J A M E S R . G I L E S

Discovering Fourthspace in Appalachia:

Cormac McCarthy’s Outer Dark and Child of God

Few American novelists have so thoroughly explored the various and complex ramifications of violence as Cormac McCarthy. Sustained critical attention was late in coming to McCarthy, and, especially in recent years, it has focused on his western novels: the anti-Western Blood Meridian; or, The Evening Redness in the West (1985) and the Border trilogy, All the Pretty Horses (1992), The Crossing (1994), and Cities of the Plain (1998). Certainly this attention is deserved. No text so thoroughly deconstructs the myth of a heroic American West as Blood Meridian, with its constantly accelerating body count; it demonstrates that Anglo domination of the North American continent was made possible by illiterate and violent men acting outside any established legal system. Thus the subtitle with its implication of a frontier that, even while vanishing, leaves behind its blood-soaked legacy. The Border trilogy—especially the first two volumes, All the Pretty Horses and The Crossing—represents a much more lyrical and forgiving modernist evocation of the frontier myth. All the Pretty Horses first brought McCarthy significant popular recognition and thereby inspired the re-publication of his neglected earlier novels.

In these texts, all set in Tennessee or in some less identifiable realm of Appalachia, McCarthy had been exploring the phenomenon of violence for two decades. The ambitious Suttree (1979) is set in a relatively contemporary From The Spaces of Violence, pp. 16–41. © 2006 by the University of Alabama Press.

Knoxville and is largely realistic in narrative approach. In contrast, Outer Dark (1968), while unmistakably set in rural Appalachia, seems to transcend precise definitions of space or time. While the setting of Child of God (1973) is identified as Sevier County, Tennessee, sometime around the mid-twentieth century, the text evokes a comparable sense of unreality. What Vereen M. Bell says about Outer Dark is, to some degree, true of both novels:

“The topography is vague, dreamlike, and surreal in a way that imposes an unwholesome, deranged aspect upon the entire scene” (33). In both texts, physical and social space are, at times, obliterated. While both short novels explore a desperation born of degrading poverty and stultifying ignorance, and can thus be seen as exposés of the disabling effects of systemic oppression, this is nevertheless only one of the levels on which the two texts are intended to function.

The elusive nature of space in the two texts is witnessed in three perceptive but contrasting critical discussions. In Cormac McCarthy, Robert L. Jarrett discusses the problems in attempting to approach the fictional landscape in McCarthy’s Appalachian novels from familiar historical and literary sources.

He notes that, in sharp contrast to the fiction of William Faulkner, a writer with whom McCarthy is often compared, McCarthy’s novels, and especially Outer Dark, seem almost untouched by nineteenth-century southern history, specifically by “the antebellum South, the Confederacy, and Reconstruction.”

If there were a single identifiable county in McCarthy’s Appalachia, it would defy the talents of any mapmaker. While McCarthy does not completely ignore race, it is far from being the overwhelming issue that it is in Faulkner’s yoknapatawpha County (Jarrett 24–25). In part, Jarrett attributes the seeming absence of history in McCarthy’s fictional landscape to Appalachia’s geographical and cultural isolation from the rest of the South; because slavery was never profitable in eastern Tennessee, he points out, the plantation system never flourished there. In addition, Appalachia has historically existed in political isolation from the rest of the South (24–27).

Brian Evenson and Gary M. Ciuba approach McCarthy’s world from considerably more abstract critical perspectives. Evenson discusses the central characters in both the Appalachian and the western novels in a post-structuralist context defined by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in their analysis of “nomadology in A Thousand Plateaus” (Evenson 42). Dividing McCarthy’s protagonists into two categories, “wanderers” and “nomads,” Evenson places the three dark, murderous outlaws from Outer Dark and Lester Ballard from Child of God in the second category. Citing Deleuze and Guattari, Evenson writes that the defining characteristic of the nomad is a search for “smooth spaces,” that is, open spaces free from limiting, regulating forces: “Such a topography can be actual or it can be the metaphorical equivalent: a moral or ethical open ground. The nomad’s existence is a series of movements which explore the limitless, open possibilities of the smooth space” (42). McCarthy’s complex aesthetic in Outer Dark and Child of God projects landscapes or spaces that fuse the “actual,” the “metaphorical,” and the “psychological” to create something that is simultaneously all of these and none of them.

This imagined landscape can perhaps be described as a kind of fourthspace, existing in a dimension somewhat similar to, but ultimately extremely unlike, Edward W. Soja’s thirdspace. The fourthspace that distinguishes the world of Outer Dark and Child of God merges the material, the metaphoric or linguistic, and the psychological or subconscious, and only the darkest forms of freedom, the most horrific possibilities, result from the merger. Ultimately, nothing is transcended in McCarthy; no one is given the opportunity to explore spiritually affirming “borders” of existence.

The three grim outlaws of Outer Dark and the necrophilic murderer Lester Ballard act in a perverted realm of “smooth space.” They perform acts of evil characterized by sheer excess, and McCarthy’s two novels are, in part, explorations of such excess. On this level, they can usefully be read in the context of comments by Georges Bataille on work, reason, excess, and violence. Bataille posits an inherent duality in human beings that he defines through the binaries of work, a realm dominated by reason and secured through taboos, and excess, a realm of violent transgression of taboo: “One cannot fail to observe mankind’s double nature throughout its career. There are two extremes. At one end, existence is basically orderly and decent. Work, concern for the children, kindness and honesty rule men’s [the gender-specific language is in this case appropriate] dealings with their fellows. At the other, violence rages pitilessly. In certain circumstances the same men practise pillage and arson, murder, violence and torture. Excess contrasts with reason” (186).

McCarthy’s fiction has always been focused on the second half of this duality; the excessive violence that dominates his fiction is thus an essential element in his aesthetic. The characters who inhabit the worlds of Outer Dark and Child of God are either exiles from the realm of work and reason or nomadic wanderers who have never even known it. The kind of “smooth space” they explore exists on several levels, all distinguished by the kind of extreme freedom that Bataille associates with excess; the violence in McCarthy’s fiction must be senseless, is often unmotivated, and above all is supremely irrational.

McCarthy’s art is thus intended to disturb by revealing a world from which the protective taboos that characterize what Bataille identifies as the realm of work have been torn away. For Bataille, this kind of intentionally disturbing art is essential for revealing the full dimension of human beings, for probing into a level of the natural so extreme that it may become unnatural:

“Man has built up the rational world by his own efforts, but there remains within him an undercurrent of violence. Nature herself is violent, and however reasonable we may grow we may be mastered anew by a violence no longer that of nature but of a rational being who tries to obey but who succumbs to stirrings within himself that he cannot bring to heel” (40).

In this context excess is an essential human characteristic, and one with which artists have long been fascinated. At times McCarthy’s nomads seem almost bloodless embodiments of such excess, and as Evenson points out, they are inevitably at war with “civilized” human spaces. When they encounter a settled space, violence inevitably results; the nomad’s quest for smooth space can only be pursued outside the boundaries of settlements.

Evenson argues that McCarthy’s ability to dramatize the violent confrontations of nomads with settled spaces is “precisely the appeal of McCarthy’s greatest fictions” (43).

In an essay that should be read in conjunction with Evenson’s (both are included in a collection of McCarthy criticism entitled Sacred Violence), Ciuba interprets Child of God through René Girard’s theories concerning violence and sacrifice. In this context, he provides an interpretation of the relationship between the title of the novel and its protagonist, the murderous Lester Ballard: Lester Ballard is the child of an ancient tradition of sacred violence.

René Girard contends that the sacred of primitive religion rose out of the salutary transcendence of violence by violence. At the founding moment of culture, humankind overcame internecine strife by focusing its mutual hostilities on slaying one of its own.

The violence that once threatened to destroy the community became the violence that graciously delivered it. . . . Since the sacrifice transformed an accursed outcast into the redeemer of a fractious community, the godhead assumed both the maleficent and beneficent aspects of violence. The transgressor became the savior; the most heinous was also the Child of God. (77–78) Thus, Lester Ballard becomes both sacrifice and sacrificer in an Appalachian community historically defined by violent injustice and oppression. It is as if a plague has been let loose upon the land, and Lester redeems it through the excess of his own transgressions. “Like some violent voluptuary in the religion of Georges Bataille,” writes Ciuba, “he makes transgression the very sign of its transcendence” (78). Girard offers a further gloss on this paradoxical concept: “From the purely religious point of view, the surrogate victim . . . inevitably appears as a being who submits to violence without provoking a reprisal; a supernatural being who sows violence to reap peace; a mysterious savior who visits affliction on mankind in order subsequently to restore it to good health” (86).

Lester does not perfectly fit Girard’s description. He submits to his initial displacement from the community only after he is knocked unconscious and forcibly removed from what was first his father’s and then his own farm while it and the things on it are being auctioned off.

Thus Lester’s victimization is, to some degree, systemic; he is the product of decades of poverty and ignorance. Moreover, he exists in a world in which religious faith, to the degree that it exists at all, has been debased to a malevolent doctrine offering no genuine redemptive promise. While his crimes are certainly excessive in nature and execution, no one in the communal world of the novel would view him as a supernatural being. The sheer savagery of his acts serves to reinforce his undeniable humanness. He embodies the violent side of Bataille’s concept of human duality; certainly work is as foreign to his being as excess is natural to it.

After he is forced off his farm, Lester gradually evolves into a representative of Evenson’s nomad, living on the edge of cultivated space.

In the course of the novel he is transformed from a communal outcast to a mysterious nomadic presence that periodically assaults the settlement. In an early scene, he is falsely accused of rape and, while being interrogated in the sheriff ’s office, pronounces what amounts to his judgment on the community: “you sons of bitches. . . . Goddamn all of ye” (52). Periodically the novel shifts into a communal narrative voice, which at one point summarizes the disgraceful history of the Ballard family, concluding on a note of perverse pride: “I’ll say one thing about Lester though. you can trace em back to Adam if you want and goddamn if he don’t outstrip em all” (81). It is significant that this judgment ties Lester’s origins firmly to the first human sinner rather than seeking a supernatural explanation for his actions. In distinct contrast, the “grim triune” from Outer Dark, while always appearing in human form, seems something other than human. Even more than Child of God—in fact, more than any other McCarthy novels— Outer Dark seems to take place in some ambiguous physical-social space devoid of history.1 In part, this almost surreal setting can be understood as exemplifying Jarrett’s description of Appalachia as a space on the periphery of the South and its history and traditions. In the opening of the novel, its two central characters, Culla and Rinthy Holme, brother and sister, are so isolated as to barely know that any larger community exists. This isolation is, moreover, not strictly spatial; Culla and Rinthy are victimized by a profound ignorance that is not simply a matter of literacy. It is as if they have somehow been untouched by any sustaining cultural values or accepted social customs. At one point Rinthy says, “They ain’t a soul in this world but what is a stranger to me” (29).

The brother and sister appear parentless and, except for each other, cut off

from any family; the only reference to their background comes when Rinthy tells a family that takes her in and feeds her, “I bet I ain’t eat two pones of lightbread in my life. I was raised hard” (60). Certainly, she seems never to have known anything approximating kindness or gentleness.

On one metaphoric level, Culla and Rinthy are re-creations of Adam and Eve, doomed to commit anew the unpardonable sin that threatens to exile them from human or divine mercy, to make them wanderers through a grotesquely fallen world. Thus their last name is cruelly ironic—they have never really known anything approximating “home” or even a safe space.

Isolated from virtually everyone else, they almost doom each other. Before the novel opens, they have committed incest; the reader is introduced to them as the baby is about to be born. Culla delivers the baby himself after refusing to go in search of a midwife, since he wants to keep their sin secret.

After delivering the child, he makes an ominous prophecy: “I don’t look for it to live” (15).

Culla does not kill the child, though. Instead, he takes the infant and leaves it to die in some neighboring woods. McCarthy’s description of Culla’s misfortunes while carrying out his secret and desperate mission is, one assumes, deliberately excessive. After Culla stumbles and falls to the ground, he “lay there with his cheek to the earth. And as he lay there a far crack of lightning went bluely down the sky and bequeathed him an embryonic bird’s first fissured vision of the world and transpiring instant and outrageous from dark to dark a final view of the grotto and the shapeless white plasm struggling upon the rich and incunabular moss like a lank swamp hare” (17).

While this kind of McCarthy prose has been condemned as excessive and imitative of Faulkner, in this case it serves a legitimate purpose. The quick shift to the “fissured vision” of the “embryonic bird” evokes a timeless, primal space underlying the mimetic Appalachian setting. Incest (however it is defined) is, of course, one of the oldest of human taboos, Girard believes, because, like murder, it assaults communal order in the most profound of ways. By destroying culturally accepted distinctions, it bequeaths chaos:

“Incestuous propagation leads to formless duplications, sinister repetitions, a dark mixture of unnamable things” (Girard 75). Carrying his child, the result of “incestuous propagation,” Culla has ventured into this “dark mixture of unnamable things” as much as, if not more than, he has entered forested material space. McCarthy seems to have emphasized Culla and Rinthy’s cultural and social isolation partly in order to emphasize the extreme and primal nature of their resultant guilt.

Culla compounds his guilt by telling Rinthy that the baby is dead.

When she demands to see where it is buried, he takes her into the woods where he has left the infant. Once there, they discover that the infant has been taken, either alive or dead, by a tinker who had intruded upon their isolation and tried to sell Culla a book of amateurish pornographic drawings.

One remembers folkloric associations of tinkers with Satan, and this tinker seems to possess supernatural insight into the lives of the isolated brother and sister. The tinker is, in fact, the first of several prophet figures, usually demented to some degree, in the novel. The tinker’s theft of the child forces Culla and Rinthy out of their isolated worlds as they separately seek to find the lost child, and McCarthy’s linguistic excess merges with the psychological guilt of Culla and the maternal need of Rinthy to produce the debased fourthspace in which the novel takes place.

In their quests, both discover grotesquely fallen worlds, haunted by poverty, ignorance, and sheer malice. Bell describes Outer Dark as being “as brutally nihilistic as any serious novel written in this century in this nihilistic country” (34). Refuting Bell, Edwin T. Arnold asserts that a redemptive moral center underlies Outer Dark and all of McCarthy’s fiction, including Blood Meridian, with its unrelenting evocations of social, rather than strictly individual, acts of violence: “While I recognize and appreciate the postmodern celebration of McCarthy’s exuberant violence, his astonishing approximation of chaos, his grand evocation of the mystery of the world, there is also evident in his work a profound belief in the need for moral order, a conviction that is essentially religious. There is, in addition, always the possibility of grace and redemption even in the darkest of his tales, although that redemption may require more of his characters than they are ultimately willing to give” (46).

Nihilism and something like religious affirmation are at war throughout McCarthy’s novel. In this context, it is significant that the space through which Rinthy travels is more conventionally mimetic and more accepting than the dark and deadly landscape Culla encounters. Arnold perceptively analyzes Culla’s descent into something that seems a great deal like both Christian and Sartrean imaginings of hell as resulting from a failure of courage, an attempt to flee from sin. That Culla’s journey is at least as much a psychological and a spiritual experience as an actual exploration of mimetic space is foreshadowed by a horrific nightmare that opens the novel and haunts him for the remainder of the text:

There was a prophet standing in the square with arms upheld in exhortation to the beggared multitude gathered there. A delegation of human ruin who attended him with blind eyes upturned and puckered stumps and leprous sores. . . . It grew cold and more black and silent and some began to cry out and some despaired but the sun did not return. Now the dreamer grew fearful. Voices were being raised against him. He was caught up

in the crowd and the stink of their rags filled his nostrils. They grew seething and more mutinous and he tried to hide among them but they knew him even in that pit of hopeless dark and fell upon him with howls of outrage. (6)

Now Culla has been transformed into something closer to a Cain than an Adam figure. He has been banished and set apart from the rest of humanity.

This introductory nightmare functions as a metaphoric introduction of the remainder of the novel. The pornography-selling tinker was merely the first of the ominous prophets Culla will encounter as he travels among “the beggared multitude.” To some degree, the emphasis on the stinking “rags” of “the human ruin” evokes the more real or mimetic landscape of soul-killing poverty through which he will travel. It also alludes to the sinfulness and viciousness in which Culla finds human beings clothed and to his own sin, already that of incest and soon to be of child abandonment as well. Like Hawthorne’s young Goodman Brown, Culla undertakes a journey in which physical space, psychological guilt, and spiritual despair merge so completely as to become indistinguishable.

Shortly after the scenes of birth and abandonment, the novel depicts an incident that reoccurs in different forms throughout McCarthy’s fiction.

On a Sunday, Culla goes to the nearest store to buy some food for the weakened Rinthy. Inevitably he finds the store closed and hears a voice calling down at him “from an upper window”: “We still christians here” (26). As indicated by the deliberate withholding of the uppercase C from “christians,” the scene constitutes, on one level, condemnation of a southern Christian fundamentalism that denies support to those who exist outside it.

Such “faith,” McCarthy seems to imply, is divorced from any meaningful association with Christ; it merely looks down on and condemns those in physical or spiritual need. In this and comparable McCarthy scenes, God seems not so much absent as harsh and vindictive, as if looking down from an elevated space upon a desperately flawed humanity. Still, the most severe judgment on Culla comes from within; he believes that he has so violated established rules of human behavior as to stand in judgment outside the possibility of forgiveness. Most of all, it is Culla who withholds forgiveness from Culla.2 Once Culla undertakes his search for the stolen child, comparable judgments meet him at every turn.3 Sometimes they seem innocent enough on the surface, as when a “squire” for whom he briefly works lectures him that “I hope you’ve not got a family. It’s a sacred thing, a family. A sacred obligation” (47). Inevitably, Culla hears this pronouncement in the context of his sins of incest and child abandonment and cannot deny that he has, in fact, violated “a sacred obligation.” Here as elsewhere in the text, outsiders— some of whom, like the squire, look down upon him from perspectives of social class or legal power—are, in some mysterious way, aware of his transgressions. Such judges exist on two levels, that of mimesis and psychological projection. The squire is a representative of class and economic superiority, of what Henri Lefebvre describes as the “power” of vertical space and the “submission” of horizontal space, as is made manifest in the squire’s initial meeting with Culla in which the squire looks at the desperate young man “as he would anything for sale” (42). The squire’s dominant position in the socioeconomic hierarchy is based on the power to objectify others, to treat them as commodities that can be used and then discarded. His power is transitory, however, as he ultimately runs into the three nomadic killers who coldly and senselessly murder him. But he is also an emblematic figure who embodies Culla’s self-condemnation.

After the doomed squire, the next “judge” Culla encounters is an old man from whom he begs a drink of water. Twice, the old man tells Culla that he “wouldn’t turn Satan away for a drink” (117). Like the squire, the old man appears to possess some mysterious knowledge of the primal nature of Culla’s sins. Moreover, he turns out to be a snake hunter given to telling grotesque stories about victims of snakebite, and inside his cabin he has the skin of a monstrous rattlesnake tacked above his fireplace: “He was eight foot seven inches and had seventeen rattles. Big in the middle to where ye couldn’t get your hands around him” (122). The scene recalls traditional associations of serpents with death and evil ranging from Genesis to Satan’s magical staff in “young Goodman Brown”; on a Freudian level, the phallic overtones of the monstrous snake recall Culla’s intercourse with Rinthy. Later a man who has lost his entire family to cholera charges Culla with being a plague carrier, to which Culla responds not at all honestly, “Ain’t nobody plagued” (138).

Like that of Oedipus, Culla’s incest seems to have let loose a plague on the countryside. One also recalls Camus’s division in The Plague of human beings into the categories of plague carriers and plague fighters.

Near the end of the novel, Culla comes close to being executed in a black comic “(mis)reading” of an incident recounted in the New Testament book of Mark. He abruptly finds himself in the midst of a herd of hogs driven by men “gaunt and fever-eyed with incredible rag costumes and wild hair” (213). After some wildly absurd discussion between Culla and one of the drovers about “unclean” hogs, split hooves, and Jews (“What’s a jew? That’s one of them old-timey people from in the bible”), the drover concludes: “A hog is a hog. Pure and simple. And that’s about all ye can say about him. And smart, don’t think they ain’t. Smart as the devil. And don’t be fooled by one that ain’t got nairy clove foot cause he’s devilish too.” Culla can only concur with such immaculate logic: “I guess hogs is hogs” (216). This exchange is a reminder of what the bleak central vision of Outer Dark can lead the reader to forget—there is wonderful black comedy in the novel, most of which has roots in southern and old southwestern folklore.

The mood of the scene quickly takes a more serious turn when the hogs inexplicably begin stampeding off the edge of a cliff into a river and the desperate drovers are transformed into beings barely recognizable as human:

“[The swineherds] had begun to assume satanic looks with their staves and wild eyes as if they were . . . disciples of darkness got among these charges to herd them to their doom” (218). In the stampede, the younger brother of the drover with whom Culla had been talking is driven over the cliff to his death in the river below. Nevertheless, the scene undergoes another daring mood shift when Culla resumes conversation with the surviving drovers:

[One of the drovers]: That beats everything I ever seen.

[Culla]: That’s pitiful about your brother.

[The drover]: I don’t know what all I’m goin to tell mama.

Herded off a bluff with a parcel of hogs. I don’t know how I’m going to tell her that.

[Culla]: you could tell her he was drunk.

[The drover]: Tell her he got shot or somethin.

[Culla]: you wouldn’t need to tell her he went to his reward with a herd of hogs. (219)

Given the brutish behavior of most of the characters in the landscape through which Culla travels, McCarthy seems to be saying that, should anyone somehow manage to receive “his reward,” he will do so in the company of a herd of hoggish human beings. It is not insignificant that Culla and the drovers both assume that their mother would find lies about the deceased man dying drunk or as a result of human violence more acceptable than the truth.

In the biblical text that McCarthy is intentionally “(mis)reading” (Mark 5:1–17), a man with an “unclean spirit” whose “name is Legion; for we are many” asks Christ to save him. In response, Christ sends the legion of “demons” out of the man and into a herd of two thousand swine, who then rush off “a steep place into the sea” and drown. Frightened by such power, those who have witnessed the miracle promptly beg Christ to leave the region. The savior is immediately rejected and symbolically banished.

In this context, it is not surprising that, with no evidence whatsoever, the surviving drovers decide that Culla mysteriously caused the hogs to stampede, and another of Culla’s “judges,” fittingly in this context the most deranged of all, abruptly enters the text: “A parson or what looked like one was laboring over the crest of the hill and coming toward them with one hand raised in blessing, greeting, fending flies. He was dressed in a dusty frockcoat and carried a walking stick and he wore a pair of octagonal glasses on the one pane of which the late sun shone while a watery eye peered from the naked wire aperture of the other” (221). McCarthy’s absurdist humor continues to be in evidence as the “parson” almost condemns Culla first to being lynched and then to being thrown off the cliff into the river with the hogs by asserting that such acts of retribution would be wrong: “Boys I believe he’s plumb eat up with the devil in him. But don’t hang him. . . .

Don’t flang him off the bluff, boys, the preacher said. I believe ye’d be better to hang him as that” (223).

After some deliberation, the drovers decide that hanging Culla would be the best course, and the preacher offers to baptize him first. When the outraged Culla refuses such a mode of salvation, the minister comments:

“I guess a feller mires up so deep in sin after a while he don’t want to hear nothin about grace and salvation. Not even a feller about to be hanged.” To this speculation, one of the drovers adds this gloss: “It ain’t no use, Reverend. He’s too mean to be saved” (225). Of course, in this particular instance Culla is innocent, and not surprisingly, the reverend is later revealed to be a charlatan. Like the early scene at the store, this episode parodies a judgmental religious fundamentalism. Culla is, however, still in flight from the sins that drove him out into the world, and until he acknowledges them he is unworthy of salvation, not because he is “too mean” but because, as Arnold points out, he is too cowardly.

yet such judges as these, as potentially deadly as they are, pale in comparison with the grim triune whom Culla encounters twice in the novel.

The first occasion occurs after Culla has almost been drowned on a ferryboat; in this scene, the rampaging river that swallows up everyone on the ferry but Culla is no bad substitute for the river Styx. It is not then surprising that Culla, after crossing the river of death, encounters the three outlaws. It is in McCarthy’s evocation of these three nightmarish figures, who exist on both mimetic and metaphoric levels, that the text’s fourthspace is most overtly dramatized. At one point they are described as emerging upon the landscape out of nowhere, “armed with crude agrarian weapons, spade and brush-hook . . . parodic figures transposed live and intact and violent out of a proletarian mural and set mobile upon the empty fields, advancing against the twilight” (35).

They are grotesque parodies of the naturalistic figures created by Thomas Hart Benton in his American murals. Now as re-created by McCarthy, they threaten violent assault on an agrarian economic system that exploits and objectifies the small farmers of Appalachia, and thus their cold murder of the squire constitutes, on one level, retaliation against an exploitative social order. Described as coming across a field “attended by a constant circus of grasshoppers” (51) in the scene in which they murder the squire, they seem personifications of some delayed and apocalyptic judgment, this time

recalling the plagues unleashed on Egypt in the Old Testament story of the clash between Moses and the pharaoh.

On another level, they can also be understood as “psychic avengers,” projections of Culla’s guilt over his sins of incest and child abandonment.4 In this context, they demonstrate the degree to which the fourthspace of Outer Dark, in contrast to Soja’s concept of a liberating thirdspace resulting from a merger of material space and cerebral recognition of the material, is frightening and restrictive. When Culla stumbles upon their camp, they, like several of the other “judges” in the text, appear to know about his past and recent experiences. Their unnamed leader, for instance, insists three times that Culla is the now drowned ferryman, thereby forcing the young man to deny three times that he is metaphorically the ferryman to hell.5 While Culla may not correspond to Charon, he did set the progress of his secular damnation in motion through his sinful actions involving the lost child and thus transports himself into an earthly hell. Culla, feeling that he is in the presence of some not-quite-human force, tries to look into the eyes of the leader with unsettling results: “In the upslant of light [the leader’s] beard shone and his mouth was red, and his eyes were shadowed lunettes with nothing there at all” (171).

In a preview of the novel’s denouement, the satanic presence then insists that Culla partake of some almost inedible and never identified meat that the trio is cooking. Subsequently an ominous discussion of names ensues. Indicating one of the other two men, the leader and spokesman of the deadly trio says: “That’n ain’t got a name. . . . He wanted me to give him one but I wouldn’t do it. He don’t need nary. you ever seen a man with no name afore?” (174).6 The leader is identifying himself as the namegiver who possesses the power to withhold or bestow identity upon others and has thus assumed Culla’s role as an Adam figure. He then proceeds to tease Culla with the mystery of his own name: “I expect they’s lots would like to know that” (173–74). In part, the leader is playing a role derived from such popular-culture genres as the Western of the unnamed and thus doubly terrifying villain. More significantly, he is identifying himself with some force too powerful to be named, an Old Testament god of vengeance.7 With Culla and his transgressions clearly in mind, the leader next observes that “some things is best not named.” Because it so threatens the social order, incest has traditionally been a sin too fundamentally unsettling to be acknowledged. The reference to things best left unnamed seems intended as a reminder to Culla of the infant he has abandoned and thereby caused to be abducted by the peddler. In this context, he later mocks Culla in a speech that appears to refer to his nameless companion but actually seems intended to evoke the child: “I wouldn’t name him because if you cain’t name somethin you cain’t claim it. you cain’t talk about it even. you cain’t say 119 what it is” (177). The words are apparently a reminder to Culla that he has forfeited any right to the child, and they also reveal an awareness that the young man’s concern for the lost infant is pretended. Certainly in contrast to Rinthy’s, Culla’s search is, at best, halfhearted. Reinforcing his satanic role, the leader comments, “I like to keep the fire up. . . . They might be somebody coming” (175). He is thus identifying himself as the guardian of the fires of hell, as the enforcer of eternal punishment, perpetually on the lookout for sinners like Culla.

The multileveled nature of the trio’s identity becomes manifest in this scene. On a strictly mimetic level, they are a savage gang of roving outlaws who assault the community out of sheer malevolence. But the several metaphoric levels on which they exist are more important. They are simultaneously “proletarian” warriors and agents of a vengeful god. In this context, it is significant that they execute the peddler after taking the infant from him. Their chosen mode of execution is lynching, an act that evokes the history of southern violence and injustice as well as the fate that Culla almost experiences at the hands of the charlatan minister and the simple-minded drovers. Moreover, they are projections of Culla’s subconscious guilt, representatives of his sin and self-condemnation, a self-judgment that, as Arnold observes, he is too cowardly to acknowledge publicly. But they also embody a capacity for excessive evil that places them outside human comprehension. It is as if they are committed to violating all behavioral taboos, as if they are engaged in a prolonged assault on the order that is essential to preserving human community. Besides the several horrendous murders of which they are guilty, they unearth the dead, stealing the clothes of corpses and leaving them in positions that mock homosexual embrace.

Girard points out that social taboos emerge out of a need to maintain order and that the ultimate threat to such order is death. Through their grave-robbing, the grim triune make this threat overt. It is hardly irrelevant that Culla is accused of the violation of the corpses, since in the course of the novel he is accused of virtually everything else. He has, in fact, violated those taboos that the three outlaws, existing outside any communal structure that includes women, have no opportunity to violate.

The full metaphoric role of the trio is not revealed until their last, climactic encounter with Culla. When he comes upon them this time, the child, now hideously disfigured, is with them: “It had a healed burn all down one side of it and the skin was papery and wrinkled like an old man’s. It was naked and half coated with dust so that it seemed lightly furred and when it turned to look up at him [Culla] . . . saw one eyeless and angry red socket like a stokehole to a brain in flames” (231).

Perhaps not fully human themselves, the three have dehumanized the child, transforming it into something monstrous. Moreover, the leader continues the harsh questioning of Culla that he began in the earlier scene, again seeming possessed of some kind of supernatural insight. He knows, for instance, that the tinker stole a child from Culla and asserts that the child was Culla’s as the result of an incestuous act. Twice, in what Arnold sees as the young man’s culminating moment of cowardice, Culla denies the accusation and any responsibility for the child: “He ain’t nothin to me” (235).

Subsequently, in an action that echoes Girard’s description of the ritual sacrifice of the scapegoat in Violence and the Sacred, the leader holds the mutilated child over a burning fire and slits its throat with a knife. In committing incest, Culla violated one of the most basic of cultural taboos and thus instigated a sacrificial crisis that profoundly threatens the social order. As Girard explains, the sacrifice of an innocent is necessary to restore the order that Culla’s acts of incest and child abandonment have endangered. Girard further specifies that, in order to prevent a destructive cycle of retributive violence, the victim should be powerless, with no ties to the individual whose violations of taboo have brought on the crisis. Above all, such cyclical violence is to be avoided:

Vengeance professes to be an act of reprisal, and every reprisal calls for another reprisal. The crime to which the vengeance addresses itself is never an unprecedented offense; in almost every case it has been committed in revenge for some prior crime. Vengeance, then, is an interminable, infinitely repetitive process. Every time it turns up in some part of the community, it threatens to involve the whole social body. There is the risk that the act of vengeance will initiate a chain reaction whose consequences will quickly prove fatal to any society of modest size. The multiplication of reprisals instantaneously puts the very existence of society in jeopardy, and that is why it is universally proscribed. (14–15)

The leader’s sacrifice of the unnamed child both clarifies and complicates the role of the grim triune as agents of retribution. Obviously, the infant, the very product of Culla’s sin, is not an arbitrarily chosen victim with no connection to the original violation of taboo. It could, though, hardly be more powerless, since it has been abandoned and remains nameless. The leader slits its throat only after Culla again denies responsibility for it. In the several brutal murders they commit, the triune seem to be agents of retributive vengeance, punishers of unnamed crimes, devoted above all to putting the communal order at risk. An example of McCarthy’s calculated narrative excess is evident in the remainder of this grim scene: “The child made no sound. It hung there with its one eye glazing over like a wet stone and the black blood pumping down its naked belly. The mute one knelt forward. He was drooling and making little whimpering noises in his throat.

He knelt with his hands outstretched and his nostrils rimpled delicately.

[The leader] handed him the child and he seized it up, looked once at Holme with witness eyes, and buried his moaning face in its throat” (236).

The mute one is the one from whom the leader has withheld a name, just as Culla has left his own child nameless. Now as punishment he is forced to witness its bloody sacrifice. The child, however monstrous it has become in the hands of the three, remains an innocent, and the mute’s act of drinking its blood is a parody of Christian communion. Any doubt the reader might have that the strange meat which Culla was forced to eat in his earlier encounter with the trio was human flesh is now removed. Unwilling to confront his guilt, he has nevertheless been forced to partake of “the body” and, fully unrepentant, he can hardly chew it. All of this is not, of course, an endorsement of cannibalism. It represents McCarthy’s vision that human beings are god, and god is human beings. The excess in this scene seems intended as testimony that any human action one can imagine, however diabolical, has almost certainly been already committed. In this context, it is perhaps worthwhile to see McCarthy as a post-Holocaust writer, since the Nazis exceeded any previously known boundaries of evil and thus threatened to make the word itself meaningless. Nevertheless, as the largely benevolent experiences of Rinthy, who is searching for her lost child and trying to negate Culla’s sin, indicate, god’s grace has not vanished from the world.

In one scene, the denuded and grotesquely arranged corpses that the triune has unearthed are brought into a town on the back of a wagon.

Seeing them, an unidentified man says to Culla: “I hate known they is such people, don’t you?” (88). One assumes that he does not mean the grotesquely displayed corpses but rather people who could do such things to the dead.

One aspect of McCarthy’s aesthetic is a determination to force upon the reader the awareness that, in fact, such people exist in the world. But in the context of the novel’s fourthspace, actions like the triune’s murders take on added dimensions. In part, they personify Culla’s willingness to commit incest, abandon his child, and then repeatedly deny that the child is his, as well as embodying Culla’s self-condemnation for such actions. Excess in style and details of plot are essential parts of the linguistic dimension of the text’s fourthspace. They contribute to its merger of a grotesquely detailed mimesis, its metaphoric and sociological implications, and its surrealistic feeling as a projection of Culla’s subconscious. The space Culla enters is more complex and thus ultimately more inescapable than the forest into which Goodman Brown ventures. Because they exist completely outside the community

(unless they are in fact projections of communal sin and guilt), the grim triune is only privileged to move freely in an extended smooth space.

Child of God is a more clearly mimetic novel. Its geographical setting is identified as mid-twentieth-century Sevier County, Tennessee, and its fourthspace is thus less complex and—somewhat paradoxically, given the content of the novel—less intimidating. 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. Thus one dimension of the fourthspace of Outer Dark is inevitably absent: Lester as recognizable human being cannot be a projection of Lester’s own subconscious guilt.

Psychology, especially abnormal psychology, is a concern of Child of God, though in a subtle manner. As several critics point out, 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. A severely curtailed psychological dimension is part of the fourthspace of the novel.

Mimetic and metaphoric dimensions are extensively developed in the novel.

Evenson sees Lester Ballard as being “a nearly unadulterated nomad” (43). This definition is appropriate, but it is important not to overlook the factors that underlie the qualification. Evenson correctly observes that throughout most of the novel, “Ballard lives absolutely on the fringe, his dependence on society reduced to a minimum. Like the movie Badlands, Child of God portrays directionless violence, an amorality which refuses to apologize for itself, which denies judgment” (44). 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. Edwin Arnold points out that “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” (56).

Lester is forced to retreat to society’s fringe after the auction because he has literally nowhere else to go; after existing in virtual isolation since his father’s suicide, he no longer knows, if he ever did, how to function in human society. He is then almost fated to occupy the kind of smooth space Evenson describes. 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

(“all the trouble I ever was in was caused by gettin caught” [53]), and his self-definition is appropriate for Lester as well: “I’m a fugitive from the ways of the world. I’d be a fugitive from my mind if I had me some snow” (53).

Still a kind of innocent at this point, Lester doesn’t know anything about “snow” or any other narcotics. But he will soon become a fugitive from his own mind; he will evolve into the very prototype of excess that constitutes the binary opposite of reason in Bataille’s paradigm. McCarthy sometimes employs a kind of after-the-fact communal narration to describe Lester, and one early such passage describes a propensity for sudden and frightening acts of violence.

Still, before committing acts that make his exile from the human community complete and irrevocable, Lester makes failed attempts to rejoin at least its outer limits. In fact, he once makes an overture for something approaching mainstream acceptance by abruptly entering a country church, but his presence merely serves to shock the preacher and the congregation, which he inadvertently further outrages: “Ballard had a cold and snuffled loudly through the service but nobody expected he would stop if God himself looked askance so no one looked” (32). Lester is condemned partly because of his family’s history of poverty and lawlessness, and in this context he ironically attains a kind of stature in the community by entering its folklore.

He is defined as being the most sinful member of two sinful families, the Ballards and the human race; the communal voice concludes a summary of the Ballard family with this: “I’ll say one thing about Lester though. you can trace em back to Adam if you want and goddamn if he didn’t outstrip them all” (81). This pronouncement is crucial to the judgment the text is making concerning the human capacity for evil—as shocked and disgusted as they are by his actions, the community feels a degree of genuine pride in having produced the sinner of sinners. In Hawthorne’s dark forest, Satan tells young Goodman Brown that “evil is the nature of mankind” and then welcomes the once innocent Puritan to the witches’ sabbath, the “communion of your race.” The community’s pride in Lester’s violent assault on the communal order indicates at least that evil is a strong part of human nature.

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 nothin I want” (77). 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 ” (79). 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. Beginning with his

father’s suicide, people have been running away from Lester for some time.

Moreover, the rejection by the young woman, as understandable as it is, effectively summarizes the communal response to Lester, who truly has nothing that anyone wants.

Comparable in its evocation of the deliberately repulsive is McCarthy’s description of a deranged “dumpkeeper” and his family of nine daughters, each of which is “named out of an old medical dictionary gleaned from the rubbish he picked”: “These gangling progeny with black hair hanging from their armpits now sat idle and wide-eyed day after day in chairs and crates about the little yard cleared out of the tips while their harried dam called them one by one to help with chores and one by one they shrugged or blinked with sluggard lids. Urethra, Cerebella, Hernia Sue” (26). Almost inevitably, the dumpkeeper discovers one of the daughters having sex in the woods and, after chasing the unknown young man away, tries to force himself on her. While such Erskine Caldwell-like misogyny and stereotyping of “poor white trash” is objectionable, the scene is thematically relevant to McCarthy’s narrative strategy. 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. Moreover, the “community” of the dumpkeeper’s family, which exists outside any moral or ethical values, is the only one in which Lester is truly welcome; the family represents a transitional stage in Lester’s descent into a horrific and multileveled smooth space.

The misogynistic overtones of the textual moments involving the woman, her monstrous child, and the robin and the dumpkeeper and his daughters pale in comparison to what is still to come. From an exile with some yearning still to be a part of the social order, Lester degenerates into a ghoulish figure so consumed by madness as to be scarcely recognizable as human. He becomes a murderer of women who collects the corpses of his victims in order to have sex with them. Moreover, he begins to dress in the clothing of the dead women and wears a literal fright wig “fashioned whole” from the scalp of one of his victims.

Nevertheless, as Edwin Arnold, John Lang, and Dianne C. Luce have argued, McCarthy goes to considerable lengths to prevent readers from misunderstanding Lester as an inhuman monster. Arnold points out that the first third of McCarthy’s text is devoted to the stages of Lester’s exile from society, and Lang analyzes the ways in which the condemning communal voice ironically creates compassion for Lester. Lang further comments that “ultimately, Child of God testifies not to the anomalous outrages committed by Lester Ballard but to the potential of violence inherent in all human beings. Lester’s actions are often shocking, but they are not, unfortunately, unique” (94). In describing Lester before he begins his murderous rampage, Luce offers the most perceptive analysis of the role of sexuality in the novel:

“Ballard’s predicament is dramatized in terms of his human needs not only for a home and shelter but also for sexual contact. Considered peculiar, he finds it nearly impossible to approach the women he knows. They rebuff him not because they are chaste, nor because they are less crude than he, but because he is in some way marked as a pariah. As his parents and the law have dispossessed him of what he considers his by right, so the women he approaches deny him both sexual outlet and intimacy” (125). Of course, dead women cannot reject Lester; nor can they resist whatever he does to them.

As Evenson points out, Lester “does not ask, as most of us would, what is the proper thing that should be done with a dead body, but rather what can be done with a dead body. For Ballard, a woman’s dead body is a smooth space, open to myriad possibilities” (44).

None of this, of course, really resolves the issue of the novel’s misogyny.

In Child of God, McCarthy is intent upon exploring the extremes to which male appropriation and objectification of the female can be taken. If there is a more profound way to objectify a woman (or, for that matter, anyone) than killing her, it would be by sexually desecrating her corpse. It is important to remember that Child of God is an exercise in excess, in the outer limits of violation of the body and the spirit, and that it is set in a rural southern culture in which women have traditionally been objectified. Evenson is correct in seeing the dead bodies of women as representing a cumulative smooth space for Lester, but they are only one such space for McCarthy’s “part-time ghoul” (174). The ultimate smooth space for Lester is madness, an insane discarding of any restrictions on or limitations to his murderous needs. Perhaps the defining aspect of his kind of madness is its seeming unawareness of all boundaries, not only those separating him from other people and even from nature itself but also those that separate the living from the dead. In his madness, McCarthy’s protagonist is free to explore fully Bataille’s dimension of excess, of the total renunciation of reason and order.

His dressing in the clothes of his female victims and even constructing a wig out of the scalp of one of them can be understood in the context of a smooth space originating in his insane need to appropriate the bodies of his victims even more completely than by sexually violating them. Lester, in fact, wants to merge his body with theirs until what is left is a pure physicality from which all boundaries have been removed.

It is in this context that McCarthy’s title is intended to be provocative, potentially even offensive, but ultimately inclusive of all forms of human behavior. In Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason, Michel Foucault valorizes the madness that underlies some of the most memorable products of Western art:

For Sade as for Goya, unreason continues to watch by night; but in this vigil it joins with fresh powers. The non-being it once was now becomes the power to annihilate. Through Sade and Goya, the Western world received the possibility of transcending its reason in violence, and of recovering tragic experience beyond the promises of dialectic. After Sade and Goya, and since them, unreason has belonged to whatever is decisive, for the modern world, in any work of art; that is, whatever any work of art contains that is both murderous and constraining. (136) Foucault believes that an essential element of the aesthetic power of the art of unreason comes from the fact that society attempts to deny and repress the vision that sustains it. McCarthy can certainly be placed in this tradition; his work is rooted in a dimension of murderous unreason that is nevertheless undeniably human. In the fourthspace of Child of God, this dimension becomes increasingly dominant as the text progresses, often submerging the mimetic to such an extent that Appalachia as a place is almost forgotten.

Truly, Lester and all he represents might emerge anywhere. Lester exists initially on the boundary between reason and unreason, but for a time he finds his own kind of liberation in crossing over into madness.

Lang writes that “Lester’s crimes would not place him beyond a human continuum on which we find John Wayne Gacy, Ted Bundy, and Jeffrey Dahmer” (93), and indeed an underlying concern of McCarthy’s aesthetic is to show that human beings are capable of any act that one can imagine, however violent it may be. Thus McCarthy is careful not to make Lester seem as abstract and metaphoric as he does the grim triune of Outer Dark, even though Lester’s crimes differ from theirs only in being more clearly rooted in sexuality. Bell emphasizes the complex implications inherent in McCarthy’s insistence that such crimes do not place Lester beyond the possibility of grace and redemption: “This is at once strange and not strange, for if Lester is in a state of grace—if such grace were in fact possible—this seems to be precisely and incomprehensibly what true grace would be like” (68).

In part, grace is possible for Lester because, despite the horrific nature of his crimes, he exists as a naturalistic victim and a sacrificial scapegoat.

From the beginning of the novel, when his life is auctioned away and he is knocked unconscious, Lester is depicted as being controlled by external forces, some of them systemic and others fundamental and permanent. As one of Evenson’s nomads, however reluctantly he joins their ranks, Lester necessarily exists outside the protection of the social order. In this context, it is not surprising that the loyal sheriff, significantly named Fate, declares himself Lester’s merciless judge early in the novel. It is as if Fate knows that his antagonist will inevitably assault the social order he is charged with protecting, prophesying early in the novel that Lester will become a murderer. Moreover, like Culla and Rinthy Holme, Lester is also the victim of long-standing economic oppression and profound cultural ignorance.

At one point, McCarthy even goes to elaborate lengths during which he initially appears to shift the narrative perspective away from Lester to establish a historical context for his protagonist. A flood threatens to submerge the town and in fact most of Sevier County, after which Sheriff Fate joins some communal volunteers in rescue boats.8 They begin to reminisce about local history and especially rival vigilante groups known as the White Caps and the Bluebills, both prototypes of the Ku Klux Klan. About the White Caps, one old man says: “They was a bunch of lowlife thieves and cowards and murderers. The only thing they ever done was to whip women and rob old people. And murder people in their beds at night” (165).9 This discussion soon evokes memories of a legendary sheriff named Tom Davis who managed to subdue the White Caps. Paradoxically, but in the world of Cormac McCarthy inevitably, Davis eradicated violence only to celebrate it. The old man remembers a communal lynching of two White Caps that took on all the aspects of a carnival: “People had started in to town the evenin before.

Slept in their wagons, a lot of em. Rolled out blankets on the courthouse lawn. . . . Women sellin sandwiches in the street. . . . [Davis] brung em from the jail, had two preachers with em and had their wives on their arms and all.

Just like they was goin to church. All of em got up there on the scaffold and they sung and everybody fell in singin with em” (167). One remembers that the auction of Lester’s farm also turned into a carnival. In Sevier County, violence has always been as close as the courthouse lawn, and the boundary between reason and the excess of unreason has always been an illusion. Thus Lester is merely the historic culmination of the communal legacy of violence.

He is the naturalistic victim of historic, as well as economic, forces.

But Lester’s victimization goes even deeper. Nature itself seems to have willed his destruction, a fact that Lester vaguely comprehends. Early in the novel he sees a pack of hunting dogs catch and destroy a wild boar and is fascinated by the bloody, choreographed violence unfolding before him:

“Ballard watched this ballet tilt and swirl and churn mud up through the snow and watched the lovely blood welter there in its holograph of battle, spray burst from a ruptured lung, the dark heart’s blood, pinwheel and pirouette, until shots rang and all was done” (69). Lester will become both boar and hound, the hunted and the merciless hunter fascinated with “the dark heart’s blood” of his female victims. What is most significant here is that the hunters (the godlike producers of the ballet) remain out of sight, as such controlling powers must in literary naturalism.

The text directly challenges the reader on the second page, describing Lester as “a child of God much like yourself perhaps” (4). McCarthy’s narrative

strategy here is clear: the reader, at this point not really knowing Lester and certainly not having encountered him as murderer and necrophiliac, is not likely to resist such identification. Child of God demands that McCarthy’s implied reader, at the novel’s end, still accepts Lester as a human being different from other human beings only in the extremity of an isolation brought on by his descent into the realm of madness, by his insistence upon the discovery of the ultimate smooth space, by his assault on the boundaries between his own need for gratification and the bodies of others.

The early reference to Lester as “a child of god much like yourself perhaps” is superseded in the novel by a later and more confrontational passage, which is interestingly one of the few places in Child of God where McCarthy indulges in the kind of stylistic excess that characterizes Outer Dark. In it, Lester attempts to cross a flooded river by riding a crate filled with an “odd miscellany” consisting of “men’s and ladies’ clothes, [and] the three enormous stuffed toys” (155). When the crate is swept out from under him, he is near drowning until he is able to grab a log that has come close to smashing into him. The external narrative perspective then isolates him in the midst of the raging river: “Ballard was lost in a pandemonium of noises, the rifle aloft in one arm now like some demented hero or bedraggled parody of a patriotic poster come aswamp” (156).10 Having isolated Lester in a cinematic manner,11 the text now adopts a dialogical mode from which to issue its strongest challenge for the reader to view Lester as a “child of god”: “He could not swim, but how would you drown him? His wrath seemed to buoy him up. Some halt in the way of things seems to work here.

See him. you could say that he’s sustained by his fellow men like you. Has peopled the shore with them calling to him. A race that gives suck to the maimed and the crazed, that wants their wrong blood in its history and will have it. . . . How is he then borne up? Or rather, why will not these waters take him?” (156). “Fellow men like you” belong to a human race that gives birth “to the maimed and the crazed”; the legacy of such beings is both monstrous and definitively human. Through this dialogical approach, McCarthy is insisting that the reader acknowledge a shared humanness with “the maimed and the crazed.”

Whether or not the reader is willing to drown Lester, the human community of the text understandably demands that his prolonged assault of taboos central to the social order must be stopped. It also needs to sacrifice him as an embodiment of sacred violence gone mad; in the words of Ciuba:

“Ballard eliminates the difference between the pious regard for sacred violence and the desire to arrogate such heavenly fury for his own power. . . .

Like some violent voluptuary in the religion of Georges Bataille, he makes transgression the very sign of his transcendence. . . . The savage Lester is godlike precisely because he seems most ungodly” (78). Lester’s rampage is the result of the sacrificial crisis evoked by the legacy of the White Caps and other such agents of Appalachian violence, and he must be stopped in order to avoid another cycle of reciprocal violence.

Having abandoned himself completely to smooth space, Lester has issued the most fundamental of challenges to the striated space of the community. His madness, which removes all boundaries from his insatiable demands, simultaneously liberates him and sets in motion his inevitable destruction. Lester becomes so much a part of the open space outside the community that he can almost merge himself with the landscape at will.

Still, his narrow escape brings home to him the communal hatred, and this epiphany dismays him. He has a chance unspoken encounter with a young boy on a school bus that evokes a recognition in Lester of the sheer madness of his actions and of a time when he was not the communal outcast that he has become. It is as if he confronts suddenly the image of his own human innocence, of the same need for belonging that inspired his visit to the carnival. Now his smooth space has been compromised, and his insane assault on taboos and boundaries must end.

He thus presents himself at the county hospital, telling a startled night nurse that he belongs there. Ironically, he is never indicted for his crimes but is sent instead to the state hospital at Knoxville, where he is “placed in a cage next door but one to a demented gentleman who used to open folk’s skulls and eat the brains inside with a spoon” (193).12 It is as if the community’s frenzied need for a scapegoat has simply played itself out, as if the moment for retributive sacrifice has passed. Finally, in 1965, Lester dies of pneumonia, after which his body is shipped to the medical school at Memphis, where an autopsy inevitably yields no insights into his behavior.

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.

During the rescue trip in the boat, a sheriff ’s deputy asks the old man, who assumes something close to an authorial voice in the scene, if people were “meaner” during the days of the White Caps than they are at present. The old man’s answer is crucial to an understanding of Child of God as well as Outer Dark: “No. . . . I don’t. I think people are the same from the day God first made one” (168). Incest, child abandonment, murder, and necrophilia have been human actions since the beginning. Thus, society is always faced with the potential of a sacramental crisis. Still, in McCarthy’s world, human beings are children of god 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.

Notes

1. For a good summary of the biblical sources of McCarthy’s title see Arnold 46.

2. One especially memorable such scene occurs when the “innocent” Gene Harrogate, violator of melons and planner of inept criminal schemes, passes beneath the window of a

“viperous” evangelist who calls down a curse upon him ( Suttree 106).

3. Arnold relates the circular structure of Outer Dark to Culla’s doomed flight from judgment: “His sin still unspoken, his guilt yet unnamed . . . Culla, wandering in his state of nothingness, seems fated to return again and again to the site of his sin” (54).

4. I am borrowing this term from Richard Wertime’s discussion of the symbolic significance of the street gang that serves as the central unifying structure in Hubert Selby Jr.’s Last Exit to Brooklyn.

5. The most important application of the number three is obviously to the three outlaws, the “grim triune,” and they are indeed a dark parody of the Trinity, bringing violence and death instead of hope and salvation. Culla’s thrice-repeated denial that he is Charon may well be intended to echo Peter’s denial of Christ.

6. Especially in view of McCarthy’s later revisionist novels about the American West, it is possible that “the man with no name” is a veiled reference to the protagonist played by Clint Eastwood in the 1964 Sergio Leone “spaghetti Western,” A Fistful of Dollars.

The Eastwood character also appears out of nowhere with a mission to punish evil. Since Eastwood, though of unknown origins, is a heroic figure in the film, such an allusion would be in keeping with the parodic subtext of McCarthy’s novel.

7. William C. Spencer applies an allegorical reading to the three outlaws. Picking up on the Old Testament feel of the novel, he argues that “the three marauders of Outer Dark comprise a triple allegory of evil, with the bearded leader symbolizing lawless authority and destruction, Harmon [the only one of the three named in the novel] representing violence, and the idiot corresponding to ignorance” (76). He adds that “like the God of the Old Testament, the bearded one of the three is an authoritarian. He gives all the orders; he clearly is in charge at all times. Furthermore, like the Father of the Holy Trinity, he acts as judge and as a dispenser of ‘justice’ ” (74).

8. The text makes overt the biblical overtones of this scene through dialogue that recalls early floods and fires that have threatened the community.

9. By the exclusion of African Americans from this list of victims, one is again reminded of Jarrett’s discussion of the strong differences between McCarthy’s Appalachia and the race-dominated and history-plagued South of Faulkner and other writers.

10. The scene inevitably recalls the aborted river crossing in Faulkner’s As I Lay Dying.

Again, Bloom’s ideas about the ephebe’s need to “appropriate the precursor’s landscape for himself [sic]” (105) through creative “(mis)reading” are relevant to any discussion of the relationship between the fiction of Faulkner and McCarthy.

11. In a perceptive discussion of the shifting levels of narrative perspective in Child of God, Bartlett discusses the cinematic aspects of the text, pointing out that Lester is sometimes viewed as in a cinematic “freeze frame.”

12. The kind of difficulty that confronts a writer like McCarthy, for whom shock effect is a central element in his chosen aesthetic, can be seen in the fact that a realistically staged act comparable to those performed by the “demented gentleman” can be seen in the most recent Hannibal Lecter film, Hannibal. Even though the movie was made almost three decades after McCarthy wrote his novel, one could argue that his appropriation of cinematic narrative techniques constitutes McCarthy’s recognition of film’s advantage over fiction in evoking purely visceral reactions. It has, after all, been a long time since Buñuel imaged the slicing open of an eyeball.