



ETHICS IN CONVERSATION

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Photo by Eva Darron, *Autumn in the Adirondacks*, on Unsplash

DEBT AND ATONEMENT IN *The Lincoln Highway*

Amor Towles (New York: Viking, 2021)

Reviewed by Sara Osborne

Amor Towles's recent novel, *The Lincoln Highway*, takes its readers on a cross-country adventure which originates in small town Nebraska, USA, in 1954. The journey begins with eighteen-year-old Emmett Watson returning home from a juvenile reform centre to find his father dead, his little brother

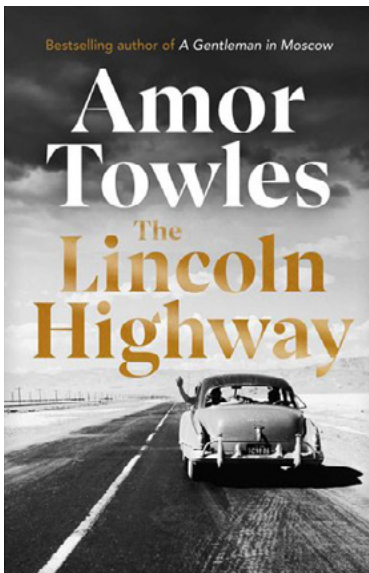
wide-eyed, and his former home overshadowed by debt. While Emmett's brother Billy longs to chase down their estranged mother in California using old postcards as clues, two stowaways from Emmett's detention centre, Duchess and Woolly, have other plans. The colourful crew embarks on a road trip *comme* pilgrimage towards an alluring inheritance housed at Woolly's grandparents'



Robert Crannell Minor, *In the Adirondacks*

cabin in the Adirondack Mountains of New York, each member dreaming of what new life the money would offer. This pursuit of happiness is interrupted numerous times along the way, however, as each main character seeks to wrestle free of the confines of guilt and indebtedness

for past mistakes. Throughout the story, beneath the theme of the American dream hanging like a cluster of grapes beyond reach, the human awareness of guilt and indebtedness vies for centre stage. Towles's novel, whether knowingly or not, highlights this common human condition as well as the tragic end of trying to set ourselves free.



Edward Hopper, *Gas*

The themes of debt and atonement are evident from the opening pages of *The Lincoln Highway*. As the warden is returning Emmett home from the juvenile centre in Salina, he pontificates on the purpose of criminal punishment and its desired effects:

... as a civilized society, we ask that even those who have had an unintended hand in the misfortune of others pay some retribution. Of course, the payment ... is in part to satisfy those who've suffered the brunt of the misfortune.... But we also require that it be paid for the benefit of the young man who was the *agent* of misfortune. So that by having the opportunity to pay his debt, he too can find some solace, some sense of atonement, and thus begin the process of renewal.¹

While Emmett listens attentively to the warden, and agrees with some of his message, he “didn’t agree that his debt had been paid in full. For no matter how much chance has played a role, when by your hands you have brought another man’s time on earth to its end, to prove to the Almighty that you are worthy of his mercy, that shouldn’t take any less than the rest of your life” (5). This restless life-long attempt at self-atonement characterizes not only the rest of Emmett’s journey in *The Lincoln Highway*, but also the trajectories of main characters Duchess and Ulysses.

Emmett Watson’s sense of indebtedness stems from his participation in the accidental death of a town bully, Jimmy Snyder. Emmett’s continuous struggle with his guilt is made clear when he encounters Jimmy’s brother, Jake, after returning home from reform school. Duchess reveals the reason for Emmett’s lack of defence when Jake

comes after him with angry fists: “Jake and Emmett had some unfinished business.... when Emmett hit the Snyder kid at the county fair, he took on a debt.... And from that day forward, it hung over Emmett’s head—keeping *him* up at night—until he satisfied the debt at the hands of his creditor and before the eyes of his fellow men” (92–93).

As Duchess reflects on this incident between Emmett and Jake Snyder, he recalls a message from Sister Agnes at St. Nicholas’s Home for Boys, his childhood home. Sister Agnes instructed the boys on sin and penance through the metaphor of the “Chains of Wrongdoing.” She taught them that their mistakes would lead to guilt and that the wrongs of others would induce indignation. While she proposed Jesus as the remedy (atonement for guilt; forgiveness for indignation), she ended her lecture by telling the boys, “Only once you have freed yourself from both of these chains may you begin to live your life with love in your heart and serenity in your step” (90–91). While the human response to sin suggests that Sister Agnes’s message holds seeds of truth, her words postulate a sort of half-gospel: despite Christ’s atoning death and offer of forgiveness, you still must do the work of freeing yourself.

With Sister Agnes’s words close at hand, Duchess persists in his efforts at self-justification throughout the pages of *The Lincoln Highway*. His first attempt to “balance the accounts” occurs when the three former delinquents and Billy stop at St. Nicholas’s Home for Boys. There Duchess breaks into the building, locks up the nuns in one of the rooms, and delivers jars of strawberry jam to all of the boys in the orphanage. Despite Duchess’s awkward attempt at good works, Sister Agnes calls his behaviour “an act of charity,” his penance an attempt to make up for his mischievous childhood antics (131).

1. Amor Towles, *The Lincoln Highway* (New York: Viking, 2021), 4–5.

Despite Duchess's demonstrable awareness of his childhood wrongdoing at the Boys' Home, his deepest sense of guilt comes from misplaced punishment for a fellow inmate in Salina. During an escape outing, Duchess caused his bunkmate Townhouse to receive "eight



Albert Dov Sigal, *Kappara (Atonement)*

strokes from the switch"—more punishment than Duchess would receive because Townhouse was black. Unable to deal with this burden of indebtedness, Duchess seeks to free himself of it by "balancing his accounts" with both Townhouse and Ackerly, the warden who had inflicted Townhouse's punishment and tried to frame Townhouse for stealing cookies (295).

Duchess visits Ackerly's home to settle the score. Upon reflection, he decides "Ackerly's debt to me would be satisfied with one solid whack on the crown. To hit him a second time would just put me in *his* debt" (238). The deed done, Duchess moves on to thinking about his debt to Townhouse. After doing some quick maths regarding debts and credits of one man to another, he decides to deal with his debt by asking Townhouse to hit him three times. Despite his act of charity at the Boys' Home and his swift return of violence to Ackerly, it is paying his debt to Townhouse that most clearly impacts Duchess: "I'd felt pretty good when I settled the scores with the cowboy and Ackerly, knowing that I was playing some small role in balancing the scales of justice. But those feelings were nothing compared to the satisfaction I felt after letting Townhouse settle his score with me" (306).

Several other characters in *The Lincoln Highway* demonstrate the human desire to deal with guilt and/or find eternal freedom (Pastor John, Fitzwilliams, Woolly, Sarah), but the vagabond Ulysses offers the third strongest example of a lifetime characterized by this struggle. Emmett and Billy meet Ulysses as a wanderer hopping trains, never sleeping anywhere longer than one night. His behaviour mirrors the Great Ulysses who "was destined to wander the seas until he had appeased the gods through an act of tribute" (424). Ulysses's guilt stems



Hanno Karlhuber, *The Search*

from his betrayal of his wife and unborn child. Unable to weather the scorn of not enlisting to fight Hitler in the early 1940s, he left for war, only to find himself deserted and alone when he returned. He traversed

the land in the years afterward, believing that "There is no end of travails for those who have angered the Almighty." Restless and lonely, Ulysses resigned himself to the fact "that the consequences of what he had done *should* be irrevocable" (228). While Ulysses never heard Sister Agnes's speech on "the Chains of Wrongdoing," he nonetheless felt their grip.

The Lincoln Highway ends with a sense of closure—whether positive or not—for its main characters. Emmett, who has been careful to avoid putting himself in anyone else's debt since his release from the reform centre, heads west with Billy to build a new life with their newfound reward. Woolly attempts to "find [his way] home again" through suicide. Ulysses strives to follow in the footsteps of the Great Ulysses, looking forward to relief from his penance. Duchess's final moments are spent still wondering about his debt, however. After pitting himself against Billy and Emmett in a final surge toward Woolly's long-awaited inheritance money, Duchess wrongfully assumes that the Watson brothers have taken his share of the treasure and run. His self-centredness leaves him alone on a raft, thinking "this ugly thought—a thought for which I will never be able to fully atone" as he notices a pile of money on the other end. Unable to swim, his leaning towards the money causes his demise, and the last pages of the book find him looking upwards in the water as money floats above him, just beyond his reach. He realizes, "Emmett had gotten into the old man's safe all right, just like I knew he would. But rather than stranding me empty-handed, he had left me with my rightful share. It was my rightful share, wasn't it?" (573).

This is the question that Towles poses from the first pages of *The Lincoln Highway* until its end. What is one's

“rightful share”? How does one determine when “the accounts are balanced”? Can we ever truly be justified? The language of debt, guilt, retribution, and atonement throughout the novel make clear a common human awareness of sin. The tragic problem with Towles’s characters, however, is that they never find an assurance of eternal hope. The characters are like the unbelieving Gentiles in Romans 2:15 who “show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them.” They know well their “chains of wrongdoing,” but falsely assume they can break free through their own feeble attempts at self-justification. In his book *The Cross of Christ*, John Stott provides an accurate assessment of this predicament: “To recover the concepts of human sin, responsibility, guilt, and restitution, without simultaneously recovering confidence in the divine work of atonement, is tragically lopsided. It is diagnosis without prescription, the futility of self-salvation in place of the salvation of God, and the rousing of hope only to dash it to the ground again.” *The Lincoln Highway* offers an incredible journey full of fascinating characters

who exhibit the plight of all men. However, it can only be called a tragedy, as the fullness of the gospel is hidden from view.



Nikolay Ge, *Christ and the Robber*

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