

Thinking with Cormac McCarthy

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Abstract

This brief essay honors the recently deceased American author Cormac McCarthy by interpreting a short scene from one of his screenplays as a modern instance of genuinely tragic understanding. This interpretation is compared on the one hand with a related yet comedic version of tragic knowledge, and on the other hand with the play “Oedipus the King” by Sophocles. The essay argues that fostering the presentiment of such tragic understanding might be an effective way of motivating people to act to avert climate change.

Keywords

Cormac McCarthy; Tragedy; Climate Change; Sophocles

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The science, the knowledge, and the foreknowledge are clear; it is not obscure, opaque, conditional, seen “as through a glass darkly.” It is not adumbrated, intimated, hinted at, as one might say about the possibility of utopia, societal change, or radical social transformation. It is starkly evident and palpably incontrovertible: the activities of human beings contribute to the acceleration of climate change and eventual environmental catastrophe. And yet we persist, undeterred, as though our reality existed wholly unconnected to that bleak, dire, devastated reality that is this actuality’s endpoint, the ever more inevitable consequence of the continuity that causally progresses from each moment now into that future.

Our gaze wanders, our focus falters, our attention is diverted and monetized by our current reality’s manufactured distractions and *bagatelles*: the self-satisfied greenwashing, or the ludicrous displacement of corporate and governmental responsibility onto fictitious preventative measures like recycling to be undertaken by voluntaristic consumers, as though all the individual, piecemeal recycling in the world could offset the environmental degradation caused by one transpacific journey of one Maersk container ship, as though each of us *qua* living thing were not already slowly being assimilated into a new Great Chain of Being, stratified by the disposition of microplastics within each creature.

And yet we persist, fail to see, fail to imagine, or deny our knowledge, persist in familiar habits as though they were not in fact our eventual unraveling as a society, as a species. How to effect change? Haranguing fails, pleading fails, menacing prophecies fail, calculated predictions and extrapolated if-then syllogisms fail, even calling attention to the present-day emissaries of the catastrophe to come—the now normalized, nearly annual “once in a century” floods, wildfires, and droughts—fails. An abiding failure of political will, predicated upon an abiding failure of imaginative capaciousness.

An idea, a desperate one. To produce a very particular mental state, with specific cognitive content and non-cognitive attitude: the mental state of an Attic tragic hero who realizes that his action has brought about (retrospectively will inexorably have brought about, i.e. it was his fate) the ruination of himself, his family, his progeny, his polis, his people; the realization that absolutely nothing can be done to prevent or forestall the annihilation that is to be brought upon his loved ones *by his own hand*; calamity and catastrophe as future past perfect, future foregone. The amalgam of dread, of unshirkable, unambiguous responsibility, of utter despair and hopelessness theorized by Aristotle in the *Poetics*: the inevitable destruction of the hero due to his *hamartia* (error, flaw) that brings about the audience’s catharsis of fear and pity. Our age’s mass media bubbles over with disingenuous, hollow invocations of “tragedy.” But a chance lightning strike causing a power outage is a misfortune, not a tragedy, and a premeditated mass shooting is an atrocity, not a tragedy. Perhaps we are so profligate with the word because it has been drained of its primeval, sacred import, which once mocked with imprecations our juridical morality and confident life plans. We moderns think ourselves immune to the

tragic and its ancient chthonic origins: plague, curses, prophecies, the working out of fate, forces beyond humankind's ken and control. We think ourselves invulnerable because we think we have disenchanted, rationalized that world of unforeseeable gods and nature, but in fact through those very means of rationalized control we have become the witting and unwitting agents of our own perdition.

There is a mesmerizing scene in the film *The Counselor*, with a screenplay by Cormac McCarthy (McCarthy 2013), that conveys the sense that I am trying to capture. The titular counselor, played by Michael Fassbender, has made a multimillion-dollar deal with a Mexican drug cartel and, through malfeasance by others and an unlikely coincidence beyond his powers of anticipation, the cartel has come to believe that he has betrayed them. They kidnap his beloved, who was entirely innocent and ignorant of the matter, and it's clear that she will die a long and excruciating death, the video recording of which will then be deposited anonymously at his doorstep. The counselor tries desperately to reach the cartel boss, the *jefe*, hoping to negotiate her release, or at least offer himself in her place. They have only one, brief telephone conversation, in which the *jefe* endeavors to explain to the counselor that there is no hope, no relief from his impending self-incurred downfall. The conversation begins almost as would an introductory lecture on the relation—as theorized from Leibniz to Lewis—of possible worlds to the actual world:

Jefe: Actions create consequences which produce new worlds and they're all different. And all these worlds, heretofore unknown to us, they must have always been there, must they not? You have to acknowledge the reality of the world that you're in. There's not some other world.

Counselor: Will you help me?

Jefe: I would urge you to see the truth of the situation you're in, Counselor. That is my advice. It is not for me to tell you what you should have done or not done. The world in which you seek to undo the mistakes that you made is different from the world where the mistakes were made. You are now at the crossing. And you want to choose, but there is no choosing there. There's only accepting. The choosing was done a long time ago... Are you there, Counselor?

Counselor: Yes.

The "crossing," the boss elaborates, names the recognition that the actual world in which one finds oneself is, for oneself at that time, a world determined by the inexorable consequences of one's previous actions, a world closed under fate, wholly distinct and disjunct from possible worlds in which one might still negotiate, still act and effect change.

Jefe: I don't mean to offend you, but reflective men often find themselves at a place removed from the realities of life. In any case, we should all prepare

a place where we can accommodate all the tragedies that sooner or later will come to our lives. But this is an economy few people care to practice. And that is because when it comes to grief, the normal rules of exchange do not apply, because grief transcends value. A man would give entire nations to lift grief off his heart and yet, you cannot buy anything with grief. Because grief is worthless.

Counselor: Why are you telling me this?

Jefe: Because you continue to deny the reality of the world you're in.

Grief motivates the counselor's denial of his actuality just as, the *jefe* suggests, it generally leads people to fail to contemplate, to avert their gaze, to blind themselves to the fateful consequences awaiting them. But this is not the kind of grief brought about by the loss of someone or something one values, in which grief temporally follows loss as cause and effect, event and response. Instead, this is prospective grief, or rather a grief that incrementally accompanies and thereby resists the recognition of what one has already wrought as this unfolds, ineluctably and unbearably. And, the cartel boss emphasizes, tragic grief exists outside any economy of exchange, not because it alone is intrinsically, incomparably valuable, like the "absolute worth" of Kant's good will (Kant 1997, 8) but because, inversely, it is an incomparable mental state of absolute despair, beyond even the exchange economy of hope that this finite future might be exchanged for another, for any other, world.

Counselor: You said I was that man at that crossing.

Jefe: Yes, at the understanding that life is not going to take you back. You are the world you have created, and when you cease to exist, this world that you have created will also cease to exist. But for those with the understanding that they're living the last days of the world, death acquires a different meaning. The extinction of all reality is a concept no resignation can encompass. And yet, in that despair, which is transcendent, you will find the ancient understanding that the philosopher's stone will always be found despised and buried in the mud. This may seem a small thing in the face of annihilation until annihilation occurs. And then, all the grand designs and all the grand plans will be finally exposed and revealed for what they are.

The "ancient understanding," I submit, is a genuine tragic understanding, and it is orthogonal, opposed to the self-assertion and self-confidence of modern Western thought, going back to Socrates' claim that science and knowledge can "correct existence." Tragic understanding is the revelation that it cannot, and moreover, that it will have brought about the very destruction it now contemplates. This ancient understanding predates Judeo-Christian sentiments, because it countenances not the slightest succor falsely promised by the reassuring thought of redemption, which would indeed return suffering to the economy of exchange, hope, control, and order. What the *jefe* calls "the crossing"

gravitates towards what Aristotle called *anagnorisis*: the world-inverting shift, the recognition or “tragic knowledge” that one has brought an inescapable and incalculable cataclysm upon oneself and one’s own.

McCarthy’s ancient wisdom is cast into relief in a comparison with a scene in an episode of the television series *The Newsroom* (Sorkin 2014) that gestures toward this same understanding, but in the comedic register. An indisputably credentialed and experienced climate scientist and “deputy assistant administrator of the EPA [Environmental Protection Agency]” is interviewed in the studio by the news anchor about the recently released climate report and rejects the host’s various attempts to offer some hope to the audience of turning around the environmental collapse that will ensue from the rise in global temperature. To each attempt by the anchor the scientist says, “no, there is nothing to be done. We could have done something, but now it is too late.” The acclaimed writer of the episode, Aaron Sorkin, recoils from McCarthy’s sober, resolute, and unflinching gaze upon our collective, self-inflicted denouement, instead titrating solace through humor—the scientist-bureaucrat is a listless and dour sad sack—that as it were leavens Cassandra’s implacable utterances with cartoonish comic relief: a modicum of exchange, control, and order restored that aims to avert the pure and powerless recognition of that which we will have inevitably brought to pass.

The ancient Attic understanding, by contrast, is unadulterated by such fanciful forestalling and ameliorating admixtures. Rereading Sophocles’s *Oedipus the King* (Greene 1991) from our historical juncture, one is struck by its narrative structure. In virtually every meeting with another character, Oedipus is told by his interlocutor, more or less explicitly, what he has unwittingly done. As an adult he had learned of Apollo’s prophecy, which he recounts: “Once on a time Loxias said / that I should lie with my own mother and / take on my hands the blood of my own father” (ll. 994-996). Each person he encounters partially reiterates and confirms precisely that account. Teiresias tells him: “you are the land’s pollution” (l. 353); “I say that with those you love best / you live in foulest shame unconsciously / and do not see where you are in calamity” (l. 367-369); “It is not fate that I should be your ruin, / Apollo is enough; it is his care / to work this out” (l. 376f.). Jocasta tells him how similar he looks to Laius and confirms the account of his murder and the close coincidence of it with Oedipus’s subsequent appearance in Thebes (ll. 736ff.) such that Oedipus exclaims “O God, I think I have / called curses on myself in ignorance” (ll. 744-745). A drunk visitor in Corinth had accused Oedipus “of being a bastard” (ll. 779-781). The priestess Pythia at Delphi, speaking for Apollo, had “foretold / other and desperate horrors to befall me, / that I was fated to lie with my mother, / and show to daylight an accursed breed / which men would not endure, and I was doomed / to be murderer of the father that begot me” (ll. 790-795). The first shepherd, who had taken the infant Oedipus to the childless king and queen of Corinth, tells him this (l. 1040). And the second shepherd, to whom Jocasta had given her cursed infant, and who had passed the child for safekeeping to the first shepherd, tells him this (l. 1171ff.). The narrative of the play unfolds like a forensic investigation: each interrogated witness fills in a causal link ultimately yielding an unbroken chain of events from Oedipus’s birth to his fateful end. Throughout his investigation, he clings to the self-delusive hope (and recall that hope is the final malady remaining in Pandora’s jar of evils) that, as one rumor

had it, Laius was murdered by a group of highway robbers, not a single man. “One man cannot be the same as many” (l. 844-45) he says, failing to hear the echo of the Sphinx’s riddle that he alone had solved to become the savior of his city.

With the help of McCarthy, we can see the plot of *Oedipus the King* as the incremental revelation of this ancient understanding, the “crossing” or reversal (*peripeteia*) attending tragic knowledge, which perhaps we moderns think we’ve outgrown, despite our encounters with scientists, with activists, with present and predicted victims of climate catastrophe.

We might follow McCarthy’s clue like Ariadne’s thread through the labyrinth of noise, distraction, and disinformation that echo ceaselessly from the shadows of corporate avarice and governmental cowardice. Our task would be to try, despite the incessant cacophony, to imaginatively transpose our fellow frail mortals into that unbearable, mad state of “the crossing,” to inflict upon them the experience that perhaps led to Kafka’s insight as reported to Max Brod and recollected by Walter Benjamin (1999, 798): “[there is] plenty of hope, an infinite amount of hope—but not for us.”

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Biography

Henry W. Pickford is Professor of German and Philosophy at Duke University. He is the author of *The Sense of Semblance: Philosophical Analyses of Holocaust Art*; *Thinking with Tolstoy and Wittgenstein: Expression, Emotion, and Art*; co-author of *In Defense of Intuitions: A New Rationalist Manifesto*; co-editor of *Der aufrechte Gang im windschiefen Kapitalismus: Modelle kritischen Denkens*; editor and translator of *Theodor W. Adorno, Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords* and *Selected Early Poems* of Lev Loseff; and author of over twenty-five articles and book chapters. He is currently co-authoring the book *Adorno: A Critical Life* and co-editing the *Oxford Handbook to Adorno*, and editing and translating a selection from Adorno’s notebooks. More information about his work can be found on academia.edu.