

From Voyeurism to Archaeology: Cormac McCarthy's *Child of God*

by Andrew Bartlett

Readers who find Cormac McCarthy's *Child of God* (1973) disturbingly powerful might well argue that this power results from the "raw material" of its antihero. Lester Ballard is a twenty-seven-year-old white native of Frog Mountain in Appalachian Sevier County, Tennessee: a cursing, spitting, vengeful, homicidal, necrophilic sociopath. This grotesque outsider could serve as stuff for a gratuitously shocking horror story. But Ballard represents a serious figure for McCarthy—not primarily a case study in psychology or criminology, but a fictional figure quite within the bounds of human possibility. Some degrees of human evil prove difficult to apprehend, must be seen to be believed. In its struggle with this difficulty, the aesthetic power of *Child of God* derives not so much from the force of Lester Ballard as subject or object but rather from the play of positions taken by the narrator through whom we see Ballard. Hunting, tracking, sighting, looking, watching, searching, exploring, examining—such processes dominate the story. Ballard demonstrates both a passionate attachment to the rifle he has carried since boyhood and an expert ability to sight and shoot, a faultless eye. The text is concerned not with a theological question, as the title might suggest, but with a problem of vision: how does a man such as Lester Ballard see the world? How might we, how ought we to *see* Lester Ballard? "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.”¹ I would suggest that McCarthy approaches this problem not merely by privileging Lester Ballard as an “objective” referential phenomenon but rather by playing with the rhetorics of visibility, ways of *seeing*. The aesthetic power of *Child of God* results from McCarthy’s superb regulation of narrative distance and perspective, his command of four degrees of proximity to Ballard, four kinds of narrative position with differing visions: the voyeuristic, the oblivious, the blind (blinded by darkness), and—most inventive—the archaeological. These “visions” determine both rhetorical strategies on the surface of the text and dramatic structures in the elements of the story.

The voyeuristic counts as perhaps the most obvious mode of perspective in *Child of God*: its circumscribed field of vision frames space and focuses on some central object in which the watcher takes a serious, ambiguously perverse, interest. The narrator constantly watches Ballard watching another body oblivious to being watched: animals and people both dead and alive, potential prey and actual victims, atmospheric signs, landscapes, ruins. Ballard himself operates as a perverse conflation of hunter and voyeur. His demented sexual adventures begin when he eavesdrops on a couple making love in a parked car on the Frog Mountain turnaround (19–20). Because for Ballard erotic impulses are painfully confused with destructive impulses (169; cf. 197), the recurrent image of the voyeur in *Child of God* is that of a hunter who focuses on a presence or a scene of actual or potential death.

Ballard took to wandering over the mountain through the snow to his old homeplace where he’d watch the house, the house’s new tenant. He’d go in the night and lie up on the bank and watch him through the kitchen window. Or from the top of the well house. . . . Ballard laid the rifle foresight on his chest. He swung it upward to a spot just above the ear. His finger filled the cold curve of the trigger. Bang, he said. (109)

All elements of the voyeuristic converge in this scene: precise visual concentration on a relatively “literal” image, the reassuring presence of the object, pleasure in watching the oblivious watched figure, perverse motivation, a certain pathetic impotence, a sense of loneliness.

Watching something “really” present in the field of vision: that voyeuristic process dominates the text. Meaning in *Child of God* may seem inseparable from a scene of visual immediacy because the dominant perspective through-

¹ Cormac McCarthy, *Child of God*, 156. All parenthetical page references hereafter are to the 1984 reprint.

out the text is that of external focalization: narrative information is most often restricted to what characters say and do than what they think or feel. In the quantitative sense the text relies most steadily on such techniques, tending toward a discourse that is episodic, elliptical, laconic, rigorously metonymic, reliant on serial structures, exact in its taxonomic diction.

He sits and dries the rifle and ejects the shells into his lap and dries them and wipes the action and oils it and oils the receiver and the barrel and the magazine and the lever and reloads the rifle and levers a shell into the chamber and lets the hammer down and lays the rifle on the floor beside him. (66–67)

Such writing is about as “lean” and “simple” as one could wish; Ballard seated here is the frame, the rifle is the centre of attention. Even here, however, the effect is slightly comic: the repetition (“and . . . and . . . and”) dramatizes Ballard’s obsession with his rifle and the grammatical concentration of verbal and noun phrases with a single opening “he” mimics Ballard’s concentration, his absorption in the task at hand. Ballard’s perspective becomes synonymous with the narrator’s, and thus with the readers, in a kind of voyeuristic tunnel vision. The most extended example of this maximized distance is the episode in which Lester Ballard rapes his first corpse—dark comedy at its most dark, but comedy inasmuch as Ballard appears so stupid, stupefied—as by gradual stages he decides to see the lovers poisoned by carbon monoxide and their remains as a kind of accidental windfall (85–91). The aesthetic quality of *Child of God*, however, is neither simple nor lean; the reader ought to resist overestimating the force of the voyeuristic perspective as a determining factor in the inventiveness of McCarthy’s rhetorical strategy.²

If Ballard’s perspective often becomes ours by force of this voyeuristic logic, the different and differing perspectives and voices of the Appalachian folk living around Frog Mountain gradually converge to a point we might call that of (relative) obliviousness. There is no question that McCarthy places a certain value on folk discourse, playing with its laziness, its inadequacy, its own ways of keeping the raw material of a Lester Ballard at a safe distance. Part I of the novel (3–81) includes seven textual segments in which unidentified Appalachian folk from Sevier County tell what they know about Lester Ballard and

² John Ditzky, in an otherwise helpful study, tends to overstate the case for *Child of God* as objectivist narrative: “here the prose has been stripped to its absolute leanest; in its starkness and simplicity, *Child of God* comes near to being a tour-de-force” (6). I hope by this analysis to show at least that McCarthy’s *archaeological* discourse is neither stark nor simple. On narrative distance, see Gerard Genette, 185–210.

the Ballard kin. The subtext would almost imply the unacknowledged presence of an inquirer who has arrived in Sevier County asking questions about Ballard, perhaps an aspect of the narrator's curiosity. One of these seven segments introduces the eye of the Sheriff, who becomes the ostensible representative of these civil folk. Part II (85–141) employs no such voices, as is McCarthy's narrator has determined to follow Ballard without any local assistance, as if the folk voices served as gentle preparation for the horrible intimacies of Ballard's lonely struggle with the unusually cold winter. This increase in mediation of the narrator-proper counts most obviously as a necessary consequence of Ballard's increasing isolation, his necrophilia, his arson and murder, his retreat into the caves. In part III (145–97), again shorter and again divided again into fewer (eleven) segments, the narrator leaves Ballard's eye to follow the Sheriff's in three episodes (145–48; 160–68; 195–97). The Sheriff now occupies the role of Ballard's rival as hunter. The extended scene in which the Sheriff and his Deputy row about the streets of the flooded town and Mr. Wade tells the tale of Tom Davis functions as an ironic displacement of the seven separate segments in part I: its loquacious summariness, historical range, and traditional moralistic conclusion contrast sharply with the relative brevity, anecdotal quality, and fragmented diffusiveness of the earlier set of Ballard anecdotes. This gradual development of visual breadth mimics a certain approach to and apprehension of Lester Ballard. At one level the story functions as a parody of crime and detective fiction. Ballard leads the party of neo-vigilantes into the caves, escapes them and leaves them in the dark; this episode—the longest segment in the text (177–86)—is profoundly symbolic of Ballard's peculiar status as one who cannot be confined or assimilated, either literally or figuratively, by agencies or discourses of social control.

The folk logic is diametrically opposed to that of the voyeuristic: one does not (really even care to) see what is there. Nobody in the Sheriff's world gets anywhere as near to seeing Ballard as we do, as "privileged" readers. Lovers who park their cars at Frog Mountain turnaround, storekeepers and clerks, officials of church and state, tend as a body to overlook or to underestimate Ballard's figure. In short, the people upon whom Ballard preys remain relatively oblivious to him. The discourse proceeding from their set of closely related positions consists of a somewhat casual dismissiveness based on a system of social law and theological assumption. Take, for example, the way in which the narrator closes an account of Ballard attending Sixmile church: the "strung heads" of the congregation turned together "like a cast of puppets" when Ballard entered late: "Ballard had a cold and snuffed loudly through the

service but nobody expected he would stop if God himself looked back askance so no one looked" (32). If the children of God believe the look of God "himself" is powerless to change Ballard, they will imitate that very powerlessness: this kind of resigned theology ironically perpetuates Ballard's isolation. Consider Ballard's release from a nine-day jail term.

Ballard looked up and went through the gate and across the room toward a door with daylight in it and across a hall and out through the front door of the Sevier County courthouse. No one called him back. (55)

The narrator here deviates from the strict empirical bounds of external focalization by virtue of a certain technique of negation, reporting the presence of an absence (cf. 14, 87). Such a report implies a value judgement proper to the narrator: because they do not *see* him right, the forces of the law fail to call Ballard back. The Sheriff himself takes a vaguely paternalistic attitude to Ballard, calling him "man of leisure" (51), seeing him as a "sullen reprobate" (56). Ultimately the Sheriff proves either ineffective or strangely resigned—McCarthy aptly names him "Fate"—inasmuch as Ballard is "never indicted for any crime" (193).

The folk would like to assimilate Ballard by framing him as an example of superlative "meanness" (56; 160). Mr. Wade, who recounts at some length the history of heroic lawman Tom Davis—Davis's pursuit, capture, and execution of the White Caps and Bluebills—sums up this legalistic attitude. When the deputy asks Mr. Wade whether he thinks people in older times "was meaner than they are now," Wade replies: "No . . . I don't. I think people are the same from the day God first made one" (168). This firm principle does not constitute a satisfactory theodicy: original sin may dismiss, but it cannot explain the figure of a Lester Ballard. Take another similar example: what Wade says about the vigilantes Tom Davis corralled and executed.³

No, these were sorry people all the way around, every man jack a three hundred and sixty degree son of a bitch, which my daddy said meant they was a son of a bitch any way you looked at em.

This doctrinaire discourse would obliterate human evil simply by making it

³ By escaping the vigilantes, struggling with death, and digging himself out of caves, Ballard shows himself different from his grandfather (who was a White Cap) and his father (who took his own life). This final act before returning to the hospital and a kind of socialized death could be read as an ironic parody of the Oedipal structure, Ballard overcoming the dual image of his parental heritage (execution and suicide).

as such, by asserting that there does not exist “any way”—not a single perspective from any “degree” offered by geometry—to look at a “son of a bitch” such as Lester Ballard other than as a self-evidently damning figure.⁴ The reader ought to see the limits of such rotationally geometrical vision (one must confidently be placed at the center of the circle to see, like Wade’s daddy, all the way around).

Earlier in the same scene the Sheriff speaks to a citizen by the name of Ed who comes wading down the street behind a rowboat that has emerged out of the hardware store; the hardware store has been robbed of some rifles. The Sheriff responds to Ed’s query about how anyone could respond to the flood by causing even more trouble.

Some people you cain’t do nothin’ with, the sheriff said.
Ain’t that the truth. (162)

The fact is that McCarthy *does* “do something with” Lester Ballard—not in the sense of curing, containing, or converting him to social legitimacy, but in the sense of *seeing* Ballard from other perspectives outside and beyond these ones, this one (inasmuch as it points to a “unified” social vision). If the perspective of relative and interrelated obliviousness would ignore Lester Ballard by casting him out of the field of vision as a legendary example of original sin, then churchgoing, lawkeeping, and traditional storytelling—some of the ways in which this perspective is systematized and maintained—are not the only “ways” available either to Lester Ballard or to the narrator who makes Ballard his interest.

The third narrative perspective faces the blindness of darkness: there is nothing to see in the visual field because that field is a scene of death and darkness—you find yourself inside an underworld utterly devoid of light. If the voyeur frames and sights a specific object in a field of vision; if the oblivious perspective uses frames of reference too limited and circumscribed (frames *outside* which the voyeur is located); in this region we can not see because it is too dark, too dark for comfort. This is the kind of perspective that Lester Ballard himself barely escapes, wandering lost inside the caves, after he has escaped the neo-vigilantes: because there is almost nothing to see, the sense of hearing displaces that of sight (170, 188–89). Inasmuch as there is little to see in it, there is little to say about it. In somewhat the same way that Ballard

⁴ The country people—as opposed to the town folk—would probably see Ballard as “crazy” rather than mean. The thematics of craziness in *Child of God* deserve a study all on their own: see pages 8, 15, 22, 29, 41, 45, 62, 88, 95, 107, 126, 152; and especially 116–17, 156–58, 193–94. McCarthy has his narrator ultimately reject the proposition that Ballard is insane.

finds his way out of the caves—by virtue of digging, a peculiar combination of pagan luck and random struggle—so does McCarthy surpass the blindness of darkness.

This brings us to a fourth kind of narrative perspective, the one most interesting—interesting perhaps because it seems to betray a kind of wish to redeem Lester Ballard from the impoverished villainy of his “literal” status—to McCarthy’s narrative practice in *Child of God*. This perspective relies on what we might call a discourse of archaeology. It positions itself at a distance from any authoritative pretensions to transcending suffering or mortality by attachment to allegorical theology or to conventional traditions of (fictional) moral decency. Inasmuch as it insists on accuracy and concentrates on precisely describing the material remains of the dead culture it studies (and a culture of death in the case of Ballard as antihero), archaeological vision mimics voyeuristic vision. However, its methods must add to the clinical neutrality of external focalization because those remains, the visualized objects, are precisely remains: they do not speak only of themselves but speak for something other than the empirically self-evident—something ancient, vanished, obscure, enigmatic.

The logic of this mode of vision operates from an impulse to see what is *not* there, by virtue of a certain (authorial) suggestiveness. If the voyeuristic attitude toward the object is intensely attached to the presence of the object while remaining disrespectful of the object’s proper status as other, the archaeological attitude is relatively detached from the object, detached enough to permit an attitude of associative freedom that becomes oddly respectful, that looks twice, as it were. In the logic of the voyeur, distance dictates a perpetual perversity: the voyeur acts as if he would possess and consume the object, and yet to “possess” the object (in the tactile sense) would be to destroy his status as voyeur. The archaeologist would possess the object only because it serves as remains, as fragmented evidence of a greater and imagined object, as the precious sign of a vanished, though possibly once-whole presence. Objects seen through archaeological vision necessarily force a relatively metaphorical discourse of reconstruction, of supplementarity.

As is the case with voyeuristic behaviour, Ballard seems to share something of an archaeological inclination with McCarthy’s narrator.

At the far end of the quarry was a rubble tip and Ballard stopped to search for artifacts, tilting old stoves and water heaters, inspecting bicycle parts and corroded buckets. He salvaged a worn kitchen knife with a chewed handle. He called to the dog, his voice relaying

from rock to rock and back again. (38–39)

If woods, waters animals, birds and fish animate some of the scenes of Ballard's territory, scenes of abandoned rubbish such as the above reminds us of the lifeless underside of that territory—they situate Ballard as the refugee of a vanishing, wasting human culture.⁵ Seeing what is not there, acting as if the dead were alive, founds the perverse logic of Ballard's necrophilia. When Ballard first copulates with a corpse, the narrator allows for the possibility of otherworldly spectators—as if he must necessarily distance himself from Ballard's perversion of archaeology. "A crazed gymnast laboring over a cold corpse. He poured into that waxen ear everything he'd ever thought of saying to a woman. Who could say she did not hear him?" (88–89). This logic also helps explain why Ballard so often speaks into a void, as it were—speaks in spite of the void. This logic operates at its most absurd and "innocent" when Ballard aims his rifle at targets and declines to shoot, but says "Bang" anyway (26, 109). Ballard sights a bass in one of Waldrop's ponds: "Ain't you a fine fat son of a bitch, he said" (33). He loses patience during a henhouse robbery when the animals squawk: "You son of a bitch, said Ballard, to the chicken or Greer or both" (137). Ballard has this habit of addressing an absent or a nonhuman body as if it were human, and the habit becomes more ambiguous when he speaks to the forces of nature and when—the narrator dialogically implies—nature responds, as if Ballard were the antitype of a providential divinity.

Ballard crammed brush and pieces of stumpwood right up the chimney. He made coffee and leaned back on his pallet. Now freeze, you son of a bitch, he told the night beyond the windowpane.

It did. it dropped to six below zero. A brick toppled into the flames. . . . (103)

⁵ This brings us to the fact that Ballard *seems* to have no inner life. But once more, this is an effect that on closer reading we might question. Vereen M. Bell claims that Ballard "is not motivated by anything that we can think of; he lives beyond the pale both socially and psychoanalytically. Since his inner life is closed away from us he seems like a dreadful unconscious, externalized into unrefelctive and unironic action" (37). But can we not speak of revenge, loneliness, anger, and the will to live as very understandable motivations at least for the direction of his actions? Nor should we overlook that the narrator at certain moments discloses the thoughts of Ballard (53, 86, 88, 132, 136, 169, 170, 187), his wonderings (136, 141, 175), his wishes (28, 189). Furthermore, the narrator discloses three of Ballard's dreams (16, 170, 175). There is also the strange self-recognition with the boy on the churchbus (191). Although this information is fragmented, it ought not be ignored. Fragmentation tends to be the condition of most archaeological remains.

On that night, the night of his first adventure as necrophilic, the abandoned cabin burns down. The same perverse logic motivates Ballard in a reverse situation after he has shot Ralph's daughter: the imperative addressed to the night proved unintentionally effective, but the imperative addressed to this victim is intentionally cruel, a demented verbal overkill: "She was lying in the floor but she was not dead. She was moving. . . . Ballard gripped the rifle and watched her. Die, goddamn you, he said. She did" (119).

Ballard's actions carry him to his worst extremities whenever Ballard himself perverts the logic of archaeological vision. But the narrator's field of vision—and therefore field of verbal reference—becomes, on the contrary, most "creative" when it situates Ballard in a frame which goes beyond the strictly empirical, strays outside the way of literality. The corresponding discourse tends toward the metaphorical, the allusive, the "literary." One might begin with an inventory of the similes littered throughout the text, many of which refer to Ballard himself. For example, Ballard and Darfuzzle squatting in the yard look "like constipated gargoyles" (46). The morning after the cabin burns down Ballard climbs onto the hearth—the hearth is all that remains of the cabin—and sits there "like an owl" (105). We see Ballard clambering up the mountain "like some crazy winter gnome" (107); carrying his final corpse off into the caves he looks "like a man beset by some ghastr succubus" (153); emerging from the caves the next morning he peers about "like a groundhog before committing himself to the gray and rainy daylight" (155). Or consider this passage in which Ballard fails to cross the flooded creek.

Ballard and the log bore on into the rapids below the ford and Ballard was lost in a pandemonium of noises, the rifle aloft in one arm like some demented hero or bedraggled parody of a patriotic poster come aswamp. . . . (156)

Warming his frostbitten feet in creekwater in the caves, the echoes of his gibbering come back "like the mutterings of a band of sympathetic apes" (159). When Greer shoots Ballard, Ballard flies back from Greer's doorway in a violent dramatic reversal.

He looked like something come against the end of a springloaded tether or some slapstick contrivance of the filmcutter's art, swallowed up in the door and discharged from it again almost simultaneously, ejected in an immense concussion backwards. . . . (173)

The mention of cinema (the storyteller referring to a rival medium itself preoccupied with powers of vision has, as with the reference to "patriotic

poster," its own ironic level of significance) brings us to another technique characteristic of McCarthy's archaeological discourse: the phrasal fragment that operates like a cinematic freeze frame (see, for example, 23, 41, 61, 96, 181). The metonymic pace of serial external action is interrupted and the narrator pauses to hold Ballard still, in a kind of animated suspension. Some such freezes are performed in a single sentence: "A gothic doll in illfit clothes, its carmine mouth floating detached and bright in the white landscape" (140); "Ballard's shadow veering dark and mutant over the cupped stone walls" (159). This discourse is just as obsessed as the voyeuristic with seeing Ballard, seems equally to imply the demands of an exacting accountability of vision, but it deploys an allusive metaphoric diction that goes beyond the strictly taxonomic and denotative: "gothic doll," shadow," mutant." The lengthier freezes gain from complexity.

Ballard among gothic treeboles, almost jaunty in the outsized clothing he wore, fording drifts of kneedeep snow, going along the south face of a limestone bluff beneath which birds scratching in the bare earth paused to watch. (128)

One of the ironies in the above is that even the birds regard Ballard as an alien, worthy of their curiosity, and ultimately harmless—inasmuch as they do not fly away (cf. the fate of the frozen robin Ballard catches as "playpretty," 75–79).

He looked about the room. Some stainless steel pots on a steel table. A pitcher of water and a glass. Ballard in a thin white gown in a thin white room, false acolyte or antiseptic felon, a practitioner of ghastriness, a part-time ghoul. (174)

Here there are no birds to figure as comic displacements of the narrational voyeur, but noun phrases accumulate an alliterative intensity. Parison and asyndeton produce an effect of urgency, as if the narrator were struggling to contain the enigma of Ballard in metaphors that remain inadequate. In each case above, Ballard is contained by an external frame (*among* gothic treeboles, *in* a white room and gown), but the effect surpasses mere voyeurism because the motive behind the freeze is to supplement the visualized object with a metaphoric discourse which refers to absent objects: alluding to a gothic world, for example, or to the world of medical horrors.

Although McCarthy's narrator seldom intrudes as a commentator on the action, when he does he speaks of a past which is primordial, permanent, strangely sacred—but equally vague, ambiguous, and provisional (for ex-

ample, 127–28). Such commentaries produce a sense not of nostalgic lamentation but of material permanence that belongs to a mute, perhaps nonhuman natural world—that world to which Ballard most readily belongs. Ballard has excavated his way out of the caves and is walking toward the hospital in the third to last segment of the text.

As he neared the town the roosters were calling. Perhaps they sensed a relief in the obscurity of night that the traveler could not read, though he kept watch eastward. Perhaps some freshness in the air. Everywhere across the sleeping land they called and answered each to each. As in olden times so now. As in other countries here. (191)

This passage both universalizes the landscape and mystifies it. McCarthy's narrator chooses not to name any determinate cause for the rooster's enigmatic communication ("perhaps. . . perhaps"); nevertheless, there is an affirmation of the similarity of this event to events in other, absent landscapes ("olden times . . . other countries"). Given the many precious moments in the text when Ballard's curses echo against a blank void or when demonic noises echo down the mountain, there is something of closure in this passage: here we have conversation, not the geometrical emptiness of echoes.⁶

This archaeological discourse—the ways this discourse plays against the dominant, "purely" empirical discourse of external focalization—determines the specific aesthetic power, the peculiar quality of McCarthy's invention in *Child of God*. We see in Lester Ballard the remains of a certain spirituality, an inverted, voided Christian theodicy: Ballard is the ironic child of God, a walking threat and insult to human innocence, a grievous case against the gods, an apostate whose language is curses and whose knowledge of God is next to nothing (31, 141). We see in Ballard the remains of a genealogically specific set of human kin, "Saxon and Celtic bloods" (4), the grandson of a depressed vigilante (80–81) and the son of a suicidal "lonely piper" (170), traces of a social inheritance of deviance and marginality. We see the animality of Ballard: a protohuman simian creature, an ape, a caveman who defecates, urinates, spits, hunts, kills, eats, and—most habitually—*squats* (10, 31, 41, 46, 91, etc.); who sees in animals, trees, rocks, caves, stars, rubbish, the

⁶ Echoes seem to be the characteristic music of Ballard's wasted landscape, in contrast with the musicians the auctioneer brings to Ballard's old homeplace (3–4) and the church-like singing at the public hanging of Wynn and Catlett (187). For echoes literal and metaphorical, see pages 5, 6, 20, 39, 68, 132, 157, 159, 185, 189. At a more abstract level, echoes could be the auditory counterpart of physical-visual archaeological remains.

inexplicable fragments of his own shattered image. The text also sees Ballard as gnome, troll, ghoul, monster, hermit—as an anti-pastoral demonic figure who makes, takes, loves, and treasures female corpses, who threatens all enlightened common sense and lives in a fearful, pagan, fantastic realm. It is the subtle power of the condensation in McCarthy's archaeological vision that both permits and produces the terribly haunted discourse of these irreconcilable traces—traces of a Christian spirituality, of a wasting Appalachian society, of a bewildered and deprived animal nature, and of a strange pagan enigma.⁷

But Lester Ballard remains a human animal, a human figure: “a child of God much like yourself perhaps” (4).

It was all lit up and the faces within [the churchbus] passed each in their pane of glass, each in profile. At the last seat in the rear a small boy was looking out the window, his nose puttied against the glass. There was nothing out there to see but he was looking anyway. As he went by he looked at Ballard and Ballard looked back. Then the bus rounded the curve and clattered from sight. Ballard climbed into the road and went on. He was trying to fix in his mind where he'd seen the boy when it came to him that the boy looked like himself. This gave him the fidgets and though he tried to shake the image of the face it would not go. (191)

Previously, Ballard has looked intently at the posters of the wanted in the town post office, perhaps for his own face (55). He has almost touched his own image, Narcissus-fashion, in a pool on the Blount county side of Frog Mountain (127). But not until this relatively random visual confrontation—only relatively, because the churchbus is appropriately ironic, and the exceptional boy's puttied nose directing the vision out the back window instead of straight ahead like all the others is suggestive—not until this mirroring event occurs does the direction of Ballard's actions change.⁸ He

⁷ Demons, pandemonium, hell, lunar imagery, ironically selected pagan names of astral constellations—all these accumulate to produce an eerie pagan subtext in the story (for example, 23, 27, 41, 68, 104, 141, 156, 158).

⁸ In McCarthy's *Suttree* the character Gene Harrogate, a kind of harmless Ballard who carries no rifle and is first arrested for having sex with watermelons—and yet similar to Ballard in his boyish ignorance, his tenacity, and his interest in underground spaces—similarly sees himself in the window of his bus while being driven to prison for his second term (*Suttree*, 439). I thank John Lewis Longley for pointing out this passage in *Suttree* (although not the chance of a connection between it and *Child of God*) to me. See his illuminating analysis of, among other things, the existential theme in McCarthy's fiction: “*Suttree* and the Metaphysics of Death.”

returns to the hospital: "I'm supposed to be here, he said" (192). Make no mistake: resignation or repentance, this choice is a kind of suicide, because Ballard belongs to the ancient mountain and not to modern society. This enigmatic conversion leads ultimately to his evisceration, to medical archaeology, as Ballard's corpse itself becomes remains: "the four young students who bent over him like those haruspices of old saw monsters worse to come in their configurations" (194). Some might find it capricious that McCarthy's narrator tells us only that the "monsters worse" are possible—given the "perhaps," this is neither reassurance nor prophecy. I would grant the archaeologist those degrees of uncertainty that follow from incomplete evidence.

McCarthy's fictional discourse in *Child of God* refuses to rest on first principles, and celebrates what can be seen—seen by means of the threatening precision of the voyeur's eye looking through the sights of the beloved rifle, or seen by means of the creative expertise of the archaeological vision. The complacent perspectives based on a society of armchair storytellers or a system of principled theological uniformity tend to exclude or to overlook the evidence outside their necessarily circumscribed fields of vision. It seems that properly to recognize the strangely beautiful world of Lester Ballard, one must live by—perhaps must live on and must live with—traces and remains. Such remains produce their own peculiar necessities. Cormac McCarthy's discourse of archaeology in *Child of God* may be the only fictional response which respects—enough to see—those outsiders who find themselves too much at home among the dead, threatened by the absolute blindness of darkness and death.

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