heroic sacrifice, he commends the boy to "go on," and fills him with the hope that all will be okay, a hope he often struggled to muster for much of their journey: "We were always

---

[237] Ashley Kunsa, ""Maps of the World in its Becoming": Post-Apocalyptic Naming in Cormac McCarthy's The Road," *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (Fall 2009), 59.

lucky. You'll be lucky again. You'll see. Just go. It's all right" (*TR*, 278). If, like Abraham, he struggled to make sense of how to be faithful to the boy in their brutal, violent world, even contemplating a mercy killing to spare the boy a more awful demise, he again begins letting go, even if his hope sometimes looks reckless. When they reach the coast, the boy questions what their journeys on the road have been about:

> I dont know what we're doing, he said.
> The man started to answer. But he didnt. After a while he said: There are people. There are people and we'll find them. You'll see (*TR*, 244).

Nothing would indicate that this is true. Is the man holding forth with blind optimism because he lacks the courage to act with the boy, or is something else at work here? A small clue rests on the shore, an abandoned boat with its name still visible on the transom: "Pájaro de Esperanza" (*TR*, 223), or Bird of Hope.

For much of their journeying, even to the last moments of his existence with the boy, the man speaks of luck, suggesting the precarious nature of chance to which they are subject. But in the end, he makes a leap from believing that the boy has luck on his side to one that sounds quite like faith—that the boy indeed is blessed: "Goodness will find the little boy. It always has. It will again" (*TR*, 281). In Kierkegaardian terms, the man, who speaks of God, good guys, and carrying the fire, but places his real faith in himself (a knight of infinite resignation) makes the impossible leap of faith to trust entirely in the blessedness of the boy—the goodness of God in him and in all things (the knight of faith).[238] He trusts the love in his heart for the boy—"I cant hold my son dead in my

---

[238] Like Abraham, the man eventually "believed and did not doubt; he believed the preposterous." Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 17.

arms. I thought I could but I cant" (*TR*, 279)—more than the sum of his very real fears. And this allows the blessed boy, "the best guy," carrying the fire inside of hm, to go on living out his true vocation.

While the man largely focuses his energies on being a good guy for the boy, the boy is like goodness itself—a Christ-like figure whose heart impels him to defend the dignity of others, to resist violence, to protect and provide for the vulnerable, and to challenge the man's anxious tendency to see their own concerns as greater than others.[239] Stang is right that *The Didache* haunts the novel, but it does not stop with its first teaching. The boy, who is baptized, anointed, and eucharistic, embodies "the way of life" set forth by the early Church. He loves his neighbor as himself, blesses those who curse him, loves his enemies, and gives (or desires to give) to those who need without asking anything in return. He is seemingly without malice or greed, he is never malicious, and he hates no one, even as he admonishes the man to be better.[240] He is love through and through—a New Adam[241] come to reveal to this post-apocalyptic world the possibility of being human again. This is why the man sees the boy as the word of God and the tabernacle glowing in the darkness and the I AM come to set him free. Carrying the fire

---

[239] It is no mistake that this looks very much like a Catholic Consistent Life Ethic (CLE), which has been defined and defended by the last several popes and key American ecclesial figures like Cardinal Bernardin, Archbishop of Chicago. Charles C. Camosy, *Resisting Throwaway Culture: How a Consistent Life Ethic Can Unite a Fractured People* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2019), 46-8.

[240] The Didache: Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, in *The Fathers of the Church: Volume 1 — The Apostolic Fathers*, trans. Francis X. Glimm, Joseph M.F. Marique, SJ, and Gerald Walsh, SJ (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1962), 171-3.

[241] Kunsa, ""Maps of the World in its Becoming," 65.

of a secular-defying *agape*, the boy is the road to humanity—the way and the truth and the life.

McCarthy seems to be making twin claims through the man and the boy. If we are to seek and live in the mysterious love of the hidden God, we need both the adult courage of leaping into an impossible kind of faith, a hope that looks blind but is not *and* we need that childlike heart of the boy who loves with reckless abandon. This is what it means to carry the fire into the secular void.

* * *

Humming of Mystery

Giving oneself over to the ineffable—through signs and symbols, through a life that neither conforms to nor entirely shuns the world as it is, can transform strangers into kindred blood. But true humility does something more still: it makes known, we knowers, to ourselves.[242] Though perhaps exasperated in our secular age, this human dilemma is no new problem. One of the oldest and greatest myths in the Judeo-Christian faith—the Fall of Humanity—speaks to our perpetual alienation: from God, from one another, from ourselves. "Where are you?" that divine question posed to a hurt and hiding Adam, is an ageless lamentation to our ceaselessly recurring amnesia (Gen 3:9 NRSV). To plunge the depths of this myth is to see the whole person exposed: our Godly image and likeness and yet our total dependence on God, our loss of God and yet our strongest desire to be

---

[242] I am deliberately playing on the famous first line to Nietzsche's *The Genealogy of Morals* that cuts to the core of our modern secular predicament: "We are unknown, we knowers, ourselves to ourselves." Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Horace B. Samuel, ed. T.N.R. Rogers (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2003), 1.

reunited with God.[243] For Christians, this story climaxes in the coming of Jesus, whose fleshy embodiment is meant to remind us Whose likeness we bear and Who is with us, even to the depths of the Cross. Even in our total abandonment of that love, a love we crucify, God still responded with a glorification of life over death, of love over fear—what Christians call the resurrection. What I am talking about is the drama of sin and salvation, of repentance and conversion, of being lost and being found.

To be humble—which, in the life of Christian faith, is inevitably caught up both in our sacramental life and the desire to give away that which we have received—is ultimately about witnessing to the liberating love of God, even despite (or because of) our fallen nature: the sins we commit, our failures to love and be loved. Salvation, which Thomas Merton rightly mourned as a word dead to modern ears, is not about piety or even ethics—it is about "a deep respect for the fundamental metaphysical reality of man," for it reflects "God's own infinite concern for man, God's love and care for man's inmost being, God's love for all that is His own in man, His son."[244] To be saved then, is about being rescued from the lostness we feel in this world with its "sea of lies and passions," and that "abyss of confusion and absurdity" we are too quick to call our selves—that self that we fail to understand because it its not really our our self at all:

---

[243] Bernard Bonowitz, O.C.S.O., *Saint Bernard's Three-Course Banquet: Humility, Charity, and Contemplation in the De Gradibus* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013), 39.

[244] Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York, NY: New Direction Books, 1961), 37-8.

> To be "lost" is to be left to the arbitrariness and pretenses of the contingent ego, the smoke-self that must inevitably vanish. To be "saved" is to return to one's inviolate and eternal reality and to live in God.[245]

This is the culmination of the journeying which Kerouac, Percy, and McCarthy chart, that final redemption which delivers selfhood back to their wayfaring pilgrims who all began their travels with uneasy feelings that they were lost in lands they never knew.

For Kerouac's Sal, that redemption exists in a hinterland between seeking and settling down, between growing up and getting married and yet still thinking of lost fathers and a lost friend: "Old Dean's gone" (*OTR*, 307). He has become a domesticated creature, drinking hot chocolate with "the girl with the pure and innocent dear eyes that I had always searched for and for so long" (*OTR*, 304). They are not the eyes of the Mexican girl penetrating him like the eyes of the Virgin Mother or the tender gaze of Jesus, but perhaps his self-discovery in those eyes are what allow him to know and respond to the loving gaze of Laura. Sal knows that to allow this new life to flourish, he must part ways with Dean, who he can see with a more nuanced wholeness—angel and demon, saint and sinner. It is fitting that it is from the back of a car that Sal and Laura wave goodbye to Dean (*OTR*, 306), separated by the thing that once united them and their quest to look for hope in America. It is living in this tension between seeking and dwelling, between ordinary human flourishing and the constant call to move beyond that good, that Sal can at once moan for man *and* grant him a vision of his own blessedness:

> So in America when the sun goes down and I sit on the old broken-down river pier watching the long, long skies over New Jersey and sense all that raw land that rolls in one unbelievable huge bulge over to the West Coast, and all that road

---

[245] Ibid., 38.

> going, all the people dreaming in the immensity of it, and in Iowa I know by now the children must be crying in the land where they let the children cry, and tonight the stars'll be out, and don't you know that God is Pooh Bear? the evening star must be drooping and shedding her sparkler dims on the prairie, which is just before the coming of complete night that blesses the earth, darkens all rivers, cups the peaks and folds the final shore in, and nobody, nobody knows what's going to happen to anybody besides the forlorn rags of growing old, I think of Dean Moriarty, I even think of Old Dean Moriarty the father we never found, I think of Dean Moriarty (*OTR*, 307).

The sentence-long "lullaby-elegy"[246] for America, a far cry from earlier laments of the national "nightmare life" (*OTR*, 106), still strikes the blues balance between sadness and quiet hopes for serenity—the dreamers woken by children crying, the cosmos circling as the people fail to read the stars. It is full of Emersonian soul and Whitmanian rhythm, Twain's sweeping song of the American sublime and Fitzgerald's nod to our helplessly greedy desires. It gathers past with present, the dream with the nightmare, hope for the future with nostalgia for the past.[247] But at its center is God—a great Pooh Bear God, playful yet mysterious,[248] blessing the earth and rivers, mountains and shores as the people grow old. And there is Sal, Beat from the road, lifting up his unconsummated dreams to this benevolent God like a priest-mystic, always at home, and never at home—a restless *homo viator* with nowhere to lay his head (Lk 9:58) yet forever aware of the ways God labors in his midst.

* * *

---

[246] Mark Richardson, "Peasant Dreams: Reading *On the Road*," in *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Jack Kerouac's On the Road*, ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2007), 226.

[247] Hunt, *Kerouac's Crooked Road*, 73.

[248] Leland, *Why Kerouac Matters*, 183.

If Sal is still incomplete at the end of the road, but wiser, better able to love and be loved, Tom More is likewise a being-in-process. But once again, Percy turns to the power of sacraments to help us move closer to God and thus closer to ourselves—grace perfecting nature according to the old wisdom. It takes Tom until the end of his own pilgrimage to make his small leap of faith, holding onto two truths at once: that he is broken but loved, a sinner but called to holiness. It is no small irony that while the secularized (and secularizing) psychiatrists in the novel want to rid Tom of his despair through the Skinner box, Percy remains convinced that it is another box that offers true healing: the confessional.

What is the confessional but a place where we recognize ourselves as loved sinners, as creatures "crawling between heaven and earth"[249]? It is a place of accompaniment—priest with penitent. It is a place of seeing again the love of God hidden by our own pride. That is where Tom goes, not to document his sins like an accountant, but to sit with those failings that have hurt others and spilt him in two: "I do not recall the occasions, Father, but I accuse myself of drunkenness, lusts, envies, fortification, delighting the misfortunes of others, and loving myself better than God and other men" (*LIR*, 397). But when the priest, Father Smith—the same man who told Max Gottlieb that "Death is winning, life is losing" (*LIR*, 185)—asks Tom if he feels contrite and has "a firm purpose of amendment," both necessary to receive absolution of sins, Tom laments honestly: "I don't know" (*LIR*, 397). At best he can say only what he has already said to Max—that he is sorry "for not being sorry" (*LIR*, 398). Though Father Smith tries to

---

[249] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 3.1.128.

show Tom the absurdity of his sin—"You are a doctor and it is your business to help people, not harm them" (*LIR*, 398)—little seems to break through. Indeed, Tom's frustration kicks in as he feels patronized by these "priestly tricks" (*LIR*, 398).

This small pride, and the fact that Tom still refuses to acknowledge sorrow for his sins, forces Father Tom to change tracks:

> "That's too bad. Ah me. Well—" He steals a glance at his watch. "In any case, continue to pray for knowledge of your sins. God is good. He will give you what you ask. Ask for sorrow. Pray for me."
>
> "All right."
>
> "Meanwhile, forgive me but there are other things we must think about: like doing our jobs, you being a better doctor, I being a better priest, showing a bit of ordinary kindness to people, particularly our own families—unkindness to those close to us is such a pitiful thing—doing what we can for our poor unhappy country—things which, please forgive me, sometimes seem more important than dwelling on a few middle-aged daydreams" (*LIR*, 399).

Here again is a compassion we have already seen in Kerouac and McCarthy—a true *suffering with* that reveals a humility in Father Smith that humbles Tom's stubborn pride: ""'You're right. I'm sorry," I say instantly, scalded" (*LIR*, 399). Twice Father Smith asks More to forgive him, but he is also direct in what sin has done, how "pitiful" it is, and how there are more important "things" than narcissistically indulging in petty fantasies. As Chesterton quipped, original sin—that is, our propensity to choose, again and again, the pitiful, unimportant, and self-serving—is "an obviously unattractive idea," perhaps more now than ever, but it is also what humbles us before each other, binding us up in a shared affliction *and* the hope of redemption from it: "when we wait for its results, they

are pathos and brotherhood, and a thunder of laughter and pity; for only with original sin we can at once pity the beggar and distrust the king."[250]

Following a revived old ritual, Tom is humbled further by wearing sackcloth and ashes, a public penance to atone for his sins before receiving Christ at the table of thanksgiving. But Tom is grateful for this act of contrition, celebrating his homecoming as a redeemed sinner. In a nod to the ending of *The Brothers Karamazov*, Tom departs the Mass and finds children, including his own son, setting off fireworks and crying: "Hurray for Jesus Christ!" And "Hurray for the United States" (*LIR*, 400)! But there is more than a playful literary allusion here. In placing Tom's savior and his nation in the focus instead of Tom himself,[251] Percy is telling us something about the role of true acts of humility as an exercise of faith—that, like John the Baptist,[252] we must decrease as God and nation increase, thus reversing modern mores which, as Delbanco argues, has rendered the cult of individualism into a god unto itself.

Only in his humbling atonement is Tom able to follow Father Smith's commendation to be better as a doctor, a husband, a father, and a citizen. In that great Christian paradox, humility before God and others does not deprive Tom of his freedom or happiness; rather, it is the source of both. Percy then is not just saying something about

---

[250] Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 155.

[251] Dostoevsky has Kolya proclaim "Hurrah for Karamazov!" after Aloysha eulogizes Illusha. Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 776.

[252] Tom, after all, is like a voice crying hopefully in the wilderness, preparing the way of the Lord: "I thought of Christ coming again at the end of the world and how it is that in every age there is a temptation to see signs of the end and that, even knowing this, there is nevertheless some reason, what with the spirit of the new age being the spirit of watching and waiting, to believe that—" (*LIR*, 387).

the hope of individual Americans, but of the hope of America too, something well noted by a great observer of the American experiment, Alexis de Tocqueville:

> Religion, which, among Americans, never mixes directly in the government of society, should therefore be considered as the first of their political institutions; for if it does not give them the taste for freedom, it singularly facilitates their use of it.[253]

Indeed, just before writing that line, Tocqueville remarks why that is, for though "the law permits the American people to do everything, religion prevents them from conceiving everything and forbids them to dare everything."[254] That is a lesson that eventually Tom learns. He goes on living in the modern secular world aware of its failings, but his renewed faith saves him from being lost in it. This not only saves him from crippling, narcissistic despair. It also shapes him into a person better equipped to build up others in his fragile society.

* * *

If Kerouac and Percy grant their characters a redemption they seek, and even indicate the possibility of national redemption, McCarthy, in his post-apocalyptic novel, stresses a more eschatological view—all creation "groaning in labor pains" toward some final redemption, that unseen hope for which we wait "with patience" (Rom 8:22-25 NRSV). Theologian Jeannine Hill Fletcher defines eschatology as that articulation of "the consummation of growth already taking place in human experience," that "fullness toward which all human lives tend" such that heaven, salvation, the beatific vision, is all

---

[253] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. and ed. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delta Winthrop (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 280.

[254] Ibid., 280.

simply in "continuity with the definitive choices enacted through the very moments of one's entire lifetime."[255] What is the end of the road if not our definitive, final union with God—a communion that is stronger than all our many struggles, stronger even than death?[256] We see that in the man, who dies without acting on his impulse to control by making a leap of faith and trusting that goodness will find the boy because "it always has" (*TR*, 281). His faith is not misplaced or naïve. After three days,[257] the boy encounters "one of the good guys" who invites him to take his own leap of faith—"You got two choices here" (*TR*, 283)—and join him and others in carrying the fire. Both are possessed by a wild, radical hope in this critical time—a strange belief, not unlike the one experienced by Plenty Coups, that they will get the good back, even as they have no way of imagining what that means or will look like.

If one mother departs into nihilistic darkness, another, new mother emerges in these final pages of *The Road* to bring the boy into the mystery of this moment, this mystery that wraps the boy's true grief and confusion over the death of the man with the hope of moving forward, of carrying the fire into a world that desperately needs it. Here is *stabat mater*, not yet mother *dolorosa*.[258] As the boy cries over his dead Papa, telling

---

[255] Jeannine Hill Fletcher, "Eschatology," in *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspective*, Second Edition, ed. Francis Schüsslter Fiorenza and John P. Galvin (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 639.

[256] Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, Second Edition (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1988), 91.

[257] Symbolic of the time between the death and resurrection of Jesus—another time of great fear and confusion that led to a hope beyond hope.

[258] Josephs, "The Quest for God in *The Road*," 140.

him “I’ll talk to you every day,” that he will not forget him, “no matter what,” it is this woman who not only comforts the boy but offers him time-worn wisdom:

> The woman when she saw him put her arms around him and held him. Oh, she said, I am so glad to see you. She would talk to him sometimes about God. He tried to talk to God but the best thing was to talk to her father and he did talk to him and he didnt forget. The woman said that was all right. She said that the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all of time (*TR*, 286).

Just as the man and the boy evoke the forms of the sacraments through genuine experiences of gratitude, and pledge to carry a fire they cannot see, here this new woman opens up the truth of the boy’s encounters with prayer—that it is okay, indeed “best,” to talk to the father he knew and loved rather than to an amorphous divinity he cannot grasp. Beyond the obvious messianic overtones, here again is McCarthy’s step toward an apophaticism that renders God hidden, even as the effects of God are so visible and real —“the breath of God,” the *ruah* or *pneuma* living in all spaces and times, passed from “man to man.”

It is that Spirit that has the last word in McCarthy in a paragraph that is as enigmatic as it is poetically mesmerizing:

> Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them stranding in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery (*TR*, 287).

Like a *meditatio* spoken from above, using brook trout as its example—whether out of the fact that these creatures are “natural miracles” easily susceptible to ecological

degradation[259] or, as a fish, an ancient symbol of Christianity, the *ixthus* used as a secret stand-in for Jesus to mark out members of *The Way*—it is a lament and a hope. On the backs of these trout live "vermiculate patterns," but which vermiculate did McCarthy have in mind—involute, or, as its Latin origins suggest, full of worms? And though they carry "maps of the world in its becoming," they also contain "mazes."

McCarthy, in a paragraph, puts our whole pilgrimage-in-miniature on display: from the depths of secular despair toward hope in something that has not been lost, that can never be lost. The brook trout, in all their glory, are gone, destroyed by those who were called to protect them (Gen 1:26-30). With them go truths that only they contained, the sacred which they signified, an embodiment of Beauty and Goodness itself—"a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again." Their loss is our loss. Their death is our death. But even still, the last word is not for us, but for a mystery—for hope that "in the deep glens where they lived," where all things "were older than man," there exists hidden, but undiminished, life *and* life evermore.

---

[259] Ibdi., 142

Epilogue

In an essay on the role of Catholic fiction in contemporary society, Flannery O'Connor, the dean of American Catholic letters, put succinctly something I have tried to say with many more words:

> We Catholics are very much given to the Instant Answer. Fiction doesn't have any. It leaves us, like Job, with a renewed sense of mystery. St. Gregory wrote that every time the sacred text describes a fact, it reveals a mystery. This is what the fiction writer, on his lesser level, hopes to do.[260]

Maybe we have heard God in the whirlwind Kerouac, Percy, and McCarthy summoned with their words to us, but if that is so, we are left with no words to utter back. Hope, after all, is not so much a thing to be expressed as a movement stirring within us whose origins we can never fully explain, for hope "does not come on its own."[261] To exist at all, it must look deep into that abyss of hopelessness. It must struggle with our purgatorial confusion to "catch the heart off guard and blow it open."[262] Maybe only then can we see our hopes manifest in the Pooh Bear God who blesses the world as we sleep, or feel the delirious urge to dance like David before the Ark on a holy Christmas night, or sense,

---

[260] Flannery O'Connor, "Catholic Novelists and Their Readers," in *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970), 184.

[261] Charles Péguy, *The Portal of the Mystery of Hope*, trans. David Louis Schindler, Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 10.

[262] Seamus Heaney, "Postscript," in *Open Ground: Poems 1966-1996* (London, UK: Faber and Faber, 1998), 444.

with awesome humility, the ineffable mystery humming with the "dearest freshness deep down things,"[263] that Word beneath the words.

Hope brings us out of the maze, accompanies us out on the road, and breaks open a new way of looking at things. It is that new sight spurring us into action, an energy rushing through us, like Peter and the other disciple running to the tomb (Jn 20:4) to discover life where once they saw only confusion and despair. Thus, Christian hope today is not so different from the urgency felt by those earliest disciples, who, in the words of theologian Johann Baptist Metz, were not moved by a "bourgeois counterfigure to hope," but by "a dangerous and liberating memory," that broke open the future for the hopeless and shattered.[264] Memory and hope have always walked hand-in-hand. Summoning old spirits, Sal senses the awakening of an ancient biblical world in those forgotten faces of a Mexican village, Tom bears the Hebraic remedy of sackcloth and ashes on his Little Way to penance and holiness, and the man leaps into Abrahamic faith as the boy channels magnanimous, redeeming Christ-like mercy and love of in a world that hardly deserves it. These memories shatter present illusions. It is why they are so dangerous *and* liberating at the same time.

Hope gifts our heroes the courage to live anew, to leave behind the lostness in answering a call to break through buffered, broken selves and enter the messiness of modern life as people of action—moaning for man, healing familiar hurts, carrying the

---

[263] Gerard Manley Hopkins, S.J., "God's Grandeur," in *Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. Catherine Phillips (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1986), 128.

[264] Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, trans. and ed. J. Matthew Ashley (New York, NY: Herder & Herder, 2007), 89.

fire into worldly darkness. Because it is hope calling them forth, and not their own wits or wiles, they stand humble before a mystery they can never really know, a mystery moving like the breath of God, possessing the heart, and asking: where is hope leading you?

Bibliography

Arnold, Edwin T. "Blood and Grace: The Fiction of Cormac McCarthy." *Commonweal*. November 4, 1994. 11-15.

Aronson, Ronald. *We: Reviving Social Hope*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2017.

Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Theologica: Complete English Translation in Five Volumes*. Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province. Allen, Texas: Christian Classics, 1981.

————————. *Summa Theologiae: Questions on God*. Edited by Brian Davies and Brian Leftow. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Augustine. *Expositions on the Book of Psalms*. Vol. V., Translated by Members of the English Church. Oxford, UK: John Henry Parker, 1853.

Baggett, Jerome P. *Sense of the Faithful: How American Catholic Live Their Faith*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Bellah, Robert N., Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008.

Berger, Peter L. *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of A Sociological Theory of Religion*. New York, NY: Anchor Books, 1967.

Bonowitz, Bernard O.C.S.O. *Saint Bernard's Three-Course Banquet: Humility, Charity, and Contemplation in the De Gradibus*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013.

Broncano, Manuel. *Religion in Cormac McCarthy's Fiction: Apocryphal Borderlands*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2014.

Brooks, David. *Bobos in Paradise*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2000.

Brueggemann, Walter. *The Prophetic Imagination*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2018.

Camosy, Charles C. *Resisting Throwaway Culture: How a Consistent Life Ethic Can Unite a Fractured People*. Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2019.

Charters, Ann. “Introduction.” In Jack Kerouac’s *On The Road*. vii-xxix. New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1991.

Chauvet, Louis-Marie. *The Sacraments: The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body*. Translated by Madeleine Beaumont. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2001.

Chesterton, G.K. *Heretics*. Nashville, TN: Sam Torode Book Arts, 2010.

———————. *Orthodoxy*. Nashville, TN: Sam Torode Book Arts, 2009.

Coupe, Laurence. *Beat sound, Beat vision: The Beat spirit and popular song.* Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2007.

Crews, Michael Lynn. *Books Are Made of Books: A Guide to Cormac McCarthy’s Literary Influences*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2017.

Crowley, S.J., Paul G. *The Unmoored God: Believing in a Time of Dislocation*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017.

Delbanco, Andrew. *The Real American Dream: A Meditation on Hope*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999.

de Lubac, S.J., Henri. *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*. Translated by Edith M. Riley, Anne Englund Nash, and Mark Sebanc. San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1995.

de Tocqueville, Alexis. *Democracy in America*. Translated and edited by Harvey C. Mansfieldand Delta Winthrop. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2000.

Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *Crime and Punishment*. Translated by Richard Pavear and Larissa Volokhonsky. New York, NY: Vintage Classics, 2021.

———————. *The Brothers Karamazov*. Translated by Richard Pavear and Larissa Volokhonsky. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002.

Eagleton, Terry. *Hope Without Optimism*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019.

Elie, Paul. *The Life You Save May Be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003.

Elliot, David. “Hope in Theology.” *Historical and Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Hope.* Edited by Steven C. van den Heuvel. 117-136. New York, NY: Springer Publishing Co, 2020.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. “Self-Reliance.” *Nature and Selected Essays*. Edited by Larzer Ziff. 117-140. New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2003.

Faulkner, William. “Banquet Speech.” December 10, 1950. https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1949/faulkner/speech/.

Fisher, James Terence. *The Catholic Counterculture in America, 1933-1962*. Chapel Hill, NC:The University of North Carolina Press, 1989.

Fletcher, Jeannine Hill. “Eschatology.” *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspective*. Second Edition. Edited by Francis Schüsslter Fiorenza and John P. Galvin. 621-652. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010.

Frye, Steven. *Understanding Cormac McCarthy*. Columbia, SC: The University of South Carolina Press, 2009.

Garner, Dwight. “Cormac McCarthy, Novelist of a Darker America, Is Dead at 89.” *The New York Times*. June 14, 2023, A, 1.

Giamo, Ben. “What IT Is?” *Bloom’s Modern Critical Interpretations: Jack Kerouac’s On the Road*. Edited by Harold Bloom. 183-206. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2007.

Griswold, Wendy. *Cultures and Societies in a Changing World*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 1994.

Heaney, Seamus. “Postscript.” *Open Ground: Poems 1966-1996*. 444. London, UK: Faber and Faber, 1998.

Heschel, Abraham. *The Prophets*. New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 2001.

Hopkins, S.J., Gerard Manley. “God’s Grandeur.” *Gerard Manley Hopkins*. Edited by Catherine Phillips. 128. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1986.

Hunt, Tim. *Kerouac’s Crooked Road: The Development of Fiction*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010.

Ignatius of Loyola. *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*. Translated by Louis J. Puhl, S.J. Chicago, IL: Loyola University Press, 1951.

John of the Cross. “The Spiritual Canticle.” *The Collected Works of St John of the Cross*. Translated by. Kieran Kavanagh, O.C.D. and Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D. 408-. Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1979.

Josephs, Allen. “The Quest for God in *The Road*.” *The Cambridge Companion to Cormac McCarthy*. Edited by Steven Frye. 133-145. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

Kerouac, Jack. “About the Beat Generation.” *The Portable Jack Kerouac*. Edited by Ann Charters. 559-562. New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2007.

———————.“*Beatific*: The Origins of the Beat Generation.” *The Portable Jack Kerouac*.Edited by Ann Charters. 565-573. New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2007.

———————. “Kerouac’s Introduction.” *The Portable Jack Kerouac*. Edited by Ann Charters. xxiii-xxv. New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2007.

———————. “Lamb, No Lion.” *The Portable Jack Kerouac*. Edited by Ann Charters. 562-565.New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2007.

———————. *On The Road*. New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1991.

———————. *The Town and the City*. London, UK: Penguin Classics, 2018.

Kierkegaard, Søren. *Fear and Trembling*. Edited by C. Stephens Evans and Sylvia Walsh. Translated by Sylvia Walsh. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

———————. *Sickness Unto Death*. Translated by Alastair Hannay. New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1989.

Kołakowski, Leszek. “Anxiety About God in an Ostensibly Godless Age.” *Is God Happy?: Selected Essays*. 183-195. London, UK: Penguin Books, 2012.

Kunsa, Ashley ““Maps of the World in its Becoming”: Post-Apocalyptic Naming in Cormac McCarthy’s The Road.” *Journal of Modern Literature*. Vol. 33, No. 1 (Fall 2009): 57-74.

Lasch, Christopher. *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991.

Lawrence, D.H. *Studies in Classic American Literature*. New York, NY: The Viking Press, 1961.

Lear, Jonathan. *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006.

Leland, John. *Why Kerouac Matters: The Lessons of the Road (They're Not What You Think)*. New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2007.

Leonard, S.J., Richard. "Happiness Has Become an Industry That is Selling All of Us a Lie." *The Tablet*. September 30, 2017, 9.

Lewis, C.S., *The Abolition of Man*. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2000.

Ligairi, Rachel. "When Mexico Looks Like Mexico: The Hyperrealization of Race and the Pursuit of the Authentic." *What's Your Road, Man?: Critical Essays on Jack Kerouac's* On the Road. Edited by Hilary Holladay and Robert Holton. 139-154. Carbondale, Il: Southern Illinois University Press, 2009.

MacIntyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory.* Third Edition. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007.

Macquarrie, John. *A Guide to the Sacraments*. London, UK: SCM Press, 1997.

McCabe, O.P., Herbert. "Hope" *God, Christ, and Us*. Edited by Brian Davies, O.P. 5-24. New York, NY: Continuum, 2003.

———————. "Prayer." *God Still Matters*. Edited by Brian Davies, O.P. 64- 75. London, UK: Continuum, 2002.

———————. "Washing and Eucharist." *God, Christ, and Us*. Edited by Brian Davies, O.P. 83-87. New York, NY: Continuum, 2003.

McCarthy, Cormac. Interview by Oprah Winfrey. *The Oprah Winfrey Show.* Harpo Production, June 5, 2007.

———————. *The Road*. New York, NY: Vintage International, 2006.

———————. *The Sunset Limited: A Novel in Dramatic Form*. New York, NY: Vintage International, 2006.

McGeer, Victoria. "The Art of Good Hope." *The Annals of the American Academy*, 592 (1), March, 2004: 100-127.

McNally, Denis. *Desolate Angel: Jack Kerouac, The Beat Generation, and America*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Books, 2003.

Menand, Louis. "Drive, He Wrote: What the Beats Were About." *New Yorker*. September 24, 2007. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/10/01/drive-he-wrote.

———————. *The Free World: Art and Thought in the Cold War*. New York, NY: Picador, 2021.

Merton, Thomas. *New Seeds of Contemplation*. New York, NY: New Direction Books, 1961.

———————. *The Seven Storey Mountain: An Autobiography of Faith*. New York, NY: Harcourt Brace, 1998.

Metz, Johann Baptist. *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*. Translated and Edited by J. Matthew Ashley. New York, NY: Herder & Herder, 2007.

Millstein, Gilbert. "Books of the Times." *The New York Times*. Sept. 5. 1957, 27.

Murray, S.J., John Courtney. *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition*. Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1960.

Newman, John Henry Cardinal. *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*. Edited by Bernard Williams. Translated by Josefine Nauckoff. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

———————. *The Genealogy of Morals*. Translated by Horace B. Samuel. Edited by T.N.R. Rogers. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2003.

Nisly, L. Lamar, ""The Sacred Idiom Shorn of its Referent": An Apophatic Reading of *The Road*." *Christianity and Literature* 68, no 2 (2019): 311-324.

O'Connor, Flannery. "Introduction to a Memoir of Mary Ann." In *Mystery and Manners*. Edited by Sally and Robert Fitzgerald. 213-228. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1970.

———————. “Catholic Novelists and Their Readers,” In *Mystery and Manners*. Edited by Sally and Robert Fitzgerald. 169-190. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1970.

———————. “The Church and the Fiction Writer,” In *Mystery and Manners*. Edited by Sally and Robert Fitzgerald. 143-153. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1970.

Péguy, Charles. *The Portal of the Mystery of Hope*. Translated by David Louis Schindler, Jr. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996.

Percy, Walker. “Concerning *Love in the Ruins.*” *Signposts in a Strange Land*. Edited by Patrick Samway. 247-250. New York, NY: Picador, 1991.

———————. *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book*. New York, NY: Picador, 1983.

———————. *Love in the Ruins: The Adventures of a Bad Catholic at a Time Near the End of the World*. New York, NY: Picador, 1971.

———————. *The Moviegoer*. New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1998.

——————— “Why Are You a Catholic?” *Signposts in a Strange Land*. Edited by Patrick Samway. 304-315. New York, NY: Picador, 1991.

Percy, Walker and Shelby Foote. *The Correspondence of Shelby Foote & Walker Percy.* Edited by Jay Tolson. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Co, 1997.

Potkay, Adam. *Hope: A Literary History*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2022.

Potts, Matthew L. *Cormac McCarthy and the Signs of Sacraments: Literature, Theology, and the Moral of Stories*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2015.

Prothero, Stephen R. “On the Holy Road: The Beat Movement as Spiritual Protest.” *Harvard Theological Review.* 84:2 (1992): 205-222.

Radcliffe, O.P., Timothy. *What is the Point of Being a Christian?*. London, UK: Continuum, 2005.

Ratzinger, Joseph. *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*. Second Edition. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1988.

Richardson, Mark. “Peasant Dreams: Reading *On the Road.*” *Bloom’s Modern Critical Interpretations: Jack Kerouac’s On the Road*. Edited by Harold Bloom. 207-231. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2007.

Ripatrazone, Nick. *Longing for an Absent God: Faith and Doubt in Great American Fiction*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2020.

Samway, S.J., Patrick H. *Walker Percy: A Life*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997.

Second Vatican Council. *Lumen Gentium*. November 24, 1964. https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vatii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

Schall, S.J., James V. “On Dealing with Man.” In *A Political Companion to Walker Percy*. Edited by Peter Augustine Lawler and Brian Smith. 69-86. Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2013.

Shakespeare, William. *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark. The Norton Shakespeare:Based on the Oxford Edition*. Edited by Stephen Greenbaltt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, Katherine Eisaman Maus. 1668-1759. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997.

———————. *The Tragedy of Macbeth. The Norton Shakespeare: Based on the Oxford Edition*. Edited by Stephen Greenbaltt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, Katherine Eisaman Maus. 2564-2618. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997.

Smith, Brian A. *Walker Percy and the Politics of the Wayfarer*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017.

Smith, Christian. *Moral, Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Stang, Charles M. “Ash and Breath: Christ on ‘The Road.’ *Harvard Divinity Bulletin.* Winter/Spring 2011. https://bulletin.hds.harvard.edu/ash-and-breath-christ-on-the-road/.

Tarnas, Richard. *The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the Ideas That Have Shaped Our World View*. New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 1991.

Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018.

The Didache: Teaching of the Twelve Apostles. *The Fathers of the Church: Volume 1 — The Apostolic Fathers*. Translated by Francis X. Glimm, Joseph M.F. Marique, S.J., and Gerald Walsh, S.J. 171- 184. Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1962.

"The Lord's Descent Into Hell" Translated by the Pontifical University of Saint Thomas Aquinas. n.d. https://www.vatican.va/spirit/documents/spirit_20010414_omelia-sabato- santo_en.html.

Third Plenary Council of Baltimore. *A Catechism of Christian Doctrine*. New York, NY: Benziger Brothers, 1921.

Thoreau, Henry David. "Walking." *The Portable Thoreau*. Edited by Jeffrey S. Cramer. 555-589. New York, NY: Penguin Classics, 2012.

Tolson, Jay. *Pilgrim in the Ruins: A Life of Walker Percy*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1992.

Tracy, David. "Approaching the Christian Understanding of God." *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspective*. Second Edition. Edited by Francis Schüsslter Fiorenza and John P. Galvin. 109-129. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010.

———————. *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism*. New York, NY: Crossroad Publishing, 1981.

Tribune News Service, "Pope Denounces 'Throwaway' Culture of Consumer Society." *Chicago Tribune*. July 9, 2015. https://www.chicagotribune.com/2015/07/09/pope-denounces-throwaway-culture-of-consumer-society/.

Turner, Victor and Edith. *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1995.

Vopat, Carole Gottlieb. "Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*: A Re-evaluation." *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Jack Kerouac's On the Road*. Edited by Harold Bloom. 3-18. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2007.

Vorgrimler, Herbert. *Sacramental Theology*. Collegville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992.

Wallace, David Foster. "An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace." Interview by Larry McCaffery. *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*. Edited by Stephen J. Burn. 21-52. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2012.

Waugh, Evelyn. *Brideshead Revisited: The Sacred and Profane Memories of Captain Charles Ryder*. London, UK: Penguin Books, 1962.

Welborn, L.L. *Paul, the Fool of Christ: A Study of 1 Corinthians 1-4 in the Comic-Philosophic Tradition*. Edited by John M.G. Barclay, Early Christianity in Context. London: T&T Clark International, 2005.

Whitman, Walt. "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer." *The Portable Walt Whitman*. Edited by Michael Warner. 249-250. New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2004.

Wood, Ralph C. "Søren Kierkegaard, Walker Percy's *Love in the Ruins*, and Transparency Before God." In *Kierkegaard and Christian Faith*. Edited by Paul Martens and C. Stephen Evans. 95-116. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016.

Wright, N.T. *God and the Pandemic: A Christian Reflection on the Coronavirus and its Aftermath*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2020.

Wuthnow, Robert. *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998.

Yeats, W. B. "The Second Coming" *The Oxford Book of Irish Verse*. Edited by Donagh MacDonagh and Lennox Robinson. 138-139. Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1958.