

Humanity in the State of Nature: Notes on José Saramago's "Blindness" and Cormac McCarthy's "The Road"

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Since the 1990s, the increasing success and diffusion of dystopian literature and allo-histories have attracted the attention of political scientists. This “genre-blurring” literature (Baccolini 2000), which violates the disciplinary boundaries between art, philosophy, and politics, has been defined as an essayistic genre, offering new political and ethical perspectives on human relations (Booker 1994; Eckstein 1999; Jameson 2005; Gordin et al. 2010). One of the more surprising features of dystopian literature is its relation to the past and present: the future scenarios that are described are disturbing but also attractive in some way because, as they depict a threatening future, they reveal some hitherto hidden and dangerous possibilities in our present lives as well or an alternative reconstruction of past events. In dystopias, the construction of new “settings” is the main device employed to create in the reader—via the protagonists—both a sense of shock and a feeling of instability, i.e., of estrangement (Delany 1991; De Lauretis 1981; Suvin 2014). Hence, dystopias often tell us something new and disturbing about our past: as Frier writes, “history is merely a constant examination of the past, carried out in terms of the problems and the points of interest, as well as the fears and concerns surrounding and afflicting us in the present” (Frier 2001, 98).

I examine two dystopian novels that share some common starting points: they both refer to a far-distant past, before civilization as such began; they attempt to describe the re-establishment of human moral behavior in the extremely hostile conditions such a past entails; and their respective authors believe that the only possible basis for re-establishing morality may be found in the relation of hospitality between the self and the other. The two novels are *Blindness*, by José Saramago, and *The Road*, by Cormac McCarthy. In spite of the difference between the historical contexts in which these novels were written—*Blindness* was written in 1995 and *The Road* in 2006—and between the authors, they present striking similarities, even though they ultimately seem to reach different conclusions. Indeed, the two novels pose the same fundamental political and philosophical question: how is morality possible in a condition almost similar to the state of nature? Saramago's answer is suggested in the behavior—not the language—of the doctor's wife, the only character who keeps her eyesight; McCarthy, on the other hand, chooses a child as the moral agent in a world characterized by death and deprived of order.

The time setting of the two novels is both very remote and very near: very remote in that the narratives describe a situation in which civilization as we know it has ceased to be and very near in that the event that triggers the backlash against the state of nature takes place in our time. This proximity is shown in the descriptions on the one hand of familiar city landscapes, traffic, and architecture in Saramago's book, and, on the other, of technical objects and commodities in McCarthy's book (the Coca Cola vending machine, for instance). The situation and society that emerge after the catastrophe—an epidemic of blindness in Saramago's *Blindness* and a natural or non-defined catastrophe in McCarthy's *The Road*—are extremely distant from the experience of both the readers and the characters themselves: these situations constitute an abrupt and complete break from the civilized world, almost a return to a state of nature. However, the time during which the two novels are set is not the future. It is an ever-present possibility; it is a possible rupture in the civilized world that can lead to a future time inversion, to a society without a state, without institutions, and without morality and religion. In this perspective, the novels are hardly even typical examples of dystopia, since neither the time nor the place featured is far away from the experience of the readers and characters and the world in which they live. And yet, *Blindness* and *The Road* are perfect eternal dystopias in that they emphasize the possibility that any and every society may be transformed into a state of nature. In *The Road*, the regression to the past is so fundamental that it reveals a radical nihilism with regard to human history and achievements; the protagonist wonders, "How does the never to be differ from what never was?" (McCarthy 2006, 27). Even the memory of any civilization and of humanity itself is cast into doubt: "We are so remote from the world that any day now, we shall no longer know who we are or even remember our names," (Saramago 1997, 57) is how the doctor's wife in Saramago's novel speaks of the deep rupture from the world before the pandemic.

No one has a name in either novel—with the exception of one marginal character in *The Road*. In *Blindness*, Saramago strongly emphasizes the universal and exemplary nature of his tale by calling his characters not by names but in terms of their roles (e.g., the doctor, the thief, or the first blind man), their characteristics (e.g., the girl with dark glasses or the old man with a black patch over one eye), or their relationships (e.g., the doctor's wife or the wife of the first blind man). McCarthy identifies his characters by referring to the generation they belong to and familial relationships (child, father, mother), physical features (half-blind old man, lightning-struck man) or their role in the novel (thief, road rat). Only one of them has a name, Ely, an appellation that is invented by the character himself and seems to suggest an analogy between the character depicted by McCarthy and the last prophet of the Old Testament, who was the first to recognize the Messiah.

Both novels seem to represent a journey on two levels. They represent both an external journey towards liberation from a hostile environment—and from the state of nature—and an internal journey towards the reaffirmation of human morality in spite of the external conditions. At the end of Saramago's novel, the main character—the doctor's wife—re-establishes collective morality through the experience of shared pain and shared resurrection. In contrast, McCarthy's moral protagonist—the child—will survive and continue with his almost religious role of carrying fire, i.e., preserving humanity in the moral and physical sense. I show how Saramago reveals the limits of political order and thinking, overcoming his own political belief in communism and preserving his faith in collective action, while McCarthy goes even further in his nihilism, casting doubt on all institutions and collective projects. Being open only to the future, i.e., believing in a child who does not know anything of the old world, can possibly save the human species and preserve humanity in a post-apocalyptic world.

José Saramago and the failure of politics

Saramago's work is a clear example of a fusion between political, philosophical, and literary languages and argumentations. In fact, the fascination of Saramago's literary world derives from his "essayistic touch" (Brune 2010) and is one of the main reasons for the wide-ranging, varied, and even contradictory political interpretations Saramago's novels have inspired—in particular his "Ensaio sobre a cegueira" ("Blindness," in the English translation). The story takes place in a time after the outbreak of a pandemic—a "white blindness"—when a fragile humanity, deprived of institutions and dangerously akin to a state of bestiality, emerges, mirroring a primordial state of nature, as described in the political literature, from Hobbes to Locke and from Rousseau to Kant. Our time, the time span of a civilized world, appears as a parenthesis in *Blindness*, a fragile exception that can be unpredictably and abruptly swept away. This white blindness leads to the destruction of institutions and authorities, customs, morality, and organization; the city is devastated, places are unrecognizable, and even language has lost its power to define, evoke, or allow communication between humans. That

new plague has leveled society, and individuals have lost their identities (Stanley 2004; Keren 2007; Chesney 2021). In particular, the moral individual cannot orient himself or herself in this new world that no longer has rules and customs. The doctor's wife—the only character who does not lose her sight—engages in an internal journey in order to rediscover real morality, which exists outside of and independently of social and political institutions.

In *Blindness*, morality is an acquired quality. It emerges after a collective and individual trauma that involves different steps in the destruction of ordinary—i.e., apparent—morality, which existed prior to the pandemic. The search for individual morality goes through compassion and hospitality, the acknowledgement of the necessity to act—even violently—to affirm justice, the transformation of private compassion into a collective quest for justice, and finally the establishment and refoundation of collective consciousness and political action from below—the “rising” (Saramago 2017, 285). In Saramago's book, all moral attitudes are active rather than passive: they involve responsible and risky action in the face of moral and mortal danger that individual actors and actresses must confront to achieve their moral aims. Morality does not depend on the existence of institutions—in particular political or religious—as it is related to individuals and free collectives, who choose to live in accordance with their moral responsibility.

Saramago leads us in his explanation of the moral journey the doctor's wife makes to attain justice. The end of the old identity, which was taken for granted in pre-pandemic society, and the rise of a new moral self begin with the growth of two sentiments: compassion and hospitality. Her first feelings of compassion are born out of the global catastrophe, i.e., the pandemic that destroys all moral values and individual positions towards good and evil and that transforms all humans into suffering beasts. However, in Saramago's work—as in Rousseau and Levinas—compassion and hospitality cannot be the foundation of a just society. The limits of compassion in Rousseau's thinking, pointed out by Boyd (2004) and Marks (2007), are the same as in Saramago's reasoning: compassion leaves things as they are and is an unpredictable and unstable individual feeling that cannot guarantee the building of a community based on justice and freedom. This lack of guarantee is one reason why in his political work, *The Social Contract*, Rousseau does not refer to the concept of pity as a foundation of democracy (Boyd 2004 ; Marks 2007). Moreover, going beyond compassion raises the question of responsibility.

According to Levinas, hospitality too, in the sense of a service to another human being, is not a sufficient moral principle in a social situation—the relation to the “Third.” Here, according to the French philosopher, the moral being becomes responsible for the Third being equal to the Self and the Others. For the thinker, it is precisely here that possibilities for human fraternity emerge. As Gauthier (2007) rightly remarks, “The presence of the Third entails that the Self is obligated not only to take ethical responsibility for the single, lone stranger that faces it but also the rest of humanity” (1669). In this case, the moral being has the responsibility of weighting competing moral obligations and enlarging his or her moral concerns to safeguard not only the Other in the dual relation but the Other of the Other or, in

other words, humanity. Responsibility arises here, so that the other becomes “immediately the brother of all the other men...” (Levinas 1974, 201). For Levinas, the interlocutor is not a Thou; he is a You. The relation to the Third grounds the intersubjectivity and makes the experience of sharing humanity possible, so, it has to be addressed with responsibility and non-indifference. “The Third is the evocation of politics” (Scoralick 2021, 316). Therefore, as Levinas states, “justice and judgment are needed from the moment the Third one appears” (Levinas 1998, 221).

The transformation of the doctor’s wife’s compassion and hospitality into a feeling of justice, which not only overcomes the first two moral obligations but refutes the very principle of hospitality by disrespecting the moral imperative not to murder, seems to cast new light on the moral drama in the novel. Absolute evil breaks into reality—abuse of women and death—on the one hand making the unnameable possible and, on the other hand, providing the possibility for a totally new shared experience, a new unnameable that re-establishes morality and, with it, a sense of community—a new “we,” as Stanley remarks using Martin Buber’s terms (Stanley 2004, 301).

The small society, protected by the doctor’s wife’s murder of evil doers, is a community that organizes itself spontaneously without—and in fact in opposition to—the State and traditional powers; it is a community that has freed itself from the fear of authority and power. It is a counter-conjuration (Vieira 2009, 14) based on shared work, rituals, compassion, and care, as well as on the model of a genuine communist society. Here, Saramago defies democratic institutions: if free collectives are the cornerstones of democracy, states have a deceptive and illusionary nature, as they are based on representative democracy. According to Saramago, “political democracy is of little use unless it is based on economic and cultural democracy.” “It seems indecent [Saramago says] to talk about [democracy] in the abstract, without the stimulus given by the presence, the participation and the involvement of citizens in community life” (Saramago 1998a, 219). True democracy, therefore, “should begin with what is immediately to hand—the country of our birth, the society we work in, the street we live on” (Saramago 2004). In this perspective, *Blindness* is a novelistic demonstration of Saramago’s radical critique of our political thinking.

Cormac McCarthy: are we the good guys?

The turning point that leads to a dystopian world is not described in McCarthy’s novel *The Road*, whose title evokes the travel literature and the *topos* of the American frontier, as defined by Frederick Jackson Turner. McCarthy narrates the journey of a father and his son in a post-apocalyptic landscape, turning the travel genre upside down and pointing to how fragile the idea of conquest and progress that pervades American literature is. As Inger-Anne Søvting sees it, “concepts like freedom and opportunity, progress, conquest and the frontier... are dead; progress and development no longer seem possible” (Søvting 2013, 708). The

frontier, as a demarcation between civilization and barbarism, is useless, because there is no difference between them and no mutation in a post-apocalyptic landscape covered in ash and deprived of life.

Moreover, in *The Road* time and place settings are featureless and unspecific. The places in the novel are all grey, desertic, wet, and inhospitable; even the sea, the reaching of which is the goal of the protagonists' journey, turns out to be only an extension of the earth, i.e., sterile, grey, and threatening. Even time is monotonous and marked by rituals that have lost their meaning, as in Samuel Beckett's theater. In the book, the journey takes place in an unspecified time; and even the event that provokes the global catastrophe is a "non-event" (Woodson 2008; Søvting 2013; Mifdal 2014): neither the narrator nor the characters ever describe it. All these features confer a mythological character on the spaceless and timeless journey, which becomes, as Søvting (2013) remarks, a universal example, a parable. Even the journey does not, unlike in Saramago's novel, lead to a development or change in the protagonists' attitudes and feelings; instead, the journey reiterates the juxtaposition between bad and good guys, father and son, hope and despair.

The question asked by the father—"How does the never to be differ from what never was?" (McCarthy 2006, 27)—opens an anti-anthropocentric perspective in the novel: the possibility that our time, the civilizational time span, is simply a parenthesis in nothingness (Squire 2012). The rupture from civilization is more radical in *The Road* than in *Blindness*, because in *The Road* the tale is outside history and takes place in an unconceivable world that cannot be described by our language nor judged with our moral yardsticks. Civilization as such and everything related to it—institutions, morality, language—have vanished; even memories fade gradually away and are of little use, apart from serving as practical technical knowledge that makes survival possible. Along with civilization, nature is also destroyed in McCarthy's novel—unlike in Saramago's. This is the most significant difference between the two novels, as in *Blindness* nature and even the architecture of the city and maps can support the first fragile communities during and after the pandemic. "In 'The Road' the nihilism of the land, of external space, is omnipresent and complete" (Søvting 2013, 709).

In *The Road*, the journey has no impact on the moral development of the characters, because there is no progress and no development. At stake is the preservation of morality, not its acquisition. In other words, the book is about the ability of one protagonist, whose morality is an innate quality, to keep faithful to that morality in spite of all external encounters and temptations. Strikingly, the moral agent is not the adult—the father who sees, knows, and compares the different worlds and whose gaze constantly monitors the landscape—but the child. Morality has not to do with rationality and knowledge or with the gaze but with spontaneous compassion; it is not concerned with civilization but with nature. It is an innate quality that can be lost but not acquired.

The father depicts his son as a Messianic figure that has to be protected against any form of spiritual and bodily disruption. The son represents not only the future but also the “good” future and the only hope for humanity in a world in which humans have become more irrational than beasts, as they eat their children and thus destroy their future. If civilization has turned out to be irrational, suicidal, and destructive, then the way out of this situation is to support human beings as such, i.e., support the child as a human who is not corrupted by civilization. Even the reversal of the relation between the father and the son at the end of the story shows the surrender of the old to the new, the turning point being the declaration of the son’s moral responsibility towards the world and his father in the following dialogue: “You’re not the only one who has to worry about everything...Yes, I am,...I am the one” (McCarthy 2006, 218).

The child’s innate morality is grounded in the same feelings as those of the doctor’s wife in Saramago’s novel: compassion and hospitality. Nevertheless, these two qualities originate from the individual, are pre-social, and go beyond language and communication. Against all forms of organization and societies—which are all criminal and morally corrupted in *The Road*—the child has to continue and “carry the fire” and the possible hope for survival and for the bare existence of humanity. Father and son are the only humans, the only “good guys;” however, although the father, while protecting his child’s life, is still dependent on fear and need to survive, the son is free, absolutely Other-focused, and open to hospitality, in the Levinassian sense (Snyder 2008). The child is a host and guest at the same time in Levinas’s terms: he is a guest, because he is protected and nurtured by his father and because, at the same time, he protects and nurtures the Other. The moral claim is his condition of existence, which he never doubts. Like in Levinas’s approach, being responsible for and open to the Other comes before subjectivity and therefore is not rationalized and does not compete with other values. Hospitality entails welcoming the Other and being hostage to the Other. In that sense, hospitality is substantially founded on a timeless moral imperative such as “Thou shalt not murder,” or, in other words, Thou shall not harm the Other. From that principle derive all actions that make hospitality a concrete act of support for the Other: nourishing, giving shelter, providing a home, etc. (Levinas 1961). At the same time, hospitality—in the sense of protecting and nurturing the Other—in both Levinas and *The Road* has a transcendental meaning; it means hosting the Other and entails opening one’s home to the Infinite and taking a risk. “When in the presence of the Other, I say ‘Here I am!’, this ‘Here I am!’ is the place through which the Infinite enters into language, but without giving itself to be seen” (Levinas 1984, 197).

The need for religion, in the form of the presence of God, is an underlying theme in *The Road*—as is fire. The depiction of the son as a Grail or Tabernacle, as carrying the light, or as a gift given to the father from God, is the dogma of the father’s religion. It is not necessary, as many scholars have noted (Søfting 2013; Weilenberg 2010; Woodson 2008), for this belief to correspond to the truth or for God to exist; in fact, as the father affirms again and again in the novel, beliefs are relevant because of the sense we give them and because we

cling to them. By clinging to his belief that the future is possible and that humanity will survive, never casting doubt on his faith in the son, and showing his faith with his actions, the father can show that hope is still possible. Fire is a strong metaphor in the novel; indeed, it is fire that destroys civilization and nature, but it is also fire that protects and makes life possible. This dual role is implicit in the description of the child carrying fire as a new Prometheus and the savior of humanity, as well as in the way it is also fire that burns the babies eaten by their parents.

Justice and hope

Starting from the same scenario, the descent of civilization into barbarism, the regression of time, and the devastation of places, *Blindness* and *The Road* offer us two seemingly symmetrical solutions to a fundamental issue: the preservation of humanity and morality outside civilization. Saragamo offers a post-political approach to the issue of morality; McCarthy goes back to mythology and religion. With his praise of the role of collectivities, of justice, and of a new form of democracy, the Portuguese novelist suggests the re-creation of a good community as the only viable way to refound the moral self. In contrast, writing a number of years later on the other side of the Atlantic, McCarthy seems to cast doubt on any possible idea of justice or democracy as a way out of the post-apocalyptic world. Nothing but belief in the future self, faith without hope, and the defying of rationality may possibly save a world intent on suicide, which is burning its treasures and eating up its own future. "Where you have nothing else, construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them" (McCarthy 2006, 63).

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