

## ANALYSIS

*Child of God* (1973)

Cormac McCarthy

(1933- )

“McCarthy’s next book was his most shocking and controversial to date. *Child of God*, published in 1973, was inspired by actual events in Sevier County. A dispassionate examination of a man driven by isolation and loneliness to murder and necrophilia, the story challenged its readers to look beyond the sensational and sometimes weirdly comic morbidity of its plot and into the heart of a crazed, lost soul. Some were unable to do so, declaring the book depraved or even despicable, a terrible misuse of McCarthy’s obvious talent. ‘[T]he carefully cold, sour diction of this book—whose hostility toward the reader surpasses even that of the world toward Lester [Ballard]—does not often let us see beyond its nasty “writing” into moments we can see for themselves, rendered. And such moments, authentic though they feel, do not much help a novel so lacking in human momentum or point,’ Richard Bruckner wrote in the *New York Times Book Review*.

But *Child of God* also elicited the most thoughtful considerations of McCarthy thus far in his career. In addition to Robert Coles’s lengthy essay in *New Yorker*, reviews by Anatole Broyard, Peter Prescott, Jonathan Yardley and Doris Grumbach all struggled with McCarthy’s masterful portrayal of ghastly actions. ‘Whenever a theory of aesthetics enters into the discussion of a novel it tends to distract somewhat from the point, that the *experience* of the book is the real thing, that there are varieties of such experience, and that some of them, a few of them, are so intense, so, well, *religious*, as to elude description by the critic attempting to communicate what he has felt, Grumbach wrote in *The New Republic*. ‘This is the long way into *Child of God*, a reading experience so impressive, so ‘new,’ so clearly made well that it seems almost to defy the easy esthetic categories and at the same time to cause me to thrash about for some help with the necessary description of my enthusiasm.’ Yardley declared in the *Washington Post Book World* that McCarthy is perhaps the closest we have to a genuine heir to the Faulkner tradition. Yet he is not merely a skilled imitator. His novels have a stark, mythic quality that is very much their own.... The sordid material of Lester Ballard’s tale becomes more than an exercise in southern grotesque because of McCarthy’s artistry.... *Child of God* is an extraordinary book’.”

Edwin T. Arnold and Dianne C. Luce, eds.  
*Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy*  
(U Mississippi 1993) 7

“The protagonist of McCarthy’s...*Child of God* (1973), is initially more difficult to assimilate than Culla Holme [*Outer Dark*]. Lester Ballard is a sneak, a thief, a liar, a poacher, a voyeur, a murderer and, finally, a necrophile. He is an isolate who becomes a hermit and then devolves into a gnome-like creature scampering beneath the surface of the ground. The title, at first, appears to be a wicked joke, except that, when the narrator introduces Lester as a ‘child of God much like yourself perhaps,’ there is no sense of irony whatsoever.

Lester is another abandoned child, deserted by his mother, then left fully parentless by the suicide of his father, whose body he finds hanging grotesquely in the barn. When we first see Lester, the rope still hangs behind him from the loft, a constant reminder. ‘They say he never was right after his daddy killed himself,’ a townspeople recounts. By the time Lester is a grown man, he has lost his home and land and been knocked permanently crooked when he attempts to drive the auctioneer and potential buyers away.

The first section of the novel details precisely Lester’s gradual withdrawal from human society. He moves into an abandoned house when his own house is sold. He is sexually teased and embarrassed by the daughters of his neighbor, a dumpkeeper who offers him a modest friendship. He goes to church but is stared at as he sits in the back pew, sniffing. When he finds a nearly naked woman, passed out on a deserted mountain turnabout, his first impulse is to inquire, ‘Ain’t you cold?’ It is only after she hits him

with a rock that he tears away her clothes and walks off with them, making her later charge of rape a lie, as Lester himself insists. 'All the trouble I was ever in...was caused by whiskey or women or both,' he brags in jail, not because it is true but because he has heard other men say it and would like to pretend a kinship with them. Upon his release, the sheriff, appropriately named Fate, finds him examining wanted posters, as if to find a clue to his own identity....

At a fair, Lester wins the most expensive prizes—large stuffed animals—at a shooting booth, and for the moment enjoys some form of admiration; the animals become his solitary companions. In early spring, he chases a robin. 'He caught and held one warm and feathered in his palm with the heart of it beating there just so.' It is the only scene in which Lester laughs or shows joy. Attempting to ingratiate himself with one of the neighbor girls, he gives the bird to her idiot brother, who chews off its legs. 'He wanted it to where it couldn't run off,' Lester explains, fully understanding the idiot's motives.

McCarthy spends over a third of the book thus setting up the *reasons* for Lester's otherwise unimaginable actions, creating a world in which such actions have a cause. The story is certainly not horror for horror's sake. Lester is both pushed and pulled into this monstrous life (the apparently extraneous story of the carnival ape is worth noting in this regard. The first body is practically given to him, by accident, by fate. To say that he 'rapes' her, as has one critic (Bartlett 5), misinterprets Lester's own needs, for he is not about violence but about companionship: 'He poured into that waxen ear everything he'd ever thought of saying to a woman. Who could say she did not hear him?' He woos, romances the dead woman. When he loses her in the fire which consumes his house, he moves into a cave. Shortly thereafter, met on the road by the man who bought his old home, he denies he is Lester Ballard. Soon he begins killing people and taking the corpses underground, creating his own community.

In his growing madness, Lester has no hold on his own identity. He begins to wear the clothing of his victims, and later he will wear their hair as a wig, anticipating the scalp hunting of *Blood Meridian*. After losing everything else, he begins to lose himself. Yet he is not without moments of self-awareness, of recognition, even of introspection. Spotting his own reflection in a pool of water, he reaches out hesitantly to touch it before drawing back, afraid. At night from his cave he 'watched the hordes of cold stars sprawled across the smokehole and wondered what stuff they were made of, or himself.'

During a flood, when he is forced to move his family of bodies, he shouts aloud in weariness and despair: 'Whatever voice spoke him was no demon but some old shed self that came yet from time to time in the name of sanity, a hand to gentle him back from the rim of his disastrous wrath.' The most touching scene in the book occurs as he lies awake in the cave and imagines 'a whistling as he used to when he was a boy in his bed in the dark and he'd hear his father on the road coming home whistling, a lonely piper...' That night he dreams (in a delicate echo of Dylan Thomas's 'Fern Hill') of riding a mule through a beautiful woods, and 'the world that day was as lovely as any day that ever was and he was riding to his death.'

What Lester wants is permanence, even (or especially) the permanence of death, but what he experiences in his life is change in the form of desertion and denial and loss. He expects to be abandoned. When he can't find his prized rifle, he panics, and upon retrieving it days to the inanimate object, 'You'd try it, wouldn't ye?' Thus, the dead bodies he collects underground around him. But Lester is also caught between the two worlds, above and below. As his lunacy grows, he tries (outfitted in the dress and hair of one of his female corpses) to reclaim his old home, and perhaps his lost child's life, by killing the owner; he is himself shot, his arm blown away. Now crippled, maimed, he is taken from the hospital by a band of men who threaten to hang him unless he confesses to the enormity of his crime. 'I never done it,' Lester at first says. 'I don't know nothin about no bodies.'

Then admitting under duress, he leads them into the cave and, as a creature of the dark, quickly eludes them. He spends three days underground before he finds a narrow passage to the upper world. Digging with his one hand, 'He'd cause to wish and he did wish for some brute midwife to spald him from his rocky keep.' The image of birth is not inappropriate, for the Lester who emerges above ground is different, 'changed.' A church bus passes in the night, and Lester shares a stare with a young boy looking out the window: 'There was nothing out there to see but [the boy] was looking anyway. As he went by he looked

at Ballard and Ballard looked back.' The 'nothing' the boy sees is Ballard; but what Ballard sees in the boy is 'himself.' That dawn he returns to the hospital: 'I'm supposed to be here, he said,' and soon after he dies, apparently a natural death.

In *Child of God*, Lester Ballard arguably faces his guilt with a courage not shown by Culla Holme. He identifies himself as Culla can never do. Thus, in a sense, he escapes from Dante's 'nowhere' zone of the uncommitted. Moreover, McCarthy also suggests that Lester serves a larger purpose, is himself a necessary agent. When he almost drowns in the flooded creek, then narrator breaks the action to address directly the reader: 'He could not swim, but how would you drown him?...' In the next section, an old man talks to Sheriff Fate about earlier days. 'You think people was meaner then than they are now?' a deputy asks. "No...I don't," the old man answers. "I think people are the same from the day God first made one.'

He then tells another story about 'how an old hermit used to live out on House Mountain, a ragged gnome with kneelength hair who dressed in leaves and how people were used to going by his hole in the rocks and throwing in stones on a dare and calling him to come out.' The story describes Lester himself. He is created by those around him, a necessary figure of the community, the scapegoat that embodies their weird alienation and stoked violence but also their terrible sadness, their potential nothingness. Thus, Lester Ballard is raised to the level of mystery. He is not one man in one age. 'As in olden times so now, the narrator states. 'As in other countries here'."

Edwin T. Arnold  
"Naming, Knowing and Nothingness: McCarthy's Moral Parables"  
*Perspectives* (1993) 52-55

"A murdering necrophile who lives in caves, hoarding the bodies of his victims as material possessions, Lester Ballard mystifies both his neighbors and the reader. Although his progression in misguided deeds follows a logic of escalation, the narrative offers little grist for the psychoanalysis of its murderer such as that provided by, for instance, Faulkner's *Light in August*. Indeed, Robert Coles remarked in his review of *Child of God* that Cormac McCarthy 'seems not to wish out twentieth-century psychological sensibility to influence his work'... The opportunism of Lester's first necrophilic experience identifies him as a genuine necrophile, and his later turning to murder is prompted by his despair of making human contact, his distrust of others, and his pent-up rage. Except perhaps in his attempted murder of Greer, Lester kills as a means to an end, and he is not motivated by the desire to mutilate and destroy, as is the necro-sadist....

The experiences that lead to Lester's necrophilia also resemble those of the true necrophiles reported by Masters and Lea, many of whom had lost parents to death when they were young, and for whom the corpse represented the lost mother.... The extremity of his rage derives only in part from his free-floating anger at...all who have previously abandoned or rejected him (beginning with his mother's abandoning the family when he was small, leading to his father's abandoning and orphaning him through suicide); it is prompted at least as much by his frustration at the intrusion of cold reality on his comforting illusion.... McCarthy employs the figure of the necrophile almost playfully as a grotesque parody of Plato's Diotima myth in this novel in which no one in Lester's materialistic culture achieves the ideal progress she describes.... McCarthy's indictment of this grasping and materialistic culture is quite serious. Lester is emblematic of the society from which he arises....

As in many of his novels, McCarthy's strategy in *Child of God* is to employ mythic images and patterns to transcend the material body of the referential world, inviting allegorical readings and guiding the reader to ponder metaphysical issues. In *Child of God*, metaphysical concerns cluster more consistently around analogues to Platonic myth than around the Christian mythology consonant with either Lester's background or McCarthy's Roman Catholic heritage.... After *The Orchard Keeper*, McCarthy's novels, in which his seeking or drifting protagonists are depicted in terms of quests or antiquests, explore, with varying degrees of realistic grounding, his great underlying concern with the soul's struggling toward or at least as often blundering away from the healing spiritual insight of which it is capable (although he rarely directly invokes the theological concept of spirit). With some crucial differences, this is also the burden of Plato's myths relating to the soul's progress (or lack thereof) back toward the Truth or the Light to which it was exposed at its creation: a progress involving sequential incarnations of the soul, intervening purifications in the cave of Tartarus...

Plato's myths profoundly inform Dante's Comedy, which some reviewers and scholars have seen as analogues to McCarthy's work.... McCarthy understands this resonance between Plato and Dante and employs it throughout his fiction... [J. A.] Stewart's study [*The Myths of Plato*, 1904; 1960] may be one source of McCarthy's extensive knowledge of Plato. McCarthy's philosophy is no clone of Plato's, but he shares Plato's emphasis on the importance of the search for value and meaning, and to several works (most notably *Child of God*, *Outer Dark*, and *Blood Meridian*, but also to some degree in *Suttree* and the Border Trilogy) he evokes the Platonic/Dantean notion of earthly life as a purgatorial experience. Rarely, however, does McCarthy directly invoke the notion of an afterlife or a cycle of reincarnation.... McCarthy's novels remain grounded in the life humans experience in this world. He honors the naturalistic world and the world of human culture for good or ill far more than Plato, who, at least for the sake of his philosophical argument, tends to dismiss the material world as illusion at worst or to value selected elements of it as symbols of the Ideal world at best...

In *Child of God* particularly, McCarthy employs elements of Platonic myth to define the metaphysical dimensions of Lester Ballard's trials and crimes, exploring this aspect of his experience more fully than the psychological dimension.... Throughout much of the novel, Lester both dwells and is imprisoned in literal caves. The text employs images of fire casting a 'shadowshow' against cave walls or comparable backdrops. It associates Lester's cave with Tartarus through allusions to Hades or the stygian mist and in Lester's impression that its stream 'ran down through the cavern to empty it may be in unknown seas at the center of the earth.' But even before Lester's descent into the caves, the voyeurism and carnality that characterize his approaches to women and lead to necrophilia evoke the Platonic idea that if vision is rightly an avenue to Truth and apperception of Ideals, evil results from blindness and materialism....

As a squatter in the ramshackle cabin of a kindly neighbor, Lester's circumstances roughly parallel Thoreau's at Walden Pond. But Lester fails to take Thoreauvian sustenance from the natural world.... Lester's feat at the shooting gallery parodies the worker's endeavor in a capitalist society: he converts his time and skill into prizes or rewards until he becomes burdened down by these goods [this theme is in the tradition of Emerson and Thoreau], the giant stuffed bears and tiger with which he peoples his cabin. Lester's shooting his human victims is an extension of the same: he spends his talents and efforts in amassing material goods—much like ourselves perhaps.... From this perspective, Lester's necrophilia functions as a metaphor not only for the materialism Plato rejects, but also specifically for American consumer culture.... In accepting the illusion offered by necrophilia, Lester commits himself to progressive blindness, becoming the antithesis of Plato's philosopher-as-seeker....

Lester recognizes beauty only in sexually objectified women or in violence.... Lester's voyeurism and necrophilia are...repetitions of Narcissus's fateful error—a mistaken application of vision and erotic attraction resulting in his drowning in materialism.... And indeed, Lester's Narcissus-like moments are all near misses, lost opportunities to see his own face truly—as when his voyeurism is turned back on him and he is mirrored and confronted by the image of the dead girl he sees through the car window.... The clearest reference to the myth of Narcissus in *Child of God*, occurring just before Lester's vision of the ice fangs and sucking water, implies that he approaches vision or understanding yet shies away from it.... Such scenes play off of the Platonic idea that the opportunity for insight always lies before a man because, even though he has imbibed the waters of forgetfulness at his birth, knowledge of Truth inheres from his creation....

In terms of the Platonic myths, the man fails to recognize that his own and all men's positions in the world are similar to Lester's: condemned to imperfect wisdom by the conditions of his existence and offered sequential chances for correction through seeking insight.... McCarthy's deft manipulation of narrative stance in *Child of God* positions the reader to recognize Lester as a being much like himself or herself—making the novel itself a Narcissus reflection for the reader.... Some American traits we might recognize in Lester include his armed individualism, his perverted consumerism, his clumsy improvisation, and his resilience as the underdog. Or, as Vereen Bell observes, 'McCarthy has conceived pathetic Lester as a berserk version of fundamental aspects of ourselves—our fear of time, our programmed infatuation with death, our loneliness, our threatening appetites, our narcissistic isolation from the world and the reality of other people'....

Lester cannot perceive a creative order in the world, inferring only the principle that ‘all things fought,’ a principle that both McCarthy and Plato acknowledge, but that both would view as a half-truth or worse. Like many of McCarthy’s protagonists who lack the maturity, patience, openness, or imagination to perceive a cosmic order in the world, Lester wishes to arrogate to himself the prerogative of the creator... Lester’s longing for order derives from the immortal part of his soul; his inability to see an acceptable order (for Plato the transcendental order; for McCarthy the order that results from the synthesis of the life of the body in a real world and the life of the inner spirit...) According to Plato, the fate that Lester bemoans, feeling himself ‘so grievous a case against the gods,’ results from the soul’s own first choice and remains his responsibility....

Lester curses his fate and considers himself grievous evidence against the creator; the novel implicates his community of similarly blinded men and women and delineates the purgatorial world of Sevier County (and America) as one in which humans participate in mutual torture and persecution (much as in McCarthy’s previous purgatorial nightmare, *Outer Dark*, and later his *Blood Meridian*). No one in Sevier County achieves the status of Plato’s seeker/philosopher. Through its evocation of both Hades and Plato’s cave parable, with its implications of the limits of human vision and of humanity’s bondage to materiality, Lester’s descent into the caves implies that his life as experienced is an outward manifestation of his inner spirit... Lester’s early life prefigures his cave life, and indeed the earthly cave of oblivion is Lester’s environment throughout; his imprisonment in the cave after he eludes his persecutors is a parable of his whole life (as well as those of his neighbors), and his release from the underground cavern is a ‘rebirth’ into the cave of this world.”

Dianne C. Luce

“The Cave of Oblivion: Platonic Mythology in *Child of God*”

*Cormac McCarthy: New Directions*, ed. James D. Lilley  
(U New Mexico 2002, 2014) 171-87, 190-91

“*Child of God*, McCarthy’s third novel, is the one which most explicitly raises the issue of the pastoral, and particularly of the republican or Jeffersonian version of it which has dominated the southern imagination. This concern is revealed with astonishing clarity in the first scene, which depicts the sale at auction of Lester Ballard’s farm, forfeited for nonpayment of taxes. As the sale progresses, Lester appears—‘[a] small man, ill-shaven, now holding a rifle’—and quixotically attempts to interrupt the proceedings. ‘I want you to get your goddamn ass off my property,’ he says. ‘And take these fools with ye.’ The auctioneer tries and fails to reason with him, and at last the dispossessed farmer is clubbed over the head with an axe and carried off by the high sheriff of Sevier County. ‘Lester Ballard never could hold his head right after that,’ explains an anonymous witness.

That judgment, as we see when Lester takes up his mad career as murderer and necrophiliac [necrophile], turns out to be a considerable understatement. Thus we need to see just what is at stake in this early scene, somehow the beginning of Lester’s descent into madness. Consider for instance the small detail of Lester’s rifle. He is virtually never without it in the novel, the weapon apparently serving him as a powerful totem of some sort. He acquired it as a boy, we learn, and by now his skills with it are the stuff of local legend: ‘He could by god shoot it,’ one neighbor recalls. ‘Hit anything he could see.’ Early on Lester demonstrates this proficiency by winning several stuffed animals at a shooting gallery; later, taking up his career as a killer, he puts it to deadlier use.

What does the rifle mean to Lester? For one thing it identifies him as an anachronism, left behind by history: a Daniel Boone with only stuffed animals to shoot for. But there is more to it than that; in the mythology of the pastoral republic, with which *Child of God* is suffused, weapons like Lester’s rifle carry enormous symbolic value. An armed man, prepared to defend the country and his own liberty and property, was for our ancestors the ideal republican citizen, the foundation of stable order: an idea which will seem most familiar to us, perhaps, as it is enshrined in the Second Amendment to the Constitution.

And so when Lester appears, rifle in hand, prepared to defend his property against the agents of tyrannical power (or so he perceives the situation), he is claiming a role for himself in one of the central dramas in the pastoral republican mythology. Raymond Williams has noted that almost invariably in pastoral literature ‘the contrast...is between the pleasures of rural settlement and the threat of loss and

eviction.’ The theme goes back all the way to Virgil’s first *Eclogue*, but acquires additional force in America, where property-holding has been an important component of civic virtue, a guarantee of personal and social stability. The scene in which the yeoman farmer loses his property is the one which pastoral republics dread—the moment when death enters their world. It is Lester’s personal Machiavellian moment. The sheriff and the auctioneer, with their talk of law, taxes and investment potential, are figures of modernity, of time; Lester casts himself as a reactionary, still hoping to resist the tides of history.

The scene is indeed the beginning of Lester’s descent into madness—a madness which carries out, in horrifying ways, the essential impulses of the threatened pastoral republic. For, deprived of his land, he must now reconstitute the order which it represents. He begins, harmlessly enough, by trying to re-establish some conventional domestic arrangement: by setting up housekeeping in an abandoned cabin, and by paying court to several potential spouses, each more indifferent than the last. But finally, frustrated in these attempts, he begins killing women and collecting their corpses as lovers, eventually accumulating quite a supply in a remote cave.

This gesture, as other readers have noted, is Lester’s mad protest against history itself, against the passing of time. Among his corpses, there is a timeless order, immunity to change: the descriptions of them faintly echo the scene in *Outer Dark* in which rural folk sit like ‘stone figures quarried from the architecture of an older time.’ Here the figures really are motionless, outside of time. Lester’s cave—which is discovered, with almost allegorical appropriateness, when a plowman’s mules fall into it through a sinkhole—is the ultimate, deranged expression of the pastoral will to deny history.”

John M. Grammer  
“A Thing Against Which Time Will Not Prevail:  
Pastoral and History in Cormac McCarthy’s South”  
*Perspectives* (1993) 36-38

“A sympathetic reader may possibly find elements of the pitiable here and elsewhere in *Outer Dark* [1968] but will be hard-pressed to find anything at all of the sort in *Child of God* (1974), which is the detailed story of one Lester Ballard, voyeur and man of violence, whose excursions into necrophilia exceed the gargantuan. McCarthy describes all these vividly and with a directness that has caused most critics to doubt that he seriously expects readers to see in Ballard anything but a parody, but in his refusal to suggest an escape by way of gnostic dualism, McCarthy is probably a better Christian theologian than his critics. His early characterization of Ballard as ‘a child of God much like yourself’ indicates where he stands. Ballard may be an extreme case, but he is inescapably one of us, bone of our bone, and, in McCarthy’s view, beloved of God as much as anyone else.”

J. A. Bryant, Jr.  
*Twentieth-Century Southern Literature*  
(U Kentucky 1997) 221

“Culla and the grim triune of *Outer Dark* coalesce in the figure of Lester Ballard, who, hideous though his actions are, remains recognizably human throughout the novel.... The narration rarely intrudes on Lester’s consciousness; he is seen almost exclusively from a narrative distance, from outside. It is then difficult to know what, if any, degree of guilt Lester feels as a result of his horrific actions.... Lester is forced onto ‘the fringe’ by the suicide of his father and the resulting auction of his home and the false charge of rape; he makes attempts, however halfhearted and doomed they may be, to rejoin the community before his final descent into mad and senseless violence; and at the end he voluntarily submits himself to society’s judgment....

Imprisoned because of the false charge of rape, Lester meets a black prisoner whose past and future foreshadow Lester’s own. The African American’s crime, in its sheer excess of brutality, previews the extremes of perversion that Lester will soon explore: he has beheaded a man with a pocketknife. Moreover, he feels no remorse for what he did.... Not surprisingly, Lester is rejected by women throughout the novel. He attempts a grotesque courtship with a young woman who has a mentally retarded child. Having captured a live robin, he brings it to the child as a present, telling the woman that he has something for her, to which she replies: ‘You ain’t got nothing I want.’ When the child chews the legs off the living bird, Lester offers an explanation for the disgusting act: ‘He wanted it to where it couldn’t run off.’

McCarthy may well be venturing too obviously into the territory of William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor in this scene, yet the episode of the young woman, the ghoulish child, and the robin is relevant to the rest of the text.... Lester...truly has nothing that anyone wants....

*Child of God* is devoted to exploring the boundary between the human and the animal, the spiritual and the material, the rational and the excessive. McCarthy is deliberately assaulting the reader; his aesthetic is inherently transgressive in nature.... An exercise in excess, in the outer limits of violation of the body and the spirit...exploring the extremes to which male appropriation and objectification of the female can be taken.... McCarthy's aesthetic is to show that human beings are capable of any act that one can imagine, however violent it may be.... Lester is merely the historic culmination of the communal legacy of violence. He is the naturalistic victim of historic, as well as economic forces.... McCarthy is insisting that the reader acknowledge a shared humanness with 'the maimed and the crazed'....

*Child of God* is a less complex novel than *Outer Dark*, eschewing the stylistic excess that characterizes the earlier novel, substituting for it excess of violent incidents. By denying himself narrative access to Lester's consciousness, McCarthy forces the reader to impose his or her own understanding of abnormal psychology on the text. Unlike the grim triune of *Outer Dark*, Lester Ballard cannot be understood on a purely mythic level.... In McCarthy's world, human beings are children of god [sic] and thus never completely beyond the possibility of salvation unless, like Culla Holme, they flee from it through cowardice or, like Lester Ballard, descend so deeply into madness that they exile themselves from redemption. And even then, Lester can experience a sudden awareness of his humanness that will bring him back into the arms of the community. Only the grim triune of *Outer Dark*, who exist in a largely metaphorical dimension and are thus not truly human at all, are beyond redemption."

James R. Giles

"Discovering Fourthspace in Appalachia:  
"Cormac McCarthy's *Outer Dark* and *Child of God*"  
*The Spaces of Violence*  
(U Alabama 2006) 16-41

"*Child of God* (1973) drives its audience into an even more intimate and horrifying encounter with human evil. *Child of God* makes explicit use of carnivalesque and grotesque imagery to draw attention to the concept of evil and, paradoxically, the necessity of empathy in the face of evil. In the novel's opening scene, the narrator describes an auction held to sell off Lester Ballard's ancestral property. The auction's audience members, arriving at Ballard's family property to witness the sale, are likened to a 'carnival,' and Ballard, squatting to talk to a friend, is 'like [a] constipated gargoyl[e].'

Throughout the novel, the narrator emphasizes all things bizarre, scatological, and deformed. But these grotesque images hold a terrifying and oddly numinous message. Mass murderer and necrophile Lester Ballard, the 'child of God' who, the narrator tells readers, is 'much like' them, forces the novel's audience to contend with the dissonance between his attributes as a character and his titular epithet. Even though the narrator insists that Ballard is a reflection of ordinary humans, he is consistently described with dehumanizing exaggeration, as when the narrator calls him a 'misplaced and loveless simian shape.' So, on the one hand, Ballard is a 'child of God' like all people, while on the other hand he is described as a bestial caricature of a hominoid.

Wolfgang Iser claims that in the dynamic reading process, in which the reader participates in creating the text's meaning, what is left unsaid in a text 'bring[s] into play [readers'] own faculty for establishing connections—for filling in the gaps left by a text suggests the effect of the narrator's malicious characterizations of Ballard. Because the narrator excoriates Ballard while commanding the audience to empathize with him, the narrator implies that empathy is not necessarily equivalent to sympathy. Ballard is a recognizable personification of evil, but while the audience is encouraged to despise that evil, they are never permitted to view evil, in the form of Ballard, as something entirely 'other,' entirely different from themselves.

This complicated call for empathy sheds light on the problematic symbolism of the grotesque in this novel. Perhaps one of the most traditionally gothic elements in the novel is the cave system in the eastern

Tennessee Appalachians into which Ballard crawls and which ultimately entomb his moldering victims. In gothic fiction, caves often house monsters and their monstrosities, psychological manifestations of horror and hysteria (linked, as they are, to wombs). In *Child of God*, the association of caves with the maternal womb is made explicit, and what is birthed from these caves is pure horror. Although many critics find Gnostic and Platonic resonances in the cave imagery, that imagery also employs traditional Roman Catholic symbolism. Ballard is ‘born again’ from the womblike caves, like Christ arising from the dead from a stone-capped burial cave.

Ballard’s other exploits evoke similarly messianic narratives, his necrophiliac encounters described as grisly plays on Christ’s miracles in the gospels. In an attempt to hide his first victim from hunters, for example, Ballard hoists the girl’s corpse to the attic of his home with a rope through a ‘small square hole’ in the attic floor. The cadaver’s ascent becomes a parody of resurrection: the body ‘pause[s], dangling’ before it ‘beg[ins] to rise again.’ And Ballard’s caves are catacombs ‘where dead people lay like saints’ and bats in their flight from his presence are ‘souls rising from hades.’ In these scenes, Ballard’s heinous crimes make saints and martyrs of his victims and permit Ballard to imaginatively lift souls up from the pit like Christ winnowing hell. Ballard is also given symbols of biblical authority. His way to the caves is marked with ‘two stones’ in a field, stones that are ‘great tablets on which was writ only a tale of vanished seas.’ The ancient inscriptions on these stone tablets are natural-world laws, in contrast to the biblical commands on Moses’s stone tablets, but they suggest Ballard’s prophetic role as a present-day demotic, and demonic, Christ.

When Ballard is fleeing the law, his crimes discovered, he falls into a river but does not drown. The narrator instructs readers to ‘[s]ee him’ because Ballard is ‘sustained by his fellow men.’ This sustenance, the narrator claims, takes the form of the human desire to possess ‘wrong blood’ as part of a collective genetic history. The narrator rhetorically asks, if this is not so, ‘[h]ow then is he borne up?’ The implication is disturbing. If evil is that which is ‘other,’ that which is *not* oneself, then how is evil not able to be excised, to be shut off from human society and locked away? The reader is encouraged to recognize what is at stake here: as much as he is allegorical, Ballard is also real. The novel is rife with case-specific details that suggest Ballard is perhaps based to some extent on James Blevins, the ‘Lookout Mountain Voyeur,’ and Ed Gein, the Wisconsin necrophile. Furthermore, the physical landscape, riven with symbolically significant caves, is also based on actual physical geographic locations. The fact that Ballard is perhaps based on real people, and that Ballard is spatially and geographically located in the real world, suggests the answer to that rhetorical question about how Ballard’s evil is sustained.

In the orthodox Christian tradition, Jesus is the divine everyman who unites in his person all spiritual virtues and all human attributes to demonstrate a pattern for righteous behavior to other humans. The parodic descriptions in this novel present Ballard as an evil everyman who unites in his person the most extreme forms of avarice, prejudice, and carnal desire with the image of God. There can be no salvation, the novel suggests, *from* evil, but only from blindness to it, whether the evil be in the external world or staring back from the mirror.”

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