

The Road to the Sun They Cannot See: Plato's Allegory of the Cave, Oblivion, and Guidance in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

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Twenty-four centuries, a very wide ocean, and major evolutions in western civilization lay between the American novelist Cormac McCarthy and the ancient Greek philosopher Plato. McCarthy is more known for his frequent use of violence and the stylistic yet minimal exuberance that characterizes most of his novels while Plato wrote dialogues in lieu of essays to discuss philosophical matters in the declining Republic of Athens.

Yet there is a thread of one of Plato's most famous theories—the often debated allegory of the Cave—which is interwoven in McCarthy's latest book, *The Road*. Even though published over 2000 years after *The Republic*, *The Road* bears some resemblance to the philosophical treaty. McCarthy is not attempting to write a philosophical essay per se, neither is he explicitly referring to Plato, or philosophy. McCarthy's reference to philosophy had been noted by Dianne C. Luce in her article on Platonic mythology in *Child of God* as she writes that McCarthy “clearly engages Platonic philosophy in many of his works” (174). But about *The Road* McCarthy himself only said to Oprah Winfrey in his sole television interview: “I'd like to think it's just about the boy and the man on the road [...] it's a pretty simple straightforward story.” It seems, however, that a cave-driven reading of *The Road* can bring new elements to help understand the peculiar relationship between that boy and that man and the quest that leads them south, on a path from innocence and ignorance to experience and knowledge.

Let us first refresh our memories on Plato's allegory of the Sun, the Divided Line, and the Cave. This paper will later study the basic analogies between both works, and finally see how Plato's theory fits into McCarthy's set of themes. The extensive presence of visual and light symbolism throughout both texts sets a strong emphasis on the power of dreams, illusions, and oblivion, and will constitute a second part. Our conclusion will focus on discussing the very relevant themes of guidance and education in *The Road* in light of Plato's concepts.

1. “Wandering in a cave”¹ from *The Republic* to *The Road*:

Before digging deeper into the philosophical abysses, let us indulge in a very general overview of both books. *The Republic* takes the form of a reported dialogue between Socrates and his disciples and more precisely Glaucon in books VI and VII where the allegory is being discussed. Dialogues are a form quite familiar to Plato whose entire canon is written as such as the dialogue form was thought superior by Socrates and Plato². *The Republic* is regarded as one of Plato's most complete masterpieces, eloquently named “the richest book ever yet composed” by American critic Paul Elmer More (54). As it masters a very wide array of subjects, the book has often been set as a philosophical reference and a “centerpiece of Plato's philosophy”³ since it “is centrally concerned with the question about how we acquire knowledge about the most important things: not only about beauty, but about justice and the good itself” (Rowe 100). The

philosophical piece is the center of attention of many critics, scholars, and of course many philosophers as well. Our study has been greatly enlightened by Heidegger's work, especially his *Essence of Truth* which deals entirely with *The Republic* and *Theaetetus*. This study has been of great help in understanding the allegory of the Cave. However, we must be aware that no consensus can be reached, as Julia Annas points out in her *Introduction to Plato's Republic*:

The Cave is Plato's most famous image, dominating many people's interpretation of what Plato's most important ideas are. This is a pity, because, as with the Line, severe problems arise over interpreting the imagery philosophically, and there are persistent disagreements. (252)

This defines Plato's work as eminently indispensable for all philosophical purposes and intents but also as sufficiently cloudy to arise more discussion.

The Road seems not quite in the same vein: it tells the story of a post apocalyptic journey taken by a father and his son to the south in hopes of a better life (or a life at all) under a sun that remains unseen behind impenetrable cloud coverage and the omnipresent threat of death. The book received dithyrambic praise from major newspapers and magazines: *Publishers Weekly* considers it "[a] postapocalyptic tour de force;" the *New York Review of Books* calls it "McCarthy's most brilliant genre work;" the *New York Times* depicts the novel as "an exquisitely bleak incantation—pure poetic brimstone." The novel was also awarded the prestigious Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2007 and its cinematic adaptation will most likely be released this winter. On the scholarly front, the *Cormac McCarthy Journal* published an issue devoted to *The Road* in fall 2008. There is also an appendix in John Cant's *Cormac McCarthy and the Myth of American Exceptionalism*, a book which deals with *The Road*, though not exhaustively.

As stated previously, it is not an easy task to explain efficiently Plato's theory and it is not the purpose of this essay to offer a groundbreaking explanation on Plato's long-debated theory. Some points, however, have been acknowledged by most critics as being of utmost relevance. At the very book VI of *The Republic*, Socrates discusses the image of the Sun (507—509) and explains:

When they [the eyes] are directed towards objects on which the sun shines, they see clearly and there is sight in them?

Certainly.

And the soul is like the eye: when resting upon that on which truth and being shine, the soul perceives and understands and is radiant with intelligence.

[508](248-249)⁴

The Sun is therefore the link between sight and the understanding of good because "the sun makes possible clear vision, because it bathes the visible things in light and thereby gives the power of sight to the eye" (Howland 123). Plato uses the Sun as the visual image for the intelligible, non visual Good because the Sun is "supreme in the visible realm" (Annas 245) for it "illuminates and lights up the visible world" (Blackburn 97).

The metaphor of the divided Line is slightly more complicated to decipher. Socrates has just explained the difference between the visual and intelligible worlds and

he takes his argument one step further by drawing a line along which he aims to scale the different ways knowledge evolves. Instead of quoting Plato's words, I'd rather use a very well designed scheme by Sean Sayers which explains the different stages from A (easy since visual) to D (less accessible since intelligible):

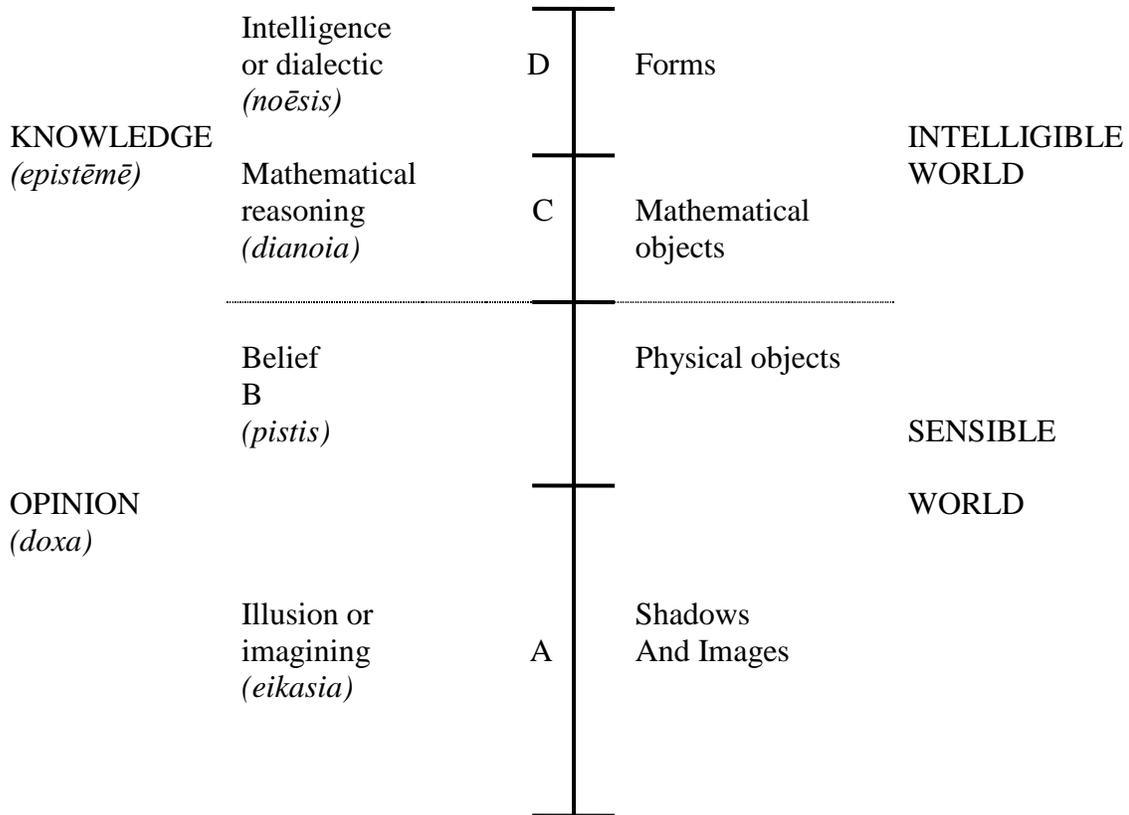


Fig. 1.: Figure from Sean Sayers, *Plato's Republic: an Introduction*. Edinburgh : Edinburgh University Press, 1999. 123.

To explain this briefly, the process goes from the sight of a beautiful image to the apprehension of what true beauty is beyond the image. The path along the divided Line will lead an individual from what he thinks to be true to Truth itself.

The explanation of the divided Line falls into place when applied to the allegory of the Cave itself. The allegory presents prisoners—a metaphor for human beings untouched by philosophy—shackled since childhood at the bottom of a cave against a wall and forced to gaze in one direction. Behind them is a fire and between them and the fire are puppets whose projections on the wall are all the prisoners can see. They are unaware of their condition and once liberated, they must walk out of the cave to real light, a process painful in both the physical and metaphysical senses since they are used to neither light nor reality.

Divided Line	Cave
A. Illusion (<i>eikasia</i>)	Prisoners bound in the cave looking at shadows of puppets
B. Belief (<i>pistis</i>)	Prisoners freed in the cave seeing the puppets and the fire
C. Mathematical reason (<i>dianoia</i>)	Seeing shadows and reflections of objects outside the cave
D. Intelligence (<i>noēsis</i>)	Looking directly at the objects outside the cave
Knowledge of the Form of the Good	Looking directly at the sun

Fig. 2.: Figure from Sean Sayers, *Plato's Republic: an Introduction*. Edinburgh : Edinburgh University Press, 1999. 127.

Once the prisoners are freed, their conception of what is real has been shattered and their eyes are not ready for light yet; therefore, the prisoners will be tempted to go back to their original shackled stage. As Heidegger says it, “Unshackledness has no content in itself. He who has just been unshackled becomes insecure and helpless, is no longer able to cope; he even regards those who are still shackled as possessing an advantage in terms of this negative freedom” (43). Fortunately, he will be “dragged up a steep and rugged ascent” (Plato [515] 255) out of the cave by those who have freed him and once he has reached the outskirts of the Cave and looked at the things lit by the light of the Sun, he will have true vision. He can then enhance that vision by looking directly at the Sun and shall therefore become a wakeful philosopher.

The very first page of *The Road* makes a connection to the allegory which will hopefully appear obvious now we have in mind the terms of Plato’s theory: “In the dream from which he’d wakened he had wandered in a cave where the child led him by the hand. Their light playing over the wet flowstone walls. Like pilgrims in a fable swallowed up and lost among the inward parts of some granitic beast” (3). In this passage we understand that the father and son are indeed in the cave, though already at stage B, i.e. recently freed from their shackles. Now they have seen the fire their own shadows are projected on the wall before them and must aim for the exit of the cave. In *The Road's* narrative, father and son indeed wander in the vastest cave ever crafted in modern literature, a post apocalyptic, “barren, silent, godless” world (*TR* 4). Another cave image found later in the novel reinforces our point of post apocalyptic land as cave metaphoric: where the father and son find the “human stock” of the bad guys “huddled against the back wall were naked people, male and female, all trying to hide, shielding their faces with their hands. [...] Then one by one they turned in blinked in the pitiful light” (93).

The description of the landscape has indeed something cavesque to it; it is very often described as immensely dark: the “nameless dark come to enshroud them” (*TR* 8) has no end, it is “impenetrable” (13) and even the binoculars offer no better perspective: “He got the binoculars out of the cart and stood in the road and glassed the plain. [...] Nothing to see.” (7). Their sight is therefore extremely reduced, as it rightly should be in an allegoric Cave, and the early snow cannot help it: even though snow is usually praised for its whiteness and therefore visual enlightenment, in *The Road* it mixes with ashes which turns it black: “the ash fell on the snow till it was all but black” (28).

The allegory of the cave is also present in the father’s early strife to relentlessly look backwards in the rear-view mirror—“he kept constant watch behind him in the mirror” (21)—which offers an altered vision, a mere image of reality which corresponds more to stage A⁵. Indeed his obsession with his past condition reaches a point where he questions going back: “We’re not thinking, he said. We have to go back” (6). This movement backwards which is present in the allegory of the Cave has been pre-
envisioned by the narrator in the second part of the father’s opening dream:

They stood in a great stone room where lay a black and ancient lake. And on the far shore a creature that raised its dripping mouth from the rimstone pool and stared into the light with eyes dead white and sightless [...]. It swung its head low over the water as if to take the scent of what it could not see. Crouching there pale and naked and translucent, its alabaster bones cast up in the shadow on the rocks behind it. [...] It swung its head from side to side and then [...] turned and lurched away and loped soundlessly into the dark. (3-4)

The creature has indeed reached stage C since it has looked out towards the exit of the cave. However, as predicted by Plato⁶, the creature cannot bear the sight of light, therefore cannot bear the vision of truth and decides to go back to darkness, i.e. the Cave and its shackles.

It seems dubious though, that the father would go *back* on the road. The only place we know the father comes from is a campsite up north where the mother commits suicide (50). If we apply the allegory of the cave to the entire journey, the prison at the bottom of the cave echoes the lesser condition of man that the father is refusing as he tries to beat the odds and reach a safer place whereas others, such as the mother, have already given up. Indeed, the cave is “not just the degraded state of a bad society. It is the human condition” (Annas, 252). In his attempt to reach the exit of the cave, the father shows his resilience to escape his doomed human condition and to survive as he hits the road.

That road holds a metaphysical sense to it: why “the” road, and not “a” road, or “this” road? It is unlikely that the apocalypse would have destroyed all but one road. McCarthy’s use of the definite article “the” mythologizes the road and gives it its uniqueness, out of the countable and the ordinary, and symbolizes the journey undertaken by the father and the son. In an identical manner, *the* Line symbolizes the progression from imagining to knowledge and the uniqueness of *the* road equals the uniqueness of *the* Line. Interestingly enough, the road in the novel is very linear and stands out of the landscape as if stronger than the declining landscape, an echo of the declining society:

“the road beyond ran along the crest of a ridge where the barren woodland fell away on every side” (13). The road, conveyer of the journey, holistic metaphor of the Line, helps the duo out of the Cave to the Sun through a “process of enlightenment [which] is portrayed as a journey from darkness into light” (Annas 253,) from a light they desperately seek from the Sun that will be necessary to guide them out of the Cave, and therefore out of the land of despair.

Unfortunately in *The Road* the Sun remains “dull [...] moving unseen beyond the murk” (12) throughout the novel. The Sun is not absent though; its return is hoped for, proof that faith in truth still exists: “as if the lost sun were returning at last” (27). In *The Road*, the Sun does not allow that final step of lighting things with the glow of truth, since it remains hidden, but the father and son’s wishes to see the sun again clearly reflect their desire to reach that final step, a safe exit from the cave. The son indeed asks his father: “If you were a crow, could you fly up high enough to see the sun?” (134)—the father answers that it indeed exists even if out of reach. It is, however, extremely difficult for the father to provide light to replace the missing sun: most of the actual light they enjoy comes from fires they set, some of them are insufficient (“the fire was little more than coals and it gave no light” 82) and the father is soon unable to make fire since he drops the lighter in the middle of the novel (107). Metaphysically speaking, the father is also very much challenged in his ability to enlighten his son since his own vision is fooled by his numerous dreams and illusions. Strangely enough, in his first dream, the father is led by the son in the cave (*TR* 3) not conversely, which already sets him as a lesser philosopher than his son. Indeed the father’s vision of what is ahead is very limited, which only increases with dreams and sickness.

2. And in “the sleep of death,” dreams and oblivion come⁷:

Dreams play an important role in McCarthy’s narratives⁸; most of his stories are marked by the weirdness of reminiscence and the deceitful power of dream and dreamlike narratives. *The Road* is no exception: it is filled with dream narratives and their wakeful equivalents: remembrances, daydreams “from [which...] there was no waking” (*TR* 16). The structure of the novel follows that of the journey itself, dreams happen to the father as regularly as their wakeful echoes. Dreams, like the illusive images projected in the cave, play powerful tricks on the father, impeach his vision and his successful exit of the cave.

I agree with Arnold as he explains that dreams have been so exhaustively discussed that it makes it rather difficult to offer an overview of scholarly studies in an essay not meant exclusively for this. He cites, however, Freud and Jung and their belief that “dreams [...] offered evidence from the sleeping world for interpretation in the wakeful state” (40) noting that Freud disagreed with Jung’s “‘mystical’ bent” (40). Freud indeed believes in the power of self-unconscious as prevailing in dreams, but Jung takes that theory further to collective unconscious. Arnold concludes saying that “McCarthy’s use of dreams seems closer to the Jungian concept than the Freudian, for they are often ‘mystical’ in their manner” (40). I strongly agree with the mystical emphasis but I think that in the case of *The Road* dreams possess an extra trait, a strong negative symbolism which can be explained with help from one of Plato’s disciple, Aristotle.

Dreams on the road are always a painful experience for the characters: the father dreams of heavenly, long past things like the “uncanny taste of a peach” (16), which take him away from the doomed reality “he was loathe to wake from” (111). Memories, which are assimilated to daydream or wakeful dreaming, act upon him in an identically negative way: “from daydreams on the road there was no waking. He plodded on. He could remember everything of her save her scent” (16). Indeed most of dreams or memories refer to the past as it once was, a past the father is struggling to let go. Against his son’s will, the father wishes to visit his old house and bedroom and takes the unwilling boy to “where [he] used to sleep” (23) where he, of course, recalls his childhood dreams, “the dreams of a child’s imaginings, worlds rich or fearful such as might offer themselves but never the one to be” (23). The child keeps mentioning how scared he is but the father proceeds against his own reason: “We should go, Papa, he said. Yes, the man said. But he didn’t” (22), before he can eventually acknowledge that he “shouldn’t have come” (23). The father is wrong, but he cannot help himself.

The persistent rivalry between dreams and reality is one of the father’s most difficult and tempting fights. His reminiscing is a self-imposed violence which still owns an inch of reality as he says that “he thought each memory recalled must do some violence to its origins. [...] What you alter in remembering has yet a reality” (111). He also mistrusts the fake reality of dreams as he acknowledges that they take him away from reality: “he mistrusted all of that. He said the right dreams for a man in peril were dreams of peril and all else was the call of languor and death” (15), an early echo to the father’s later recurrent over-sleeping which he calls “sleep of death” (170). We may know little of McCarthy’s literary influence, but we can trace back the origin of dream as a call of death to *Hamlet* and his famous tirade on dreams and death: “for in that sleep of death, what dreams may come, when we have shuffled off this mortal coil, must give us pause: there’s the respect that makes calamity of so long life” (III, 1). Dreams impeach the proper perception of reality since they keep part of the father’s mind in a world long gone and render him restless and sensible to dreams; Aristotle agrees with this theory: “he calls dreaming an affection of the perceptive faculty, as in sleep, but again does not call it an inactivity of that faculty” (Wijsenbeek 213). Indeed, dreams may affect perception but they are also a clear indicator of life since it indicates persistent perception.

Once death is upon men dreams indeed cease, which is the case of the wife who says that she doesn’t dream shortly before committing suicide (48). The father also has a “dreamless sleep” (211) as he thinks the boy is about to die and he will die with him⁹. Philosophically, it seems that dreams might tend to increase because of sickness: “another cause of delusions is illness. The higher the fever, the greater the degree of emotion in the patient, so that the chance that he will be deceived by his illusions is greatest when the illness is most severe” (Wijsenbeek 222). Once the child has recovered from sickness, he indeed tells his dad “I had some weird dreams” (212), just like the father whose dreams of the “vanished world returned” (157) brighten when he is sick. The father is subject to such surreal illusions which increase his philosophical resistance. Against his own good will, the father is still attracted to images, whether they are fake representations of reality (his dreams) or representations of a non-longer-existing reality (his memories). This implies that he has not successfully detached himself from the altering power of images and is therefore diminished in his philosophical endeavor.

Dreams are indeed “not the means by which supernatural wisdom is conveyed” (Wisjsenbeek 172) since they blindfold the dreamer with a fake cover of reality he does not wish to be stripped of. He is therefore an improbable philosophical guide to lead the way out of the cave because he cannot successfully detach himself from stage B.

There is a strong emphasis placed on perception in *The Road*, mostly visual perception. As said previously, it is very hard for the father to provide light for technical reasons but also for metaphorical reasons. The father is himself blinded by the visual power of images which are “the mere appearance of the sensible world, which obscure the reality behind and get in the way of the philosophical soul” (McCabe 49). Since light for Plato operates “as a metaphor of truth” (Annas 257), how could the father possibly be able to enlighten his son and give him a glimpse of truth? We are given an understanding of such powerlessness through the motive of oblivion.

The motive of blindness has often been dear to McCarthy who used the device several times in the past, most notably the blind man in *The Crossing* and the blind musician who refuses to serve as Magdalena’s godfather in *Cities of the Plain*. The blind man in *The Crossing* serves as a literary foreseer of the world to come in the future—and therefore in *The Road*—since he, despite his blindness, has a clear vision of what is to come: “the world itself moved in eternal darkness and darkness was its true nature and true condition and that in this darkness it turned with perfect cohesion in all its parts but that there was naught there to see” (*The Crossing* 283). The blind man later explains that his blindness has led him to forget “dreams and memories alike [which] had faded one by one until they were no more” (291). The father’s oblivion has not reached the medical stage of blindness, but many around him have: his wife, for example, is blind by the time she nears her death; the man struck by lightning is also half blind (“one of his eyes was burnt shut” *TR* 42); and both are described as being bound to die. Blindness in *The Road*, whether it is physical or spiritual, acts as a harbinger of death until the very end: the father is blindfolded by his many dreams and memories, unable to see the light at the exit of the cave (“they went on in the perfect darkness, sightless as the blind” 197) before his sight is actually challenged (“he lay watching the boy at the fire. He wanted to be able to see” 233).

In her article on blindness as “physical and moral disorder” Mary Jane Kelley argues that in many ancient and biblical works blindness is a sign of physical and moral disorder which follows a guilty or sinful action (she cites, among others, the Cyclops, Oedipus). Sight and blindness in the Bible are often associated with the power of God and therefore the power of faith upon mankind: men are cured from blindness thanks to the power of God and the power of faith. I would not say that McCarthy is setting the father’s upcoming blindness as an example of moral disorder or sin per se, but I do think it connects with the loss of faith and the loss of will to see the truth since in *The Road* most of those who have lost sight and hope end up dead. Indeed, if the father wasn’t blinded by images and dreams, he might have been able to lead the child of the cave towards a place where truth can be found. He runs unnecessary risks which will ultimately cause his death and cannot but embrace his many dreams until the end (“old dreams encroached upon the waking world” 236). In *The Road*, it is not only the truth that these characters, as well as the readers, are looking for: they are looking for the meaning of life, the meaning of survival, and that meaning can only be reached if there is indeed a guide to light up the way out of the cave. The father’s philosophical oblivion

prevents him from reaching meaningfulness as he dies still anchored in the cave: “the dripping was in the cave. In that cold corridor they had reached the point of no return which was measured from the first solely by the light they carried with them” (237).

3. Love to guide and educate.

There are several answers to the question why *The Road* is a very peculiar novel in McCarthy’s corpus. Some of those answers have to do with the geographical and historical setting of the novel which stands out in McCarthy almost perfectly divided Appalachian and Western novels. Some have to do with the inexplicable outing of seclusion from McCarthy to promote the novel all the way to Oprah’s sofa. I would argue that, with regards to Plato’s theory and McCarthy’s past novels, the theme that sets this book as a work apart is guidance, as well as the narrative bond between father and son that McCarthy has created. Many previous novels depicted father/son relations as being inexistent or unsatisfactory. Fathers in McCarthy fail at providing worthy examples—John Grady’s father is a broken down war veteran and divorcee. Sometimes their deaths prevent them from providing an example at all: both Billy’s father and John Wesley Rattner’s father die early in the lives of their sons. Fathers of male protagonists in McCarthy’s novels stand out by their absence or incapacity to be educators which causes most of the young heroes to set out on journeys without a father and worse, without a guide.

In *The Road* McCarthy changes this traditional component: there is a guide, the father, whose love for his child takes him on the road because that journey out of the cave “always requires guidance” (Friedländer 67). The father tries hard to provide this guidance and spurs on a resilience that overcomes many obstacles in the way. For example, the father ceases to teach the son (“we don’t work on your lessons anymore” 206) but at least he has tried. Many times the father thinks that death is upon them, or that there shall be no more than a couple of days left to live, yet he goes on awkwardly, imperfectly, albeit persistently.

What truly lies beyond the allegory of the Cave for Plato and what I argue lies beyond *The Road* is the absolute necessity for guidance and philosophical education to shape a society not devoid of humanity and order, a society that aims for truth and truthful life, in other words, happiness, which in Plato’s—and McCarthy’s works—is not to be mistaken with pleasure. Indeed, happiness is reached when philosophical knowledge is gained, and that process, as we have seen, does not induce pleasure but pain as “further ascent takes the ex-prisoner up a rough steep slope” (Blackburn 102). Heidegger goes even further saying that “violence belongs to this liberation: man must use a kind of violence to be able to ask about himself” (56), which implies that violence is an intrinsic part of the quest for truth and happiness, which could be a hint at McCarthy’s recurrent use of violence as a somehow positive and necessary means to reach completion, if not happiness.

But the first, and probably worst, misconception that makes the father an unlikely and unsuccessful guide is the belief that freedom from the shackles is enough, that advancing on the road as a means to survive is enough: it is not. Acceptance of survival is just the first step. It is a hard step to take as we see that many refuse to live on and give in (the mother, the thunder-burnt man) but it is a mere acknowledgement of stage A. As

Heidegger says, “removal of the shackles is thus not genuine emancipation, for it remains external and fails to penetrate to man in his ownmost self” (26). If the father truly wishes to educate his son as a man, he must go further than his mere will to live is taking him, for as a philosophical educator he must be able to be “elevating, or guiding the engaged human being to maturity” (Rotenstreich 207).

Yet how could the father truly educate the child when he is himself led by his dreams and illusions? One of his many dreams explains this as a generational gap as he envisions weird creatures which remind him of himself: “He’d been visited in a dream by creatures of a kind he’d never seen before. They did not speak. [...] maybe he understood for the first time that to the boy he was himself an alien. A being from a planet that no longer existed. The tales of which were suspect” (129). The father is so driven by old memories and dreams of ancient things that he himself is outdated. His aptitude to melancholia makes him incapable of wisdom, which is however quite indispensable for the correct fulfillment of the task since “the love of wisdom [is what] leads [man] to the exterior of the cave” (Howland, 144). If the father was the philosophical guide or prophet to lead the child out, his love of wisdom would prevail and help him overcome. But the father is hindered in his philosophical endeavor by his own misshape as a philosopher, by his own incapacity to teach his son. He is ultimately put to death as he cannot find his way out of the Cave in another very cavesque moment where it becomes obvious that the son has outshined his father in terms of philosophical advancement:

The dripping was in the cave. The light was a candle which the child bore in a ringstick of beaten copper. The wax spattered on the stones. Tracks of unknown creatures in the mortified loess. In that cold corridor they had reached the point of no return which was measured from the first solely by the light they carried with them. (236)

We must, though, give credit to the father for his rare but effective teaching: the son can read (he successfully deciphers the word “pear” from the can 117), he is taught through lessons till the second third of the novel, and he has been taught how to properly commit suicide: “Don’t be afraid, he said. 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 point it up. Do it quick and hard. Do you understand? Stop crying” (95). Paradoxical to this very real and pragmatic teaching, the child is also kept in a juvenile world since the father maintains the ancient tradition of the bedtime storytelling. I purposely use ‘ancient’ for what is ancient for us in our pre-apocalyptic era is Plato and Ancient History, but what is ‘ancient’ for the kid is the world as we know it now, the world where a Coca Cola bottle is a strange, alien object. But the paradox will reach its apex by the end of the novel, when the son starts blaming the father for his illusive stories, an echo of his illusions.

This poignant confrontation between the father and the boy occurs shortly after the father has stripped off his clothes and possessions a thief who had just taken their cart away. The son blames the father for not only reclaiming his due but for taking the thief’s possessions as well, claiming that will cause his death (“we did kill him” he says p. 219). It becomes obvious after this episode that the father’s right mind has been so shadowed

that it calls the son to action, a son who has silently observed has realized that he also needs to worry:

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. (218)

The boy has understood that it is not only necessary to be freed from the shackles (and to survive) but it is indispensable to survive the right way, and not fall in line behind the "bad guys," which the father has, according to the child, as he caused somebody's death. There is a need for further accomplishment to reach full philosophical education. Friedländler interprets Plato's wish to educate in the right way as a sign of true love: "For him, true love is love that educates. [...] Education means shaping the beloved after the image of god [...]; hence, this orientation also imposes upon the educator the obligation to look up to the god and resemble the latter more and more." (196)

The son's education is rendered incomplete by the father's own refusal to see the light, and the son realizes it, he even blames his father for teaching him deceptive narratives as he compares bedtime stories to lies:

Do you want me to tell you a story?
No
Why not? [...]
Those stories are not true.
They don't have to be true. They're stories.
Yes. But in the stories we're always helping people and we don't help people.
(225)

The father is aware that stories are untrue, but the son is already a step ahead: the stories he wishes to tell are not happy stories, "they're more like real life" (226). There is a clear passage from innocence to acceptance and the doomed power of experience in the voice of this child who grew up too fast. The father and storyteller is overruled within his own narrative by the stronger voice of his wiser, yet younger son, who has benefited from his ill-mannered and incomplete teaching and from his father's past failures. The father has tried and he has led his child nearer to the exit of the cave, to a place where he will, hopefully, be able to reach out by himself now that he has a deeper understanding of philosophical knowledge.

Conclusion:

Of course, *The Road* is not a novelization of Plato's allegory, written to line up point for point with the metaphor. I think however that this cavesque reading of *The Road* sheds a new light on McCarthy's newfound interest in paternal guidance, a guidance he is only able to discuss now that he has experienced late fatherhood which has probably helped him rethink his role as a father:

(Winfrey) Had you not had this son at this time, this book wouldn't have been written?

(McCarthy) No. Absolutely not. Never would have occurred to me to try to write a book about a father and a son.

McCarthy understands, both as a father and a storyteller, the utmost importance of guidance and example, and I think that he is trying to put forward once again the idea that indeed “the endless search for truth is the best stand-in for the actual attainment of wisdom” (Weiss 203), a theory that he explores many times in his previous books but that he takes one step further with this father/son allegory. *The Road's* father fails at leading his son completely out of the cave, but he succeeds in bringing his son toward that enlightenment. His son is an older and wiser child by the end of the novel, he has overturned his father's experience to make it his own, and he has successfully comprehended the need to see the Sun and to search for an enlightened truth, a truth that, according to McCarthy, comes from within: he concludes the novel telling the child has “to carry the fire [...] It's inside you. It was always there” (235).

What shall we understand from this? That the father's Sun was his child, that this entire time he used his son as the benchmark for directions? I doubt it. I think the father is trying to tell his child that he is philosophically able to search for the light and the Sun and to keep trying to reach the exit of the cave and the truthful and more fulfilled life that awaits there and that part of that sunny truth lays in the hope carried by this son. After all, the post apocalyptic winter of their discontent can hopefully be turned into glorious summer by this son who does not come from York but who has proven to be worthy of that philosophical endeavor.

Notes

¹ *The Road* 3.

² “Writing is but an image or phantom of this living and breathing speech, which in the very nature of things is superior, more powerful.” Craig, Leon Harold. *The War Lover: a Study of Plato’s Republic*. Toronto: U of Toronto Press, xiv.

³ “*The Republic* is in one sense the centerpiece of Plato’s philosophy, for no other single work of his attempts to treat all of these topics so fully” (Kraut 10).

⁴ The number in brackets refers to the verse, the number in parenthesis refers to the page in the given edition of *The Republic*.

⁵ Let us recall what is engraved in all rear-view mirrors in America: “Objects in the rear-view mirror are closer than they appear” which speaks for itself: objects in rear-view mirror are not as real as reality. For a closer examination of the mirror motive in McCarthy, see Barclay Owens. *Cormac McCarthy’s Western Novels*. Tucson: U of Arizona P, 2000.

⁶ See longer extract here: “The glare will distress him [the prisoner], and he will be unable to see the realities of which in his former state he had seen the shadows; and then conceive someone saying to him, that what he saw before was an illusion, but that now, when he is approaching nearer to being and his eye is turned towards more real existence, he has a clearer vision, -what will be his reply? [...] will he not be perplexed? Will he not fancy that the shadows which he formerly saw are truer than the objects which are now shown to him? [...] if he is compelled to look straight at the light, will he not have a pain in his eyes which will make him turn away [...]?” [515-516], (255)

⁷ “The sleep of death” refers to both *The Road*, 170, and Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, “for in that sleep of death, what dreams may come, when we have shuffled off this mortal coil, must give us pause” (III, 1).

⁸ Edwin T. Arnold offers a very strong study of dreams in *The Border Trilogy* and his “lengthy prelude” (49) offers a strong analysis of the dream motive in McCarthy’s entire corpus. For further reading, see Arnold, Edwin T. “Go To Sleep: Dreams and Visions in the Trilogy.” *A Cormac McCarthy Companion*. Eds Edwin T. Arnold and Dianne C. Luce. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2001, 37-72.

⁹ “you have to stay near, he said. You have to be quick. So you can be with him. Hold him close. Last day of the earth” (*TR*, 210).

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