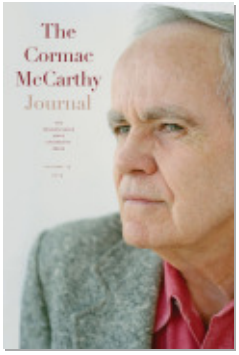
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One Drive, Two Deaths in Cormac McCarthy's *Child of God*

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ABSTRACT: This article will offer a reading of *Child of God* that integrates the supposedly black and white discourses of theology and psychoanalytic theory. One of the main themes in *Child of God* is the close relationship between sex and death as drives that shape human action and fate. These drives, as fundamental to human nature, have most notably been theorized by Freud. Accordingly, this article argues that in *Child of God* McCarthy offers a vision of reality in which the sex and death drives are situated in the greater context of a Christian metaphysics of self, thereby repositioning certain Freudian insights within a view of reality repudiated by Freud. KEYWORDS: libido, ego, spiritual death

The reality that underlies the fictional worlds of Cormac McCarthy has been the cause of much debate among scholars. Vereen M. Bell characterizes the McCarthian universe as "Heraclitus without Logos," meaning that it represents a protean flux ever tending toward nothingness, offering "no first principles, no foundational truth" (9). Edwin T. Arnold, taking Bell to task, especially his characterization of McCarthy's second novel, *Outer Dark*, as "brutally nihilistic" (44), notes the religious significance of the book's title. Following William J. Schafer, Arnold notes that the phrase "outer dark" is taken from the New Testament in which Jesus draws a distinction between "the kingdom of heaven" and "the 'outer darkness' of hell" (46). From Arnold's perspective, while McCarthy's vision of reality can indeed be characterized as infernal, it can hardly be called nihilistic in the sense of lacking in any moral or spiritual significance. Of course there is the possibility that McCarthy is merely giving in to the postmodern penchant for irreverence and irony in his use of the title. Yet anyone familiar with McCarthy's literary voice would likely find this suggestion difficult to digest. Referring to McCarthy's third novel, *Child of God*, Arnold argues, "[t]he 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' (4), there is no sense of irony whatsoever" (54). If Arnold's reading is correct, and I believe it is, McCarthy's use of

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such titles must be taken quite seriously and be seen as bearing significance on the overall meaning of the texts.

McCarthy's most explicit engagement with the central metaphysical question these critics pose is found in *The Sunset Limited* and *The Road*. The former, a novel in dramatic form, concerns two men, one named "Black" and one named "White." While on a literal level these impersonal monikers correlate to the "race" of each man, it is also true that each possesses a firmly entrenched view of reality that is the polar opposite of the other. Thus, the text embodies a tension between black and white worldviews. White, a suicidal and misanthropic "professor of darkness" (McCarthy 140) holds that "the world is basically a forced labor camp from which the workers—perfectly innocent—are led forth by lottery, a few each day, to be executed" (122), thus making self-destruction both logical and expedient. Through his eyes, man is a sickening and futile specimen, "[a] thing dangling in senseless articulation in a howling void" (139). Furthermore, the concept of God is "just a load of crap" (62), and the prospect of eternal life, "the ultimate horror" (135). Black, on the other hand, is an ex-con turned ghetto missionary. Living in a rundown New York City tenement, he offers shelter to the neighborhood junkies and crackheads who, despite his charity, walk off with anything that's not bolted down. Asked if he thinks Jesus is present in the room with them, he responds, "No. I dont think he's in this room. . . . I *know* he's in this room" (10). Black believes that salvation is there for the taking, but in order to get it, "you got to let your brother off the hook. You got to actually take him and hold him in your arms" (78). The story begins directly after Black has saved White from a suicide attempt in the subway, and the dramatic action of the text centers on the former's attempt to keep the latter in the apartment for as long as possible and dissuade him from making another attempt on his life. It is ultimately an attempt at *metanoia*, or conversion, that change of mind that brings one back from the brink. The text seemingly ends in Black's failure, with White waxing poetic in typical McCarthian fashion on the futility and emptiness of life prior to storming out of the apartment, leaving Black calling on a divinity that remains silent. This silence has led some critics to the conclusion that the vision of reality the drama unfolds is one of "devastating nihilism" (Cooper 2). Others see in this silence the apophatic or negative approach to divinity embraced by mystics such as Pseudo-Dionysius and John of the Cross (Tyburski 123). In either case, McCarthy leaves the reader with the message that reality is not as simple as black and white thinking would imagine it.

This ambiguity between the black and white worldviews of theocentrism and nihilism that marks the terminus of *The Sunset Limited* is the point of departure for *The Road*. The entire landscape of the novel is one of grey. The first page of

the novel describes this all-encompassing grey-ness as "the onset of some cold glaucoma dimming away the world" (McCarthy 3). Besides denoting something akin to a nuclear winter, a climate in which the sun is blotted out by the dust and ashes of a former civilization, this description also connotes an existence in which the question of an abstract worldview, whether black or white, that is capable of making sense of experience is become quite unthinkable. There is no "world" to speak of, only the skeletal remains which stand, "[b]arren, silent, godless" (4). McCarthy's narrator describes a would-be world in which the monuments of culture and religion, those monuments that, throughout history, have always informed the worldviews of humanity, have been laid to waste, where "[t]he frailty of everything [has been] revealed at last" (28). And yet, as father and son trudge through this postapocalyptic wasteland, the man, Job-like, still addresses God, if only to curse Him or mutter a feeble prayer when faced with some unspeakable horror. In such instances there is always the sense that the man may be wasting his breath. Supplementing this doubtful narrative of theodicy, however, is the narrative in which the man identifies his son as a figure of godliness. This begins early in the novel when the man, invoking Christ, says in reference to his son, "[i]f he is not the word of God God never spoke" (5). Erik Wielenberg justifiably claims that "[t]his statement introduces a fundamental ambiguity that runs throughout the novel" (1). While this "fundamental ambiguity" does embrace the black and white dialogism portrayed in *The Sunset Limited* in which either God or man represents the true measure of morality, it also surpasses it to include the ambiguity of spiritual incarnation. The emphasis on the preciousness of breath—which begins on the first page and continues to the second last when the man's breath, having left him after a long and terminal cough, is actually likened to God's breath—is meant to emphasize the central Christian mystery of incarnation, of God's Spirit born in man. This emphasis is also evident in the scene of the father's death in which, contemplating his son, he thinks, "[t]here is no prophet in the earth's long chronicle who's not honored here today. Whatever form you spoke of you were right" (McCarthy 277). The "form" the prophets "spoke of" is another allusion to the transpersonal consciousness of Christ, an uncreated spiritual reality that was once incarnated in Jesus and which the man now sees incarnated in his son. What *The Road* presents us with is the vision of an incarnate Trinity: father, son, and the uncreated "fire" (83) of their spirit that propels them along the endless road.

Having established McCarthy's preoccupation with what Dostoevsky, one of his favorite authors, refers to as the "accursed questions" (693), those that concern the true nature of reality and that can only be answered ambiguously, if at all, this article will offer a reading of *Child of God* which integrates the supposedly

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black and white discourses of theology and psychoanalytic theory. One of the main themes in *Child of God* is the close relationship between sex and death as drives that shape human action and fate. These drives, as fundamental to human nature, have most notably been theorized by Freud. Accordingly, this article will argue that in *Child of God* McCarthy offers a vision of reality in which the sex and death drives are situated in the greater context of a Christian metaphysics of self, thereby repositioning certain Freudian insights within a view of reality repudiated by Freud.

In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud describes the initial formulation of the theory of narcissism as "the discovery that the ego itself is cathected with libido, that the ego . . . is the libido's original home, and remains to some extent its headquarters" (753). He continues: "[t]his narcissistic libido turns towards objects, and thus becomes object-libido; and it can change back into narcissistic libido once more" (753). What this means is that the primary object of the sex drive is the ego, which only later is supplemented by "external" objects. In "On Narcissism", these two libidinal forms are described as even more closely related. Freud describes "an original libidinal cathexis of the ego, from which some is later given off to objects, but which fundamentally persists and is related to object-cathexes much as the body of an amoeba is related to the pseudopodia which it puts out" (547). In other words, when an object is cathected, or invested with emotional energy, the ego also receives some of that energy. Lacanian scholar Richard Boothby describes this as a "profound libidinal equivalence of ego, others and objects in the world" that exists at "the most fundamental level of psychic life" and that "remains inchoatively present in all subsequent experience" (32). The realization of this "equivalence" problematizes Freud's initial clear-cut distinction between "ego drives (= death drives) and sex drives (= life drives)" (*BTPP* 89). The death drive becomes something vague and indistinct. Freud admits this when he writes of the death instinct, "we have much greater difficulty in grasping that instinct; we can only suspect it, as it were, as something in the background behind Eros, and it escapes detection unless its presence is betrayed by its being alloyed with Eros" (*CAID* 755). When Freud refers to the death instinct being "alloyed with Eros," he is primarily referring to sexual sadism, that perversion in which the aggression of the death instinct is directed outward. While *Child of God* maintains this essential ambiguity, through broadening the picture of man to include a spiritual dimension, it illustrates the manner in which the destructive energy of the sex/death instinct always flows in both directions.

Knowing Freud's views on religion it is perhaps not such a curious thing that, throughout his "often far-fetched speculation" (65, *BTPP*) on the origin, nature,

and relationship of life, libido, and death, he never has recourse to the biblical text of Genesis, which, in recounting man's fall from a state of grace, reveals a nearly simultaneous origin of the latter two phenomena. Yet, in order to understand McCarthy's vision of these drives within a Christian metaphysics of self in which to be "a child of God" has real meaning, it is essential to briefly explore this text and its account of the drives in question. In the second creation narrative of Genesis, the serpent tempts Eve to partake of the forbidden fruit, telling her, "the moment you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods" (*New American Bible*, Gen. 3.5). A careful reader will have noticed the paradox in this statement in that an earlier chapter reveals God saying, "'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness'" (Gen. 1.26). If humans are created after God's "likeness" why would their eyes need to be opened in order for them to "be like gods"? What the serpent's statement represents is the first instance of self-image. In other words, through the serpent's "cunning" (Gen. 3.1) Eve's being is objectified in an image. The serpent's creation of an image occurs simultaneously with Eve's cathecting that image with desire. Thus, alienation from the real and narcissistic libidinal cathexis (self-seeking) represent different aspects of the same movement. Of course, a purely id-based conception of the real must here be replaced by one that permits the existence of an uncreated intelligence commensurate with the biblical *imago dei*, or, image of God,[1] if only on the phylogenetic scale of prelapsarian history. This initial movement represents a spiritual death, for lack of a better term, a death that is synonymous with the birth of the ego as a separate reified self. We then read, "the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized that they were naked" (Gen. 3.7). The fixed image of identification almost immediately becomes centered on the body. That both Adam and Eve are objectified in this manner reveals the aforementioned "equivalence" between libidinal cathexis of the narcissistic variety and that directed toward outer objects. After Adam and Eve have committed the "original sin" of sexually objectifying one another, God curses them, saying, "you are dirt, and to dirt you shall return" (Gen. 3.19). Thus, according to this reading of scripture, narcissistic libidinal cathexis and spiritual death are essentially indistinguishable and set in motion the process that ultimately culminates in corporeal death. That corporeal death is a consequence of spiritual death is due to the fact that the uncreated has become identified with the created through the agency of desire. What is engendered thereby is not change and decay per se, but the identification of an assumed and temporally fixed image with the elements of change and decay.

Child of God is rife with natural images of creation and destruction ambiguously fused. We read, for instance, "[i]n the spring Ballard watched two hawks

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couple. . . . He eyed them on, watching to see if one were hurt. He did not know how hawks mated but he knew that all things fought" (McCarthy 169). In another example, the melting snows of spring, a time of rejuvenation, reveal "old buried wanderings, struggles, scenes of death" (138). There is a definite sense that to be a *created thing* is to be doomed to inevitable and final destruction. In contrast to this, Lester Ballard is introduced to the reader as "[a] child of God much like yourself perhaps" (4). What this means in the context of the novel is that, though born into a state of fallenness, Lester has been redeemed from death's trajectory by the free gift of God's uncreated Spirit. Though he will have to undergo bodily death, his spiritual rebirth will ultimately triumph over the dissolution of the elements should he accept God's gift through the action of faith and the vision it engenders. Lester, of course, fails to do so. Rather than being guided by a faith that would identify him, however imperfectly, with the uncreated and thus temper "worldly" desire, he is driven by a desire that identifies him absolutely with the elements of creation. This death drive thus represents the deep-seated impetus to return to an unregenerate state which ultimately culminates in what St. Paul, prefiguring Freud, refers to as a return to "the weak and destitute elemental powers" (Gal. 4.9). Thus, the drive in question is primarily toward the spiritual death of identification with creation, with bodily death following as a logical consequence. Manifesting itself as the objective counterpoint to narcissistic libido, this drive possesses many characters in the text, but none more so than Ballard, the outcast turned necrophile. McCarthy uses Ballard, alongside certain other minor characters, to represent the objectifying tendency of libido and its doomed trajectory from spiritual to bodily death.

The "demonic" (*BTPP* 65) character of the drive, duly noted by Freud, and represented through the agency of the serpent in the Genesis story, is clearly illustrated in *Child of God* as well. One night, after having been dispossessed of home and hearth, Ballard comes across a parked car on the "Frog Mountain turnaround" and notes when it begins to "rock gently" (McCarthy 19–20). Peering into the car window Ballard sees, "[a] pair of white legs sprawled embracing a shade, a dark incubus that humped in a dream of slaverous lust" (20). It makes little difference whether this "shade" is read as an actual demon or as "[a] nigger" (20) as Ballard so callously exclaims. The "possession" that grips Ballard is in his identifying with the "dark incubus," whether natural or supernatural, and taking the latter's desire and object for his own. Ballard is thus described as "the watcher" who, "unbuttoned, spent himself on the fender" (20). His voyeuristic masturbation satisfies both the narcissistic and object oriented goals of libido, fusing them into one. In other words, his identification with the "dark incubus,"

in objectifying both self and other in a single act of desire, not only illustrates the "profound libidinal equivalence of ego [and] others" at the foundation of psychic life but also sets the template of all further relational experience in which the objectification of others reifies the initial narcissistic objectification of self.

When Ballard is finally detected by the occupants of the vehicle and forced to flee, he is described as "a misplaced and loveless simian shape scuttling across the turnaround as he had come" (20). Ballard's identification with the "dark incubus," the demon-ego, has transformed him into a mere "simian shape," a primate in heat running helter-skelter through the night. His descent to the animal level, precipitated by his egoic possession/spiritual death, thus marks the beginning of his return to the dirt. This association of human sexuality with an animal nature pervades the text and is not limited to Ballard. At one point, Ballard visits the local dump keeper who is described as having "*spawned* nine daughters" (26; my emphasis). Describing them, McCarthy writes, "[t]hey moved like cats and like cats in heat attracted surrounding swains to their midden until the old man used to go out at night and fire a shotgun at random just to clear the air" (26). In one of the more disturbing scenes, the old man, out walking in the "jungles on the far side of the dump," comes across "two figures humping away" (27). At first he merely watches from a distance, much like Ballard on Frog Mountain. When he realizes that one of the "figures" is his daughter, he runs the boy off and proceeds to beat his daughter with a stick. While thus thrashing her, she manages to throw him off balance and he falls beside her. The old man is then overcome by lust and "[n]ext thing he knew his overalls were about his knees and he was mounting her" (27–28). When he finishes, he says to her, "Goddamn you," as though she were somehow demonic, and then "lumber[s] off toward the dump like a bear" (28). In the reality McCarthy has envisioned, animal metaphors are often used in connection with an objectifying sexual libido that somehow "possesses" the subject.

Yet, people are not merely described as animals. They are also described as "things" and body parts. For instance, the retarded son of an acquaintance of Ballard's is referred to as "the thing in the floor" (77). To be accurate, the description of this "thing" employs animal imagery as well (77). Thus we read of a "hugeheaded bald and slobbering primate that inhabited the lower reaches of the house . . . a consort of roaches and great hairy spiders, perennially benastied and afflicted with a nameless crud" (77). Yet when some "woman" says to the child, "[l]ooky here, Billy," we are informed that, "[*i*]*t* didn't look" (77; my emphasis). The dump keeper is said to have named his daughters "out of an old medical dictionary gleaned from the rubbish he picked" (26). The girl's very names, such as "Urethra" and "Cerebella," etymologically refer to urinary tracks

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and grey matter respectively (26). When Ballard visits, he is described as having his eyes on a "long blonde flatshanked daughter" (28). The term "flatshanked" reduces the woman to a piece of meat. The daughter does not seem to mind, however, in that she offers to show Ballard her "nice titties" for twenty-five cents, or one for twelve and a half (29). Another time, when Ballard goes to visit the aforementioned acquaintance but only finds his daughter and the same idiot son at home, Ballard says to the girl, "[w]hy don't you show me them nice titties" (118). In all of these cases, women are reduced to body parts. Though this is a common enough phenomena in contemporary society, looked at soberly, it is not a far cry from necrophilia, that is, from sexually cathecting a dead thing. It is perhaps in this sense that Ballard, a "child of God," is much like ourselves. That is, any difference is more a matter of degree than of dormant potential. In his sympathetic analysis of Lester Ballard, Michael Madsen notes "how easily we as children of God can become estranged, lonely, and be driven to commit horrendous acts" (23). According to this interpretation, that which separates Lester from the rest of us is the alienating experience that drives him from community and home. I would suggest that, while this is an important variable in understanding Lester, our kinship with him rests more in the way he takes many of society's sexual proclivities to their logical end. It is thus conceivable that we have more reason to be uneasy than Madsen allows.

The next time Ballard comes across a parked car on Frog Mountain, he is out squirrel hunting. He strolls past the car and sees, "[a] bare thigh. An arm upflung. A hairy pair of buttocks" (86). Inside the car are "two people half naked sprawled together" (86). Ballard keeps walking but soon stops, being objectified himself, as, "[a] pair of eyes staring with lidless fixity" (86). Ballard is thus reduced to a scopic gaze seeking object cathexis. Upon investigating further Ballard learns that the car occupants are "deader'n hell" (87). The cause of death is not given and there is no appearance of violence. Carbon monoxide poisoning, the most obvious explanation seeing that the car is still running when Ballard happens upon it, is, however, quite unlikely in that both occupants are described as having their eyes open in death. That two corpses are depicted as being engaged in a sexual act is, however, of great symbolic significance in that it reveals the objectification inherent in libido and thus the identity of libidinal desire and spiritual death. This symbolism becomes all the more apparent when Ballard turns the man over and we read that, "[t]he dead man's penis, sheathed in a wet yellow condom, was pointing at him rigidly" (88). Not only does the dead man's erection signify the ambiguity of sex and death in the world McCarthy envisions, but the fact that he is wearing a condom implies a sexual act that is cut off from the very possibility of life. Ballard then notices the dead girl's breasts

and reaches across the dead man to "cop a feel" (87). The difference between this act and that proposed by Ballard to the aforementioned living girls is minimal. Finally Ballard climbs into the back seat and we read, "[k]neeling there between the dead girl's legs he undid his buckle and lowered his trousers" (88). Ballard is then described as "[a] crazed gymnast laboring over a cold corpse" (88). Ballard thus commits the dread taboo of necrophilia. And yet, the real horror is how seamlessly his act fits into the overall sexual landscape of the text.

According to Lisa Downing, necrophilia represents the epitome of "death-driven perversion" (50), trumping sadism as an ambiguous admixture of *Eros* and *Thanatos*. In her book, *Desiring the Dead*, Downing defines necrophilia as an act in which the fetishized corpse, signifying a "radical absence," allows the necrophile to "know" death through the other (52). This implies that the necrophile has a specific attraction for lifeless corpses. In contrast to this, Lester Ballard seems to be a necrophile by default. His is not a sexual attraction for the dead per se, but merely for the sexually objectified. His object choice logically follows in a world where people are perceived as sex objects. Whether dead or alive, his gaze objectifies. This is his violence, the violence of ego. In the dead, Ballard simply finds the purest form of an object, a pure projection to mirror his spiritually dead self. That the dead do not represent a particular fetish for Ballard is evident in how he invests the corpses with attributes of life. Thus, in his first sexual encounter with a corpse on Frog Mountain we read, "[h]e poured into that waxen ear everything he'd ever thought of saying to a woman [and] Who could say she did not hear him?" (McCarthy 88). Then, once Ballard has taken the dead girl home to the shack in which he is squatting, to shack up with her, so to speak, he goes to a dry goods store in town and buys her a red dress, some panties and a slip (96–98). That night, after thawing her out by the fire so that the "Goddamn frozen bitch" was "limber enough," Ballard goes about prettying her up (102). We thus read, "[h]e sat and brushed her hair with the dimestore brush he'd bought. He undid the top of the lipstick and screwed it out and began to paint her lips" (102). After dressing her and posing her in a variety of enticing positions, "[h]e undressed her very slowly, talking to her. Then he pulled off his trousers and lay next to her. He spread her loose thighs. You been wanting it, he told her" (103). Thus Ballard invests his dead object with the desire of the living, thereby turning himself into her object. This further illustrates the manner in which ego seeks to reify itself through the libidinal objectification of others.

Ballard soon crosses a line between treating people like objects to turning them into objects. On another one of his lone walks through the mountains he comes across a parked pickup truck in which he finds a young couple "fixin

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to screw" (150). After shooting the boy through the neck where he is sitting, Ballard demands that the girl get out of the car. Once out, he has her face the other direction and we read, "he laid the muzzle at the base of her skull and fired" (151). Ballard drags the corpse into the woods to violate it post haste but is surprised when the pickup truck starts up and drives away. After futilely giving chase Ballard returns to the corpse to find it "cold and wooden with death" (152). In another instance, when Ballard attempts, but fails, to kill John Greer, the local man who bought Ballard's house when the county auctioned it off, Ballard is described as wearing a "frightwig" (172), which we soon come to realize is a "dried human scalp" (173).

The more Ballard treats people as things to be cathected, the more does he, himself, become a thing. Shortly after his first act of necrophilia, the shack in which he is squatting burns down in the night. McCarthy's use of such descriptive words as "hellish glow" (104) lends to the scene a theological import, as though a soul were facing the possibility of its perdition. Once burnt out, Ballard is forced to move into a cave like the animal that he has become. When he visits the house of an acquaintance, the daughter of said acquaintance says to him, "[y]ou ain't even a man. You're just a crazy thing" (117). Ballard becomes more and more incoherent, abject, wearing his victim's dresses like some kind of "gothic doll" (140). In his lair he is described as "gibbering," as making a sound that "echoed from the walls of the grotto like the mutterings of a band of sympathetic apes" (159). Perhaps where this degeneration is most notable is when McCarthy writes of a voice coming from Ballard that 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" (158).

And yet Ballard does not return to sanity, nor to humanity. After he is apprehended, he is "sent to the state hospital at Knoxville and there placed next door but one to a demented gentleman who used to open folks' skulls and eat the brains inside with a spoon" (193). Such is Ballard's company and kindred in a zoo for the deranged until he finally succumbs to pneumonia and is "found dead in the floor of his cage" (194). Ballard is then shipped to the "state medical school at Memphis" (194) to be cadaverized. It is in the description of this postmortem that the absence of spirit becomes a veritable presence to the reader:

> He was laid out on a slab and flayed, eviscerated, dissected. His head was sawed open and the brains removed. His muscles were stripped from his bones. His heart was taken out. His entrails were hauled forth and delineated and the four young students who bent over him like those haruspices of old perhaps saw monsters worse to come in their configurations.

> At the end of the three months when the class was closed Ballard was scraped from the table into a plastic bag and taken with others of his kind to a cemetery outside the city and there interred. (194)

The description begins by referring to "[h]is head," "[h]is muscles," "[h]is heart," as though there were something else there besides these body parts, some spiritual essence out of which these disparate things manifest. But the search comes up empty and thus it is "Ballard" who is scraped from the table into a plastic bag, a heap of viscera encased in a thin shell, not so very different from what he had been when roaming the mountain side. For, McCarthy seems to be saying, he had died the only death of real import long before the pneumonia finished him off. In forsaking the free gift of God's Spirit, he had already become identical to the writhing nature that encompassed him. Yet it took this afterthought, this surgical dissection, to reveal the void that is McCarthy's true object.

This overemphasis on raw materiality is also seen in the description of some of Ballard's victims when they are discovered in his cavernous lair. The local sheriff's department is forced to use a rope pulley to lift them out, and we read, "The rope drew taut and the first of the dead sat up on the cave floor, the hands that hauled the rope above sorting the shadows like puppeteers. Gray soapy clots of matter fell from the cadaver's chin. She ascended dangling. She sloughed in the weem of the noose. A grey rheum dripped" (196). Once the authorities have exhumed them all and put them in a truck trailer to be carted away, they are described as "seven bodies bound in muslin like enormous hams" (197). This description certainly lays bare Ballard's objectification of his victims, but it must also be recalled that many of those victims were themselves found by Ballard in acts of "slaverous lust." In other words, they too were driven by the objectifying force of libido. In this way, the connection between sex and death, both spiritually and materially, is not limited to Ballard. It pervades the landscape of the entire text.

The fact that McCarthy's object is an absence revealed through the processes of desire and decay makes it easy to understand why Vereen Bell would characterize his philosophical stance as "Heraclitus without Logos." As such, Bell is not incorrect in claiming that McCarthy's novels are pervaded by a "nihilistic mood" (2). Yet the subjectivism of mood must give way to the objectivity of metaphysics where one is posited, and clearly, McCarthy's title, and the manner in which the text employs the same phrase, does so. In fact, this "nihilistic mood," coupled with McCarthy's emphasis on raw matter, reveals the absence in question. Perhaps critics such as Bell mistake this absence for the emptiness

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of a projection, and thus as the locus of a Nietzschean death of God. Yet, the absence is not revealed through a search for God as it is with Nietzsche's madman. Rather, it is revealed through the constant search for self-gratification. It is thus man that is dead, not God. It is thus God that is forsaken, not man. In this world, sex and death have far more than a merely Freudian import. The objectifying tendency of libido that identifies the uncreated Spirit with the elements of creation through an incessant economy of desire represents an unconscious rejection of a spiritual reality. This spiritual death and its overcoming is the subject matter of most religious discourse. Of course, if we take this novel as McCarthy's final word on the issue, there is very little to be hopeful about. If Ballard is meant to be paradigmatic of humanity, and I believe he is, doom is the resounding message of the novel. And yet, this is not McCarthy's final word. Both *The Sunset Limited* and *The Road* offer visions of spiritual hope, however weighed down by the cross of doubt.

Freud's views on religion are well known. In "Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices," he identifies religion as "a universal obsessional neurosis" (434), and in *The Future of an Illusion*, he identifies, "religious doctrines as illusions" propagated and perpetuated by our "wretched, ignorant and downtrodden ancestors" (706). Thus, religion is a crutch at best, a mental illness at worst. And yet we are not dealing here with religion or with religious doctrines, but with the essence of man, of which religion necessarily speaks. Where Freud most obviously reveals his limitations in this regard is in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. In the first chapter of the work, Freud writes of an acquaintance of his who identifies the source of all religious sentiments in what Freud paraphrases as an "oceanic feeling" or a "sensation of 'eternity'" (*CAID* 723). His preconceptions force him to pigeonhole the experience of his acquaintance into the conceptual framework of his own worldview. It is thus written off as a form of primary narcissism that was somehow preserved in the psyche throughout the course of further ego development (725). Thus, for Freud, the ego is normative, even if it delves inward into the abyss of the id. It is ultimately here where his vision fails and where McCarthy's does not.

It is true that neither McCarthy nor Freud paints a pretty picture of man. Both depict him as an egocentric hellion driven by lust and hate. But whereas for Freud the ego is normative, and so too the hell it brings with it, for McCarthy, in *Child of God*, it is *an infernal agent within a larger spiritual reality*. McCarthy sees ego's never ending self-seeking as a living death that makes of bodily death an afterthought at best, rather than business as usual, however sordid it may be. Accordingly, while his vision seems darker, in reality it is more illuminating than the vision of Freud. One is reminded of Heidegger's definition of the true

poet "[i]n the age of the world's night" as being he who dares to "reach into the abyss" where Being lies buried (92). Thus desire and death take on a much larger significance in the reality McCarthy has created to mirror our own, becoming even more blurred in ambiguity, an ambiguity that reaches into the abyss, approaching that central paradox of man's existence: "He who seeks . . . his life will lose it, but who ever loses it will save it" (Lk 17.33).

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NOTE

1. The Buddhist "Buddha nature" is another example of such an uncreated intelligence.

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