CARRYING THE FIRE IN THE CAVE-WORLD OF THE ROAD

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Jonathan Sondej, B.A.

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Jonathan Sondej, B.A.

Thesis Advisor: Ricardo Ortiz, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

This project treats Cormac McCarthy’s latest novel, The Road, as the near allegorically-explicit, yet narratively delicate, natural culminating expression of McCarthy’s theory of responsible humanity developed over the course of his career. The project traces the theory to its origins in Child of God and Outer Dark, examines its stamp upon the great work Blood Meridian, and identifies The Road’s conceptual dependence upon narrative machinery first developed in No Country For Old Men.
For John and Jane Sondej
And
For Mary and Marianne Halleran

With thanks for the humane patience of Ricardo Ortiz
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Introduction

Cormac McCarthy was born in 1933 in the town of Providence, Rhode Island. His given name, however, was not Cormac, but Charles. Steven Frye speculates that the name “Cormac” is the “Gaelic equivalent of Charles” (2), and perhaps this is so (I can find no evidence, nor does Frye offer any), however it would constitute at best an adoptive equivalence; etymologically, the two names are not so much as distant cousins. “Charles,” of course, is of Germanic origin, preserved in English since before the time of Chaucer in the form of “churl,” a simple fellow. In its oldest sense, the name signifies “man.” “Cormac,” on the other hand, is of a Gaelic and more provocative valence. Its significance, perhaps erroneously through a Latinate misappropriation (see corvus), is often given as “raven,” which still presents itself to us today in words like “corvine” and “corbel,” the latter of which, as it happens, meaning a mason’s or carpenter’s bracket in the shape of a crow’s beak, has not escaped McCarthy’s scrutiny as a master craftsman himself fastidiously interested in the tools and techniques of more material artifice and their intersections with the natural world: intersections that will be explored later in this essay, with particular attention paid to Ballard’s trip to the blacksmith in *Child of God*.

Certainly there is something of the raven’s morbid character to be discerned in the tone of McCarthy’s novels, at least upon initial inspection. *Blood Meridian* strikingly juxtaposes these corbels, these fabricated “ravens” by metonymy, with other scavenger birds in a scene where the Kid is stranded in a badlands without provision alongside the hopeless, wounded and consumptive Sproule, who has ironically come west for reasons of health: “there were buzzards squatting among the old carved wooden corbels and he [the Kid] picked up a stone and squailed it at them but they never moved” (58). Sproule, despite the Kid’s helpful urgings, seems content
to die in whatever way the world found fit, be it consumption, thirst, exposure or the return of the hostile natives that devastated their troop: “he [Sproule] said that he would not rise” (67).

Sproule sees the world as an abattoir within which human will is without consequence: “we’d never make it” (58), “I don’t need to go nowhere” (59), and, when the kid asks to look at Sproule’s wounded arm, “what for?” (61). And the buzzards among the corbels, who sit “about the topmost corners of the houses with their wings out-stretched in attitudes of exhortation like dark little bishops” (59), seem readily to agree with him. Scenes like this, frequent in Blood Meridian as in McCarthy’s general corpus, may call to mind the problem of wisdom as negotiated by Hegel and Nietzsche. Nietzsche speculates that wisdom may appear as a raven, lured by the smell of carrion to a world not unlike a battlefield in aftermath, by definition already well beyond the aid of wisdom. And though the buzzards among the corbels never moved, never relented when the Kid deigned to squall a stone at them, it is this squailing itself, the seemingly futile act of will and wisdom against the larger hopeless and entropic will that seems to be the will of the world at large, which is most admirable in McCarthy and shall serve as this essay’s chief subject of inquiry. McCarthy’s view of wisdom, of informed right action, expressed in part in the character of the Kid, but most completely in The Road, is not one assured of our redemption thereby; it admits the Nietzschean possibility that the world is in the end just an abattoir. But neither does it see any value in succumbing to that possibility. Nothing is ever certain in McCarthy, and indeed his worldview is more readily aligned with Hegel’s less scrutable pronouncement on wisdom, that the owl of Minerva flies only at dusk, upon which Nietzsche’s maxim was later predicated. Here too, wisdom occurs to us only towards the end, but there is yet some last light in dusk, as there is the wasteland of The Road, and we cannot know if
it is light enough to effect some change, whether in the world or our internal selves, unless we should try to make use of it. Though further speculation along these lines will be reserved for subsequent chapters, we may be sure at least that the corvine implications of his name were known to McCarthy upon its choosing.

But what else might we learn about McCarthy from his taking of the name “Cormac?” Books devoted to the meanings of names often give “legend” alongside “raven” as one of the name’s principal significations, and indeed the figure of the raven is so thoroughly bound up into Celtic mythology as to become almost synonymous with it. McCarthy was born into a fairly affluent family. McCarthy’s father, also Charles, was a Yale-educated attorney who eventually became the general counsel for the TVA, or Tennessee Valley Authority, the government agency tasked in the early 1930’s with countering the effects of the Great Depression through much of the south by making electricity widely available through the region. But this electrification came at a price, as the means of its generation was achieved by flooding great portions of the Tennessee Valley (including the areas that now constitute the massive Kentucky and Barkley Lakes), dispossessing and discommoding thousands of families in the process. Jay Ellis notes that the young Charles’ uneasiness with his father’s legacy is present from his earliest novel. In *The Orchard Keeper*, the elderly recluse Arthur Ownby, whose name suggests as strongly his traditionally American self-reliance and distaste for government interference (he is his own author/self-Arthur’ed) as does his self-consignment to his un-electrified woodland cabin hermitage, fires several large-bore rounds into a government water tank the location of which “corresponds with structures on TVA property” (Ellis 140).
This filial strife continues to express itself in *Suttree*, of which it is a trope of McCarthy’s biographers, though certainly not an inaccurate one, to say is the writer’s most autobiographical novel. Cornelius “Buddy” Suttree, like the younger Charles, is born into a fairly affluent family and chooses to simply walk away. Suttree, as well as Cormac, was educated at the University of Tennessee, and as far as can be determined, exceeded his author there insofar as he graduated and took a traditional life, complete with wife and children, before his sudden and unexplained apostasy. McCarthy himself dropped out twice, and eventually either decided that academia was not at all for him, or was asked to leave. Suttree abandoned his life of privilege to live as a fisherman among the indigent river-folk on the banks of the Tennessee in Knoxville, and the young Cormac abandoned his to live in slums and to write of these people, for *Suttree* is both his first and middling book, begun even before his first published novel, *The Orchard Keeper*, but not released until 1979. In a scene aboard Ab Jones’ riverboat, Suttree reflects on those displaced by the TVA:

> Whole families evicted from their graves downriver by the damming of the waters. Hegiras to high ground, carts piled with battered cookware, mattresses, small children. The father drives the cart, the dog runs after. Strapped to the tailboard the rotting boxes stained with earth that hold the bones of the elders. Their names and dates in chalk on the wormscored wood. A dry dust sifts from the seams in the boards as they jostle up the road. (113)

McCarthy’s concern for the common and often indigent folk of Appalachia is evident in each of his novels devoted to that region: *The Orchard Keeper, Child of God, Suttree*, even *Outer Dark*; it is evident in the care with which he documents their personalities and idiolects such that each
person is a uniquely living and dying subjectivity, and yet commonly invested with one cultural character. However, in this passage we see that he is concerned perhaps as much for the deceased of that breed as he is for the living; he fears for the erasure by time and by floodwater of their traditions and their way of life, both from living memory and from the memory of books. And it may well be for this reason, spurred by guilt inherited from his father’s instrumental complicity in the flooding of the Tennessee Valley and the near utter abolition of a culture, that McCarthy forwent the boons of his privileged birth and dedicated the first great movement of his career to the preservation of a vanishing race in words. We hear this preservation as aesthetic purpose stated almost explicitly in the closing lines of McCarthy’s debut novel, *The Orchard Keeper*:

> They are gone now. Fled, banished in death or exile, lost, undone. Over the land sun and wind still move to burn and sway the trees, the grasses. No avatar, no scion, no vestige of that people remains. On the lips of the strange race that now dwells there their names are myth, legend, dust. (246)

Exile and exodus: we hear always in McCarthy the themes and rhythms of the Bible, particularly those of the King James Old Testament, and it is not difficult to imagine him a son’s soul self-burdened with the sins of the father (Exodus 20:5). Though McCarthy is native to New England and in fact no part of this vanished people, he takes up out of filial culpability the cross of their dispossession, and the pen against their obliteration in every sense of the word, such that he might achieve their resurrection in art. He is their unlikeliest of scions, and the work which he has devoted to that people their lasting avatar in a world which has moved on.

Frye Begins his *Understanding Cormac McCarthy* by noting that “early in his writing life, Cormac McCarthy renovated a dairy barn as a living space, salvaging bricks from the
boyhood home of James Agee. In building a new house from old stones, he was mirroring practice that would define his writing for the next forty years” (1). One need look only to the first imperative sentence of Blood Meridian to hear echoes of Moby-Dick, or to the Ulysses-esque streets of Suttree to know that McCarthy is above all a conservator and rejuvenator of legend; and it is not impossible to imagine that embarking upon his career as a writer he chose the name “Cormac” for the very reason of its association with legend. It is the name of the semi-mythical High King of Ireland, Cormac Mac Airt, as well as several other sovereign Irish figures (kings, princes and bishops), and so perhaps further justified as a fitting moniker for the young writer who in his first act of self-authorship renounces his father’s name along with his father’s governance and willingness to be governed, even to the extent of making himself complicit in the washing away of an entire Appalachian culture. McCarthy’s non serviam disposition is as well documented as anything about the reclusive writer, and indeed his second wife Anne Delisle is on record as saying that McCarthy “was such a rebel that he didn’t live the same kind of life anybody on earth lived” (qtd. in Jarrett 3). The only commandments he seems to have accepted as binding are to record the beautiful peculiarities of a largely illiterate populace and a natural land rapidly vanishing into industrialization, and to do so with such perceptive strength and originality as to guard forever against their obliteration by time or act of man.

But this spirit that guards against immemorial oblivion extends well beyond just the early Appalachian novels, and might be considered, at least through the present terminus of The Road, to be the grand theme and project of his life’s work. The greatest of McCarthy’s villains is of course Judge Holden of Blood Meridian, who sets at nothing the value of men and cultures that
have not proven themselves of continued viability through a sort of selective process of Darwinian war:

Suppose two men at cards with nothing to wager save their lives. Who has not heard such a tale? A turn of the card. The whole universe for such a player has labored clanking to this moment which will tell if he is to die at that man’s hand or that man at his. What more certain validation of a man’s worth could there be? This advancement of the game to its ultimate state admits no argument concerning the notion of fate. The selection of one man over another is a preference absolute and irrevocable and it is a dull man indeed who could reckon so profound a decision without agency or significance either one. In such games as have for their stake the annihilation of the defeated the decisions are quite clear. This man holding this particular arrangement of cards in his hand is thereby removed from existence. This is the nature of war, whose stake is at once the game and the authority and the justification. Seen so, war is the truest form of divination. It is the testing of one’s will and the will of another within that larger will which because it binds them is therefore forced to select. War is the ultimate game because war is at last a forcing of the unity of existence. War is god. (249)

The Judge is an expert draftsman, and makes precise sketches of all the curiosities he encounters before destroying them. He sketches an invaluable conquistador’s greave before crushing it into dust, shoots and mummifies rare birds before packing them out of sight forever, copies an ancient Neolithic painting into his notebook before scrappling it utterly from the record of the cave wall. He copies these things into his drawing book in order that they should be blotted out
from the book of life or of being, in order that they should be, as the judge tells an inquisitive cowboy, “expunged from the memory of man” (140). The Judge kills almost indiscriminately, too.

In taking life from the world as in destroying unique cultural artifacts, the mere ability to do so seems for him sufficient justification for the deed. The Judge believes, for someone like the simple hermit Arthur Ownby of *The Orchard Keeper*, that “the rain will erode the deeds of his life” (199), and that this would be only fitting. The Judge is the personification of the sort of cultural effacement visited upon the simpler folk of the Tennessee Valley bemoaned by Suttree, and upon the Anasazi as detailed by the Judge himself and bemoaned by almost no one in these latter days: “the old ones are gone like phantoms and the savages wander these canyons to the sound of an ancient laughter” (146). The Judge says to Tobin, indicating the stone houses of the lost Anasazi: “this you see here, these ruins wondered at by tribes of savages, do you not think that this will be again? Aye. And again. With other people, with other sons” (147). This sort of inevitable recurrence proves for the Judge that the Anasazi’s journey out of memory and into oblivion should only be hastened by the destruction of their remnant artifacts. And McCarthy admits that such recurrences are unfortunately not merely speculative.

Just a little while later in the narrative the Judge’s marauding band “fall upon a band of peaceful Tiguas camped on the river and slaughter them every soul” (173) such that “in the days to come the frail black rebuses of blood in those sands would crack and break and drift away so that in the circuit of a few suns all trace of the destruction of these people would be erased” (174). And because McCarthy realizes that such recurrences are not speculative and indeed inevitable, he appoints the Kid an occasionally admirable antithesis to the Judge, just as he had
appointed himself champion and chronicler of the dispossessed people of the Tennessee Valley: “no assassin, called the Judge. And no partisan either. There’s a flawed place in the fabric of your heart. Do you think I could not know? You alone were mutinous. You alone reserved in your soul some corner of clemency for the heathen” (299). In *The Road*, McCarthy carries the idea of utter expungement beyond its ordinary limits in a still viable world with a single culture occasionally disappearing here and there, to its frightening, but unfortunately not illogical or impossible, fullest expression. The world of *The Road* is one in which culture, tradition and the moral imperatives for which they are vectors have disintegrated almost completely as simple biological necessities on a planet which can no longer provide for its inhabitants begin to justify, except for an admirable few, even the blackest atrocity of cannibalism. It is the preservation of cultural memory, and its implicit mores, that set the father and son of *The Road* apart from almost all others by which their world is peopled, and allows them to retain a genuine humanity even after the culture which gave it context has passed out of recognition. By McCarthy’s reckoning, it is a worse and darker thing to live by the Judge’s principles in a lush world than it is to inhabit the realized eschaton of *The Road* carrying the fire of memory and reason, for if the Judge’s violent Darwinism is followed down through all of its possible selections and the unity of existence is achieved by force at last with one war god left standing, it would be a lonelier place for him, and of less solace, even than a cannibal’s cellar.
Chapter One: Culla Holme as Potential Model of the History of Secrecy in Cormac McCarthy’s 

*Outer Dark*

In *The Gift of Death*, Jacques Derrida describes a genealogy of European secrecy, tracing the evolution of the western soul, its responsibilities and its understandings of itself back to the beginning. For Derrida, this beginning lies in what he, like Patocka on whom relies for the bases of his argument, terms the “orgiastic mystery” (8), or orgiastic secret. From this daemonic, orgiastic primal state, the soul undergoes two major conversions. The first conversion is that from the orgiastic to Platonic mystery; the second converts Platonic mystery to Christian mystery (10). This series of conversions is of course primarily understood as historical in scope, with each constituting a paradigm shift in western metaphysics. Generally, one is born into a singular mystery (though it would of course contain, incorporated or repressed, the kernels of older mysteries) that defines him throughout his life; occasionally, one might undergo the conversion from orgiastic mystery to Platonic, or from Platonic to Christian; rarely, though one supposes it is not impossible, does one experience both conversions in a single lifetime. However, in the protagonist figure of the Culla Holme of Cormac McCarthy’s *Outer Dark*, the attentive reader, in the novel’s final moments, is able to see a soul on the brink of twin crises, torn between the struggle to complete its incipient conversion to Platonic light/responsibility and in nearly the same instance through demonstrable concern not merely for its own death but for the death (and therefore life) of another to Christian mystery as well, and succumbing to the temptation of apostasy, of retreat back into the spelaean dark of the orgiastic.

But of course, before we can delve into the narrative specifics of Culla’s conversions, or the possibilities thereof, we must first find him in man’s original and (in the sense that it contains
the seeds of conversion) originary state, firmly established and enwombed in orgiastic mystery. For Derrida and Patocka, the orgiastic state of man is defined, as the word suggests, as a “community of fusion” (22). It is a fusion Dionysian and erotic, copulatively unaware of itself, of its ownness; or, if and when self-aware, it is copulatively concerned with self-annihilation, with obliterating itself through fusion (sexual, ethanolic, material, etc.) with the other until the very category of the other, and self-awareness with it (I can only define and distinguish itself through the presence of thou), ceases to exist. In other words, to transcend the demonic, to convert from orgiastic mystery into Platonic understanding “involves gaining access to the individualization of the relation to oneself, to the ego that separates itself” (22). In the beginning of Outer Dark, it is abundantly clear that Culla has yet to develop this Platonic sense of the individual self. Culla lives with his sister Rinthy in a small, primitive cabin in a clearing in the woods of early twentieth-century Appalachian Tennessee. There exists in the novel no detail of their parents, where they might be or whether they have died, why they might have left them. There is no sense of the world about them, no human or political context. There “had been no one to the cabin for some three months” before Culla rushes “harried and manic into the glade to wave away” the dwarf tinker who comes hauling a carillon to peddle his goods (McCarthy 6). In short, Culla and Rinthy exist in a primal wilderness where can be heard not human voices but only the “dull lowing of an alligator somewhere on the river” (12) and in a primal state of consciousness or mystery. Nothing of tradition has been handed down to them, nothing of the two metaphysical conversions to Platonic and Christian mystery. They exist in a demonic/orgiastic mode, which Derrida and Patocka tell us is predicated, in that it is above all else a mode of fusion, upon “an essential dimension of sexual desire” (5); it is unsurprising therefore that the reader should meet
Rinthy as she “lay in the floor clutching the bedstead,” writhing in the spasms of giving birth to Culla’s child (13-4). Culla and Rinthy, innocent or ignorant of Platonic individuality/responsibility, have characteristically fused, in the both literal and symbolic form of their inbred child, into the non-identity of the orgiastic mode of which they are, at least initially, representative.

Perhaps the best proof of the fact of this identity-destroying (or identity-preventing) orgiastic fusion is the conversation Culla and Rinthy have immediately after the birth of their child:

What is it, she said.
What?
It. What is it.
A chap.
Well, she said. (14)

The reader might logically, and of course sustainably, assume that Rinthy seems to be inquiring after the sex of the child, but this is not inherently evident in the language of her first question; she merely asks, “what is it?” as if unfamiliar with the very idea of the other itself. In a certain sense, the concept of the other has had almost no precedent in her life; Culla does not exist as the other to her because they are, to apply a biblical phrase to the orgiastic, “one flesh” (Genesis 2:24), a single, fused entity. Culla seems similarly unfamiliar with the idea of the other, given his response to the question “what is it?” He replies to the question with a question himself (“what?”), which seems astonishingly, impossibly naïve given the great, anguished drama and immediacy of the childbirth. After what other referent, given this context, could Rinthy possibly
be inquiring? Rinthy seems able at least initially to conceive of the child as other, even if the concept of other is itself entirely alien to her, but Culla, whose child-bearing arms are actually “stained with gore to the elbows” (14) from assisting in the delivery, cannot recognize the child’s existence as external (other) to his/their fusive own until Rinthy, emphatically but tellingly non-specifically, non-identifyingly, causes, through and only through this emphasis (“It. What is it”), the presence of the other to reveal itself as other. Only then can Culla, forced to a sudden and jarring awareness of the distinct individualities of his otherwise orgiastically fused environment as Heideggarian dasein is forced to a present-at-hand awareness of its otherwise ready-to-hand (pre-consciously experienced and understood) referential totality only when one of its subordinate elements causes the totality-at-large to reveal itself through malfunction (through an expression of alterity, of disharmony with the other elements), conceive of it as other to himself/theirself. Only then can he term it “a chap;” only then can he tell her she has born him a son.

That it is a community of fusion, however, is only one of the defining characteristics of the orgiastic mystery/condition, though the second, its spelaean character, is closely related. Patocka tells us:

The cave is a remnant of the subterranean gathering place of the mysteries; it is the womb of the Earth Mother. Plato’s novel idea is the will to leave the womb of the Earth Mother and to follow the pure ‘path of light,’ that is, to subordinate (podridit) the orgiastic entirely to responsibility. Hence the path of the Platonic soul leads directly to eternity and to the source of all eternity, the sun of ‘The Good.’ (qt’d. in Derrida, 13)
In other words, man in his natural, orgiastic state is man in Plato’s allegory of the cave before he sees the light of responsibility, reason, and individual own-ness (selfhood as distinct from the other) and decides to follow it out of the cave in performance of the Platonic conversion. The cave is the ultimate community of fusion in that those within are as indistinct from the Earth, from whose womb they sprang and to which their bodies will return when they die, as they are from each other. There is no light in the cave (at least initially, before the call to conversion) and so those within cannot know one another from a distance, as others; they can know each other only tactiley, by joining into one orgiastic flesh; they can know the other only as self.

Culla/Rinthy’s existence has already been established as one characteristically orgiastic in the seminally erotic, fusive sense, but McCarthy allows us also to read the space of their existence early in the novel, clearing and cabin, as the lightless cave itself, as the “womb of the Earth Mother.”

McCarthy allows us a literal image of this sort of earthly/orgiastic indistinction when Culla later abandons his child in the wilderness to die of exposure:

> When he crashed into the glade among the cottonwoods he fell headlong and 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 in 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)

The child is not a child here but merely a “shapeless white plasm;” it is indefinite in shape as it is indefinite in individual identity. We know only that it is plasmic, a living, writhing tissue; it is an
animate singular collective composed of a plurality of cells, in other words, an image of orgiastic
fusion. Further, in being described as a “lank swamp hare” the child is bestialized as the
inhabitants of the orgiastic cave are necessarily bestialized when compared to the rational,
responsible disciples of Platonic light. With the phrase “incunabular moss,” McCarthy gives us a
highly concrete image of the “womb of the Earth Mother.” The word “incunabular” derives from
the Latin etymon *cunae*, or cradle. A cradle is a sort of second womb, an amniotic place of safety
that harbors the child until it is ready to leave. That the moss, as literally earthly a symbol or
image as one could possibly ask for, is incunabular, allows the reader to see the total confusion
of Culla and the child, which is himself as Rinthy is himself, into the mundane, spelaean
orgiastic. This orgiastic human/earthly indistinction is reinforced when Culla falls in the dark
“with his cheek to the earth” after giving his child back to the elements. And of course, it is quite
fitting that this passage occurs almost entirely in the dark, and that Culla is able to witness this
incunabular scene only by a chance flash of lightning that tears temporarily open the darkness of
the cave of his orgiastic existence. McCarthy’s device here is already as dazzling as it is
instructive, but its significance, its technical and thematic brilliance are only reinforced and
intensified when one realizes that this flashfire-facilitated, momentary recognition of the cave for
the cave, and of the chap as an entity distinct from himself and therefore also as an invitation for
Culla to gain access to the “individualization of the relation to oneself,” to become an “ego that
separates itself” (Derrida 22), a necessary first step in his potential assumption of responsibility
for the life and death of the chap, seats Culla in the perspective of “an embryonic bird’s first
fissured vision of the world.” The image here is a remarkable one. We are able to see Culla as a
bird experiencing the first crack in its egg as it hatches, which, by virtue of the influx of an
exterior light, is also the first moment it is able to perceive, and even more importantly conceive of, an external world inhabited by distinct alien entities, by others. With Culla though, we cannot say that this moment was a hatching into responsibility for himself and for others, for of course it is a moment of apostasy, of a standing or turning away from his child in abandonment. Rather, we can safely only say that it was a moment, literally and intellectually for Culla, of epiphany and epiphانομενον, of a shining forth, however brief, of awareness and of externality, of the things themselves. Culla’s potential conversion to responsibility out of the orgiastic, does not occur in a moment of astonishment, of being transfixed and transfigured as if by a thunderbolt, though his process through conversion may have been kindled by one. This moment in the text is epiphанically burned into Culla’s consciousness (if not yet conscience, as this burning may be considered to be the birth of conscience in Culla) as powerfully as it is burned phανοποητικα into the mind of the reader in language. Its valence, in both cases, is complex and takes time and consideration for its full revelation to be achieved, but of course the strength of the image is such that it stays with us and recurs to us, as to Culla, long enough for that to happen. Slowly, over the course of the novel, we are able to witness Culla’s gradual agon with responsibility and apostasy.

The cabin, again, is located in a “glade” that the tinker must travel “long through the woods” to arrive in (McCarthy 6). The glade that cabins Culla and Rinthy is a small opening in the primal wilderness just as the cave is a small and sheltering opening in the earth. It is, except on rare occasions, un-penetrated by the external world of responsibility, reason, culture and the other. After Culla wards off the tinker early in the novel, he goes into the cabin and finds his sister; McCarthy writes: “she sat huddled in a ragged quilt, her feet gripping the bottom rung of the chair, watching the barren fireplace in which the noon light lay among the ashes and in which
her voice trembled and returned about her” (9). That the negative, echoing space of the fireplace is barren is immediately indicative of the lightlessness of the cabin as cave; that the “noon light lay among the ashes” bespeaks the deep, near impenetrability of the orgiastic dark of life in the cabin. The noon light is the strongest, brightest light of the day, and yet it, as a call to Platonic responsibility, reason and individuality, dies unheard and impotent on the cabin floor, drunk up and extinguished by the spelaean dark.

Indeed, the novel properly begins within the cabin as cave. Witness, to the extent that one can witness at all in the absence of light, the novel’s very first lines:

SHE SHOOK HIM [sic] awake into the quite darkness…she shook him awake from dark to dark, delivered out of the clamorous rabble under a black sun and into a night more dolorous, sitting upright and cursing beneath his breath in the bed he shared with her and the nameless weight in her belly. (5)

Our first experience of Culla is of him coming into consciousness in the dark from a dream of darkness, where “the sun buckled and dark fell like a shout” (5). McCarthy’s choice of word for this coming-into-consciousness from a dream-state is particularly instructive, if not enlightening. Culla is literally “delivered” from the dream into the darkness of the cabin/cave. It is a word perfectly evocative of childbirth, and therefore also one that situates him perfectly within the orgiastic “womb of the Earth Mother.” The orgiastic communality of Culla’s world is also emphasized in this selection in that he is immediately located in the “bed he shared with her and the nameless weight in her belly,” sightlessly and tactilely indistinct from the woman that is himself in that she is his blood by birth, his flesh by carnal knowledge, and the gravid mother of his child which is itself a literal embodiment of their practical, situationally orgiastic insolubility.
The sun of the dream is notably a “black sun” to reinforce the spelaean lightlessness of his existence, and the as-yet unborn child is described not as a nominal child but as a “nameless weight in her belly” in order to emphasize the orgiastic oneness or lack of alterity inherent to the cave.

Some attention is due here to the dream from which Culla wakens. It proceeds in part as follows:

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. The sun hung on the cusp of eclipse and the prophet spoke to them. This hour the sun would darken and all these souls would be cured of their afflictions before it appeared again. And the dreamer himself was caught up among the supplicants and when they had been blessed and the sun begun to blacken he did push forward and hold up his hand and call out. (5)

The first note of importance from this passage is that the supplicants of the dream are a “beggared multitude,” a collective “delegation of human ruin.” In other words, they are referred to, though plural in number, by terms of collective singularity. This is particularly appropriate for a reading that would define them as belonging to the orgiastic as they each have their individual identities subsumed into this collective; there is no mention at any point during the dream of any distinguishing characteristic, of their names for example, as they can hardly be said to have any concept of the other at all. Even in what would normally be distinguishing characteristics, their stumps and sores, they are one and the same. Later in the dream, and furthering the idea of the
subsumption of individuality into orgiastic collectivity, Culla is “caught up in the crowd” which “in that pit of hopeless dark…fell upon him with howls of outrage” (6). Further they have “blind eyes” as the dwellers of the orgiastic cave properly should from dwelling so long in the dark. Finally, of course, so thoroughly entranced are they in the secret of the orgiastic that even the external world itself has become a model of the cave. The sun hangs initially on the “cusp of eclipse,” on the brink of total darkness in existence, and at last “blacken[s]” (5) and “the sun did not return” (6). Indeed, so deeply enwombed is Culla in the dark of the orgiastic cave that he can only be freed from the dream thereof into its waking ideation.

Now that we have established Culla as belonging, at least initially, firmly to the orgiastic, we may proceed in our delineation of his character as a possible model of the greater history of secrecy. Derrida writes: “the cavern becomes the Earth Mother from which one must finally extract oneself in order to ‘subordinate,’ as Patocka puts it, ‘the orgiastic entirely to responsibility’” (10). This extraction takes the form of a following of the light out of the orgiastic cave into consciousness, into the world of responsibility, and is termed by Derrida “Platonic anabasis” (10), literally a “going up” or “going out.” Incidentally, it is not Culla but Rinthy who first attempts this anabasis. Rinthy is able to first conceive of the other, perhaps by virtue of her sex; having given birth, she is able to convert the knowledge of physical alterity to responsibility. Shortly after giving childbirth, Rinthy falls into a deep sleep, but not before Culla tells her of the child: “I don’t look for it to live” (15). Culla, as mentioned earlier, leaves the child to die of exposure, perhaps because he cannot bring himself to kill it directly, and then later digs a false grave to deceive Rinthy when she wakes. But Rinthy goes to this false grave and is not deceived. She knows or intuits that her child is still alive, and so decides to leave the relative, amniotic
comfort of cabin and glade to find it. The long trek out of the wood of her orgiastic origins constitutes her anabasis as it is literally a following of the Platonic light towards responsibility, particularly the responsibility of care she owes her child in the wake of its having, as perhaps first of all entities, revealed itself to her as other, something which the orgiastic consciousness (or non-consciousness) has a difficult or impossible time even conceiving of. It is quite appropriate then that as she wends her way through this wood of orgiastic mystery toward Platonic responsibility, she is literally able to “see light through the trees” (57).

Culla, then, is left to himself, alone, but not as the member of the orgiastic collective is always alone; rather, for the first time, Rinthy, who has always registered to Culla orgiastically as merely an extension of himself, reveals herself as other to him through her absence. Again, one of the principal properties of Platonic light is that it allows the other to be perceived from a distance - that is to say other than tactilely/erotically/fusively – as other. Just as the alterity of the child constitutes a guiding Platonic light of responsibility for Rinthy, the sudden and shocking alterity of Rinthy constitutes the revelatory, conversional ray by which Culla extracts himself from the cave of glade and cabin. Both are instances of what Derrida calls a “first awakening of responsibility by means of the soul’s relation to the Good” (10). What Derrida, and according to Derrida, Plato, means by “the Good” here is giving oneself the gift of death by “giv[ing] sense to…death” and “tak[ing] responsibility for it” (13) by taking care of the way in which one lives. Where someone immersed in the orgiastic mystery has no regard for their life in that they are fused with their death (in the sense that their rotting bodies will fuse again with the earth that spawned them) as they are fused orgiastically with all else, the Platonic convert takes responsibility for his life by taking responsibility for the manner in which death will come to
him. Culla, recognizing at last by at least a fleeting glimpse of the Platonic sunbeam Rinthy as other, can no longer accept a cloistered, enwombed, meaningless, referent-less and non-contextual orgiastic death. Patocka writes:

> Responsibility triumphs over the orgiastic, incorporates it as a subordinate moment, as Eros which cannot understand itself until it understands that its origin is not in the corporeal world, in the cave, in the darkness, but rather that it is only a means for the ascent to the Good with its absolute claim and its hard discipline” (qtd. in Derrida, 14).

He must dedicate his life to the care and recovery of Rinthy as other, and as it her own responsible concern, the recovery of their chap.

But unfortunately, as Derrida later tells us, conversion to responsibility “must always run the risk of…apostasy” (29); there is always the latent threat after conversion of reversion, of turning back from Platonic light to one’s original orgiastic state. And so it is that Culla falters on his path toward responsibility. The novel employs a twin narrative structure, dividing its time between Culla’s quest for Rinthy and Rinthy’s quest for the chap. However, these narratives are occasionally intercut by tales of three nameless outlaws. The three men are appropriately nameless in that they are figures of orgiastic irresponsibility, and one night they come upon the tinker, who has previously found the child as it lay to die of exposure and taken up its care. The nameless men kill the tinker, and Culla comes upon their subsequent encampment, appropriately “limping out of the woods and cross[ing] a small field toward the light, insects rising out of the dark” (231). This line is again a model of the soul trying to free itself from the night-cave/maze of the orgiastic by the clue (as of Theseus’ clue of yarn) of Platonic light. Confronting the men
around the fire, Culla pleads with them to return the child, saying, “My sister would take
him…That chap. We could find her and she’d take him” (236). But before them Culla stands
“with his feet together and his hands at his sides like one arraigned” (235). There is something
preternatural about the nameless villains; that he is “one arraigned” signifies that they are his
judges, the judges of his conversion out of the orgiastic into responsibility.

While Culla has made a half-hearted attempt to recover the child, he has previously
denied his responsibility for it. When his judge asks him, “what do you want with him,” Culla
responds, perhaps in an attempt to conceal from them the child’s value to him but perhaps quite
truthfully (the reader cannot know for certain), “he ain’t nothin to me” (235). In the light or
darkness of this denial of responsibility, of taking care against the child’s death and therefore of
taking care for its life, Culla stands apostate to the Platonic beam, and so the judge with a
“slender knife” cuts the “child’s throat” and returns it, nameless, to the womb of the orgiastic
Earth Mother (236). That it is returned namelessly is significant in that when, perhaps
determining his worthiness to care for the child, the judge asks Culla “what’s his name?” (235).
Culla can only reply, “I don’t know” (236). The judge declares that:

He ain’t got nary’n…They say people in hell ain’t got names. But they had to be
called somethin [sic] to get sent there. Didn’t they. That tinker might of named
him [but] it wasn’t his to name. Besides names die with the namers. A dead man’s
dog ain’t got a name” (236).

There is a certain connection between hell, or hades, and the cave of the womb of the Earth
Mother in both the Judeo-Christian and classical traditions. Hell and Hades are popularly and
classically imagined as subterranean realms, essentially as caves, filled with flame, rivers of
memory and forgetting, etc. Those that drink from the Lethe in the Hades of classical tradition forget their pains and sorrows, but only by entering into the state of oblivion and non-identity. They forget themselves entirely, rendering themselves as nameless as Culla’s chap in its return to the cave of the womb of the Earth Mother. Hell, in Judeo-Christian tradition, is a place of suffering but specifically of the suffering of the masses where the “fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part [emphasis added] in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone which is the second death” (Revelation 21:8). I have here emphasized the phrase “their part” to demonstrate that the patients of hell are subsumed into the nameless collective of the orgiastic. The bible elsewhere speaks of Hell as an “outer darkness” where “there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 22:13); it is to this hellish, nameless, orgiastic outer darkness that the child is abandoned and consigned and from which the novel draws its title.

But just as Culla had the opportunity for apostasy from the state of Platonic enlightenment, of reversion back into the orgiastic, the novel gives him the opportunity to experience that conversion to the Platonic a second time, and perhaps even something more. At the very end of the novel, with Rinthy and the chap both lost to him, Culla encounters a blind man on the road. The blind man wanders down the road and “before him under the high afternoon sun his shadow be-wandered in a dark parody of his progress” (242). The blind man is a model of the orgiastic soul in that he is unreceptive, either volitionally or conditionally, to the Good, the responsibility of Platonic light. Culla quickly passes by the slowly doddering blind man and what he finds is here fully included as the basis of the remainder of our analysis:
Late in the day the road brought him into a swamp. And that was all. Before him stretched a spectral waste out of which reared only the naked trees in attitudes of agony and dimly hominoid like figures in a landscape of the damned. A faintly smoking garden of the dead that tended away to the earth’s curve. He tried his foot in the mire before him and it rose in a vulvate welt claggy and sucking. He stepped back. A stale wind blew from this desolation and the marsh reeds and black ferns among which he stood clashed softly like things chained. He wondered why a road should come to such a place. (242)

The blind man is clearly headed unwittingly to hell. The road leads to a place of “spectral” or ghostly figures in a “landscape of the damned” where even the ferns are in bondage “like things chained.” Of special significance though is that this hell is described as “vulvate,” which reestabishes the connection in the novel between hell and the cave, the orgiastic womb of the Earth Mother. The blind man, unconsciously as the orgiastic soul is unconscious, is returning to this womb to die.

Derrida writes: “Socrates recalls a certain invisibility of the psyche, after having played again on aides-haides, as he does in the Cratylus, on the fact that the invisible soul (aides also meaning ‘one who doesn’t see,’ ‘blind’) goes to its death in the direction of an invisible place that is also Hades (Haides), this invisibility of the aides being in itself a figure of secrecy” (15). We have found in Plato then, by way of Derrida, the perfect terms on which to analyze the blind man’s return. He is literally the figure of the aides, “one who does not see,” going to his death in an “invisible place that is also Hades (Haides).” Culla, as the unseen seer of this blind man, is brought to a special crisis of responsibility. Culla returns “going back the way by which he
came” and meets “again the blind man tapping through the dusk” (McCarthy 242). Culla “wait[s] very still by the side of the road” and watched the blind man, the aides, “out of sight” and “he wondered where the blind man was going and did he know how the road ended. Someone should tell a blind man before setting him out that way” (242). These are the final lines of the novel in which Culla stands on the brink of apostasy and conversion, the orgiastic and the Platonic, irresponsibility and responsibility, ignorant animal life and Philosophy. For Derrida defines philosophy as “nothing other than this vigil over death that watches out for death and watches over death” (17), just as Culla now has the opportunity to stand responsible, philosophical vigil over the blind man. Derrida further writes that “such a caring for death, an awakening that keeps vigil over death, a conscience [emphasis added] that looks death in the face, is another name for freedom” (17). Culla standing unseen beside the blind man, the aides returning to hades, is “conscience,” or “con-science,” a knowing together. It is a model of the soul knowing itself, “becoming conscious…through this care for death” (16), through this vigil over the death, and therefore life, of the blind man.

The closing scene is an allegory of the soul, of the soul “retreat[ing] from the visible body to assemble itself within itself in order to be next to itself within its interior invisibility (Patocka as qtd. in Derrida, 15). It is an allegory for the possibility of the constitution of Culla’s responsibility, freedom, Platonic conversion and Goodness. As Patocka writes:

Care for death becomes care for life, life is born of this direct look at death, of an overcoming of death, is this overcoming. That, however, together with the relation to the Good, identifying with the Good while breaking free of the
demonic and the orgiastic, means the rule of responsibility and so of freedom. The soul is absolutely free, that is, it chooses its destiny” (18).

Culla is on the verge of either full conversion to responsibility and Platonic light through the potentiality of becoming, almost literally, the Platonic light that leads the blind man out of the hellish swamp as cave, and apostasy, or the turning away from responsibility by allowing the blind man to return to the cave, the “vulvate” womb of the Earth Mother. Telling himself that “someone should tell a blind man before setting him out that way” is a dialectical, and hence philosophical (philosophy of course more or less begins in Platonic dialectic/dialogical form) act of the self to the self, of conscience or “con-science;” it is the soul standing next to itself in responsibility. It is the conscientious soul as opposed to the apostate soul, “apostate” signifying etymologically literally a “standing away.” The apostate soul, in standing away from itself in a return to the orgiastic, cannot know itself Platonically, that is, con-sciously and responsibly.

Culla’s question, for his final imperative statement to himself is of course in essence a philosophical/dialectical question of conscience, of self to self, is an allegory of the soul attempting to “be next to itself” in order to responsibly know itself. But we are ultimately left without an answer. If the soul responds to the question it has asked itself, we are unaware. That we are unaware of the outcome reinforces the idea of Culla’s as a soul in crisis, on the verge of decision, between luminous Platonic responsibility and orgiastic irresponsibility.

But Culla is not merely on the brink of a single conversion, that from orgiastic to Platonic mystery in this instance, but on the brink of a nearly simultaneous (if the first conversion is successful) conversion to Christian mystery as well. Culla and the blind man may be understood to represent two halves of the soul, such that the question of responsibility Culla poses himself is
practically (if he chooses responsibility and light) an instance of an essentially Christian evangelical spreading of Good News (gospel) and concern not only for one’s own death but for the death (and hence life) of another. Therefore, in choosing to surpass orgiastic mystery for Platonic, Culla would simultaneously convert to a Christian paradigm of being, which contains in it the incorporated Platonic ideal of Light/the Good (Culla potentially acting as guiding light for the blind man), and represses the orgiastic (Culla potentially saving the blind man from return to the womb of the Earth Mother). It is important to keep in mind Levinas’ qualification of Christian responsibility: “responsibility is not at first responsibility of myself for myself. The sameness of myself is derived from the perspective of the other, as if it were second to the other, coming to itself as responsible and mortal from the position of my responsibility before the other, for the other’s death and in the face of it” (qtd in Derrida, 47). Culla would potentially achieve Christian responsibility for his own life and death by assuming responsibility for the death of the blind man. He could give the blind man death by giving him the light of guidance out of the cave of the womb of the Earth Mother. He would give him responsibility over his own death. It would no longer be an inexorable thing. The blind man would be free to choose his destiny and death as those consigned to the orgiastic hell of the cave can never be. But ultimately, this all lies in the realm of crisis and potentiality. The reader never knows for certain whether Culla chooses to be a guiding light to the blind man and thereby achieve his conversions. When last we see Culla the blind man has already passed him “out of sight”(242). Perhaps the unfortunate truth the novel is trying to convey is that the “outer dark” of the title is darkness outside of Plato’s cave, that the exterior world itself is often as lightless and brutal as the orgiastic world within.
Chapter Two: Carrying the Fire in the Cave-World of *The Road*

*This study of McCarthy’s work has no thesis other than that which issues from the cryptic intelligibility of the novels themselves when they are patiently and attentively considered. One Strength of McCarthy’s novels is that they resist the imposition of theses from the outside, especially conventional ones, and that they seem finally to call all theses into question.*

-Vereen M. Bell

*Here, too, life dies sunwards, full of faith.*

-Ahab

The problem presented at the end of the last chapter is the problem of the possibility that the exterior world, the world outside of the orgiastic cave, the world we elect for ourselves in electing to take up human responsibility for our lives and following the Platonic light of reason out of the cave, can be just as lightless and brutal as the world within. Vereen M. Bell, in *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy*, writes that the last page of *Outer Dark* is “an appropriately unaccommodating resolution to an otherwise inconclusive [emphasis added] and highly unconventional narrative” (1). I have argued that the reason for this inconclusiveness is that *Outer Dark* leaves us at the precipice of this possibility as well as on the precipice of the taking of responsibility in the form of Culla’s unresolved and simultaneous twin crises. In this chapter, I will argue that McCarthy returns, decades later, to attend to the question of how one must conduct himself in the very literally realized event of this possibility in *The Road*. The first paragraph of *The Road* situates us explicitly in a lightless spelaean (in spirit, if not in actual fact) environment:
When he woke in the woods in the dark and the cold of the night he’d reach out to touch the child sleeping beside him. Nights dark beyond darkness and the days more gray each one than what had gone before. Like the onset of some cold glaucoma dimming away the world. His hand rose and fell softly with each precious breath. He pushed away the plastic tarpaulin and raised himself in the stinking robes and blankets and looked toward the east for any light but there was none. (McCarthy 3)

Waking into darkness as a metaphor for existence in an orgiastic/spelaean state here becomes a recurring theme for McCarthy; the awakening of the nameless man (hereafter simply referred to as “the man”) into darkness is immediately evocative of the lightless awakening of Culla in Outer Dark (“SHE SHOOK HIM [sic] awake into the quite darkness” (5)) as discussed in the previous chapter. Both awakenings constitute the first lines and occurrences of each novel, establishing the thematic parallel between the books, and situating by force of this parallel the later novel’s serving as an extended exploration of the possibility of responsible life in an exterior world as devoid of light as the interior cave from which a human subjectivity emerges in its burdening itself with responsibility and, by extension, freedom. It is also significant, as detailed in the last chapter, that Culla is “delivered” out of the darkness of his dream “into a night more dolorous” (5) because the word “delivered” has strong connotations of childbirth, which in turn refers us to the image of the cave as the womb of the Earth Mother. Culla is delivered into a darkness occupied by others, Rinthy and the “nameless weight” in her belly, who do not truly register as others to him but as forms of himself; in the lines cited above the nameless man seems similarly to be woken into an ebon amnion with a nameless other (and
indeed his get) who is not other but himself. However, the events of the novel will demonstrate, as this paper will demonstrate, that though they are perhaps permanently enwombed in the night of what I will define as the cave-world, each is an Appollonian-ly distinct subjectivity taking responsibilities not only for their own life and death, but for the life and death of the other.

*The Road* is a novel with a limited cast. Though other characters move briefly and infrequently through their tale, *The Road* tells the story of two people: the man and the boy, father and son. That they are nameless might be material for an argument that they are subject to a Dionysian/orgiastic fusion and subsequent non-identity, but McCarthy’s project, for all its bleakness, is in the end a hopeful one, and indeed, with McCarthy it often seems that the darker the tale the brighter the light of hope shines at the end. Rather than suggest a spelaean animality or sub-humanity, the anonymity of the two main characters instead serves to reinforce the novel’s considerable allegorical power (this being of course the allegory of the soul in the process of its conversions from orgiastic and Platonic mystery), and, almost paradoxically, to make its reading an even more intensely personal experience for the reader. The man and boy stand as the everymen of their plight, and if we do not know the deepest particulars of their identities, we are by that same token allowed to see ourselves and our relationships more clearly in their characters, and to learn the more from them.

The light of their world is largely gone, and it is clear from the opening lines as cited above, that what remains is leaving them; there is a great and “cold glaucoma dimming away the world” and “no light” in “the east” (3). The man is waiting for a sunrise that has not yet come and that, indeed, may never come. Dawn *does* come for the man and the boy in their literal, non-allegorical situation in the novel, but it is not a dawn as we know it. It is a dawn of “gray light”
of “ashen daylight” that “congeal[s] over the land” (5), making of the world in the reader’s mind’s eye one great dead campfire. McCarthy shows us this dead-ember world as soon as there is enough light for the man to use the binoculars. Our first actual glimpse of their world (though it has already been oneirically prefigured in such a way that this essay will attend to it shortly) is as follows:

When it was light enough to use the binoculars he glassed the valley below.

Everything paling away into the murk. The soft ash blowing in loose swirls over the blacktop. He studied what he could see. The segments of road down there among the dead trees. Looking for anything of color. Any movement. Any trace of standing smoke.” (4)

Some apocalyptic event has befallen their world (one the reader imagines to be ours in an uncomfortably near future), though we never learn precisely its nature. We know only that the man, his wife then pregnant with his son who is perhaps ten years of age during the events of the novel, recollects that “the clocks stopped at 1:17” and that there was “a long shear of light and then a series of low concussions” (52). Though nuclear holocaust or an asteroid strike on the order of that which might have wiped out the dinosaurs are the likeliest explanations for what has happened to their world, that the apocalyptic event itself is passed over in description so briefly and almost casually by McCarthy is highly appropriate to theme of human responsibility of his tale. It does not matter how what is left of humanity came to inhabit the ruined remnant of the world; it only matters that what is left of humanity should conduct itself as humanity, in a mode of responsibility that leads it, morally and philosophically, out of the trap of the orgiastic cave that has become the world entire.
However, before we can reasonably examine and assert the philosophically responsible behavior of the man and the boy in a world which has reverted from Platonic and Christian mystery to a cave-world by virtue of the ever-present orgiastic seed which these higher, human mysteries must inevitably contain, more attention must be given to establishing the cave-world as such. The novel begins with the man awakening from a dream that expresses the essence of the cave of the womb of the Earth Mother such that the man’s very awakening from this dream is a symbolic escape, or subconscious recognition of the waking-world need to escape, if only morally/behaviorally, from that cave:

In the dream from which he’d wakened he had wandered in a cave where the child led him by the hand. Their light playing over the wet flowstone walls. Like pilgrims in a fable swallowed up and lost among the inward parts of some granitic beast. Deep stone flues where the water dripped and sang. Tolling in the silence the minutes of the earth and the hours and the days of it and the years without cease. Until they stood in a great stone room where lay a black and ancient lake. And on the far shore a creature that raised its dripping mouth from the rimstone pool and stared into the light with eyes dead white and sightless as the eggs of spiders. It swung its head low over the water as if to take the scent of what it could not see. Crouching there pale and naked and translucent, its alabaster bones cast up in shadow on the rocks behind it. Its bowels, its beating heart. The brain that pulsed in a dull glass bell. It swung its head from side to side and then gave out a low moan and turned and lurched away and loped soundlessly into the dark.

(4-5)
It cannot be overlooked that in the dream the man and boy “wandered in a cave.” This is a literal, though oneiric, spelaean echo of their waking situation in the novel, where their world entire has become the orgiastic cave, yet in which they must continue to “wander,” a word inherently suggestive of the sort of hopefulness necessary to persist in their responsible humanity and resist the orgiastic despair ever threatening to consume them, often quite literally, that is to say, cannibalistically. The essential hopefulness of the word "wandered" is cemented immediately in the mind of the reader when the man and boy are similied as being "like pilgrims," faithful wanderers on a journey of some higher obligation/responsibility and carriers of the higher human mysteries by definition; they are, in Derrida's terms, followers of the light of the sun of the Good. Similarly, it cannot be overlooked for the purposes of this reading that these pilgrims are wandering within the "inward parts of some granitic beast;" they could not be more thoroughly or menacingly cradled in the womb of the Earth Mother. In this passage too, within the orgiastic womb, McCarthy delineates for us, in unsettling detail, a figure of Patocka and Derrida's daemon with the creature on the far shore. That it is a "creature" and merely a creature, a merely bestial "created thing," is significant in that it suggests it acts only according to the base precepts of its creation, to the daemonic, Dionysian, libidinous, fusive and self-annihilating instincts and impulses to which we all are heir, but must overmaster (though we contain always and inescapably their kernels within us) in our conversions to higher mysteries of responsible humanity.

It is also, of course, appropriate that the creature is blind; with eyes "dead white and sightless" it cannot perceive the light of responsibility and of the Good. That its jaws drip water is a subconscious image of salivating appetite, reinforced of course by the simple fact that it has
been greedily slaking its thirst at the pool. No sooner are we given this appetitive image than the blind attention, and therefore appetite, of the beast is fixed, with the phrase "it stared into the light," upon them with an intensity that threatens somehow to supersede the blindness of the beast and discover them mortally to its Dionysian and daimonic, consumptive and fusive will. This is the perfect image of the persistent threatfullness with which the protagonists' post-apocalyptic, waking cave-world turns its blindly irresponsible, appetitive eye upon them. We know that the phrase "it stared into the light" signifies that the creature has fixed its curious apperception upon them because it is "their light [emphasis added] playing over the wet flowstone walls." They are in a subterranean space and the scene has been furnished by the author with no other light source. Man and son bear no flashlights, torches or lanterns; how then are we to explain this anomaly? This oneiric, and therefore allegorical, space and scene then can only be understood to be illuminated by a sort of inner-light radiated by man and boy which has its source, as will be demonstrated, in the responsible freedom of their souls; this scene, like the ultimately, and almost impossibly, hopeful spirit of the novel is literally illuminated by the light of the Sun of the Good, which penetrates the shroud of dreams, the shadow of despair and what the poet of Beowulf might have termed the bone-house of the soul as surely as it pierced the depths of Plato's cave. The scene takes its light from the fact that the man and boy are, in their own terminology and in a phrase that recurs repeatedly throughout the novel, "carrying the fire." Further, that the creature’s eyes are dead white and sightless “as the eggs of spiders” is a detail excellent in its expression of orgiastic, fusive horror; the reader has the image of dozens or hundreds of eggs filling each eye socket in what is appropriately known, in that the word
suggests huddled, orgiastic *eros*, as a “clutch,” each egg pregnant not only with a spider, but with the primal, pitiless grasping daemonic appetite such an archetypal hunter-horror represents.

Before we discuss the significance of the phrase “carrying the fire” in the instances in which it appears in *The Road* itself, consideration will be given to the idea’s foregrounding in two more of McCarthy’s earlier novels, *No Country for Old Men* and *Blood Meridian*, thereby lending strength and solidity to our reading of McCarthy’s latest novel as the natural extension of work begun decades before. Where *The Road* takes as its subject a world which is already largely gone, a perhaps inevitable extinction apparent in passages like, “he [the man] thought if he lived long enough the world at last would all be lost..like the dying world the newly blind inhabit, all of it slowly fading from memory” (18), *No Country For Old Men* concerns itself with a world that has not yet suffered a doom like the world of *The Road*, but that seems perhaps irrevocably destined to a similar fate, not by some apocalypse or extinction event, but through the degradation of the heart of man. *No Country For Old Men* tells the story of Llewellyn Moss, a Vietnam veteran who becomes the object of pursuit of a possibly deranged but certainly intelligent and philosophically principled killer, Anton Chigurh, when he one day finds two million dollars in a bag in the bloody aftermath of a drug deal gone wrong. This narrative is intersticed with thirteen stream-of-consciousness chapters from the mind of Ed Tom Bell, the sheriff of Moss’ county who, despite his dutiful efforts to the contrary, remains but peripherally involved in the action of the narrative. That narrative action features only occasionally in the thoughts of Sheriff Bell, but its violent symptoms are characteristic in tone and subject of Sheriff Bell’s general theme, the continued degeneration into violence and inhumanity of the world around him as he has observed it over the decades of a long career.
Sherriff Bell begins the adumbration of this theme with the description of a nineteen-year-old man he sent to the gaschamber for the dispassionately wicked (“the papers said it was a crime of passion and he told me there wasnt no passion to it” (3)) and unmotivated (by anything other than the act of the killing itself) murder of a fourteen-year-old girl. As the sheriff tells us:

He told me that he had been plannin to kill somebody for about as long as he could remember. Said that if they turned him out he’d do it again. Said he knew he was goin to hell. Told it to me out of his own mouth. I don’t know what to make of that. I sure dont. I thought I’d never seen a person like that and it got me to wonderin if maybe he was some new kind. (3)

What is even more disturbing about the young murderer is that, as he was being strapped into the gaschamber chair, “he might of looked a bit nervous about it but that was about all. I really believe that he knew he was goin to be in hell in fifteen minutes. I believe that” (3). The killer quite frighteningly attaches as little value to his own life, and its imminent ending, as he did to the life of the girl he murdered. He is seemingly utterly unconcerned, dispassionately detached. It is this dispassionate detachment from the consequences of his actions to both others and himself that causes the sheriff to wonder if he is not some “new kind” of person. As the sheriff says of the murderer during the times he went to visit him while he was in prison awaiting execution: “he was not hard to talk to. Called me Sheriff. But I didnt know what to say to him. What do you say to a man that by his own admission has no soul? Why would you say anything?” (3-4).

Sheriff Bell makes frequent reference to the newspapers to describe the general moral malady that he detects in these latter days of his life and career. He tells us, “I read the papers
ever mornin. Mostly I suppose just to try and figure out what might be headed this way. Not that I’ve done all that good a job at headin it off. It keeps gettin harder” (40). The reader has the sense, in this line and in the general tone of the novel, of an inexorable decline and the frustrated inability of “the good” (of those who are indeed “carrying the fire,” as we will shortly see) to staunch the flow of that dismal tide. The sheriff then recounts the newspaper story of two boys, one from California and one from Florida, who simply happened to run into one another “somewheres in between” and “then they set out together travelin around the country killin people.” The sheriff wonders to himself at the chances of such a coincidental meeting between two such persons, and declares that they must be low, but we can hear his rueful incredulity at his own statement even as he utters it: “There cant be that many of em. I dont think. Well, we dont know. Here the other day they was a woman put her baby in a trash compactor. Who would think of such a thing?” (40).

In a later chapter, Sheriff Bell ruminates further on dire newspaper portents:

What I was sayin the other day about the papers. Here last week they found this couple out in California they would rent out rooms and to old people and then kill em and bury em in the yard and cash their social security checks. They’d torture em first, I dont know why. Maybe their television was broke. (124)

The inhuman/subhuman emptiness of the villains of No Country For Old Men is more than a mere pre-figuration of the nihilistic, cannibal occultists we will encounter in our discussion of McCarthy’s next novel (The Road); instead, they constitute an uncomfortable blurring in McCarthy’s corpus between the bestial, daemonic, orgiastic and irresponsible lows and atrocities
we as a species are capable of (though as the man and boy prove, never justified in) in the dark exigencies of the post-apocalyptic and those of which we already are, and indeed long have been, capable.

In order to solidify our characterization of these atrocities with the bestial, orgiastic/Dionysian and daemonic, we should return momentarily to the boy that Sherriff Bell sent to the gaschamber at Huntsville, and thereby also to McCarthy’s conception of hell. As cited earlier, the boy knows that he is going to “be in hell in fifteen minutes” (3) and that he is a “man that by his own admission has no soul” (4). The question of how the boy justified his crime, the unmotivated murder of the fourteen year old girl he was dating, is answered only by the fact that there was no justification; and indeed there could not have been. The moment of the soul’s true inception (by which we mean the moment of its becoming human), according to Plato and to Derrida’s and Patocka’s reading of Plato, occurs not at the moment of inspiration (of drawing first breath) or the moment of what they would view as merely biological conception, but rather in the instance of the human creature recognizing, by virtue (the word here used in its purest sense, suggesting genuine humanity by way of its etymological derivation from the Latin vir, meaning “man”) of the light of reason its ownness, and by the taking of responsibility for that ownness in the manner in which it gives itself both life and death. Sherriff Bell remarks of the executed murderer: “they say the eyes are the windows to the soul. I dont know what them eyes was the windows to and I guess I’d as soon not know” (4). The reader however, suspects that Sherriff Bell knows very well what those eyes are a vantage to but is understandably reluctant to admit it; the murderer’s eyes are the windows to the orgiastic cave of the bestially irresponsible, to the blind and lightless realm where alterity cannot be recognized or conceived of, of ever-self
and never-other. It is a realm of being born, as Beckett might say, astraddle the grave, or in the words of Kurt Cobain, into an umbilical noose; ashes to ashes, dust to dust, the cave of the womb of the Earth Mother is as much grave as cradle to its inhabitants. Again, this killer has told Sheriff Bell that he “had been plannin to kill somebody for about as long as he could remember. Said that if they turned him out he’d do it again” (3). While it is true that Derrida and Patocka tell us that the demonic/orgiastic mode is predicated upon an “essential dimension of sexual desire” (5) and it is also true, as earlier detailed, that our nineteen-year-old killer confessed, or rather professed, to the sheriff that there was no passion in his murder of the girl, we must remember that the orgiastic mode is above all else a mode of fusion, that sexual desire is a desire for fusion with and into the other, and that the ultimate aim of fusion is self-extinction, which takes death for its profoundest expression. The condemned boy’s dispassion is the dispassion of the already spent, and his spending, like perhaps all erotic spendings, a fevered grasping at oblivion, at self-annihilation. He is fused with his own death as the bodies of those in the cave fuse in death into the ground of the cave from which they sprang, and it is his natural, instinctive, daemonic and pre-rational will to fuse his girlfriend’s fate with his own, to gather her into anonymity and nothingness.

The killer’s admission to the sheriff should properly be termed a profession, rather than a confession, because the latter word holds implicitly within it the suggestion of a reasoning moral consciousness, this word (consciousness) understood again as in the first chapter as a “knowing together,” a knowing of the self by the soul standing outside of and next to itself in contemplation. Such an etymologically genuine consciousness would be the only sort capable of the rational examination of its own actions, of the conception of sin or having done wrong, and
of experiencing responsible guilt. This is because such an experiencing can only be rooted in the recognition of the other, a threshold conception made possible in turn only by the initial recognition of the self as distinct from the other by virtue of the Platonic light of reason and responsibility.

That the dismal tide of man’s inhumanity to man, to borrow Burns’ phrase, observed by Sherriff Bell over the course of the novel points toward a general apostasy into the orgiastic is supported by the fact that the narrative action of the novel, its driving source and contemplative soul, is catalyzed by a desert shootout over narcotics. The appeal of narcotics is of course the appeal of the Dionysian wine-rite. They are that through which the extinction of the self and the subsumption into a collective oblivion is achieved. This wine-rite, this Bacchanal, is ancient, fusive and orgiastic. It threatens to gather ever more persons into itself, which is to say ultimately into death, and the aftermath scene of the desert shootout at the beginning of No Country is a microcosmic exemplar. It is the scene of a drug-deal gone wrong, quite appropriately a lethal mix-up or confusion between manufacturers and dealers, between the creators and purveyors of death. Strengthening the connection between drugs and the hell of the Dionysian cave in the novel, Bell tells us in meditation, “I think if you were Satan and you were settin around tryin to think up somethin that would just bring the human race to its knees what you would probably come up with is narcotics” (218). The scene is arranged around “three vehicles,” the pickup bed of one full of an unspecified, brown narcotic powder, about which an indefinite multitude of bodies are strewn (11). The trucks are “all shot up” and by the pattern “across the sheetmetal” which are “spaced and linear” Moss knows that “they’d [the bullet holes] had been put there with automatic weapons:” with appetitive, frenzied, indiscriminate weapons operated by appetitive,
frenzied, indiscriminate wills (12). Here, I offer a selection of the description of the scene that ranges over pages and even chapters of the book as the reader returns to it. The selection is Moss’ first inspection of the carnage and is typical of McCarthy’s many descriptive passages thereof:

In the first vehicle there was a man slumped dead over the wheel. Beyond were two more bodies lying in the gaunt yellow grass. Dried blood black on the ground. He stopped and listened. Nothing. The drone of flies. He walked around the end of the truck. There was a large dead dog there of the kind he’d seen crossing the floodplain. The dog was gutshot. Beyond that was a third body lying face down. He looked through the window at the man in the truck. He was shot through the head. Blood everywhere. (12)

For want of a less lurid but equally accurate phrasing, it is an orgy of death. Almost comically, even the dog does not escape it. There is a gutshot man in one of the trucks that cannot truly be counted among the living because his wounds, though slow, are fatal, and in time will prove the catalyst to further deaths in this place, and others like it. McCarthy makes sure that for the reader as for the characters the desert takes on all of its ancient associations with hell and with Satan, lord of flies. The desert is of course the scene of Christ’s temptation by Satan in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, and in the legends and popular imagination of the church, the site for the many temptations also of St. Anthony and St. Jerome, the Desert Fathers. McCarthy sets his mortal scene in a “caldera” (15,16,27), or cauldron, of “baked terracotta terrain” (8) beneath a “lava ridge” presided over, amongst the living, only by the “drone of flies” (12).
The mortally-wounded man asks Moss for water, but Moss has none to give him and after trailing another fatally shot, temporary survivor of the carnage to his dying place beneath a distant tree and taking possession of a case containing over two million dollars in drug money, Moss leaves him begging in the truck cab and heads home. But, as if the place were asserting an inimical, fatally fusive will from afar, drawing ever more persons into death, Moss wakes in the night and is drawn back by conscience to bring the dying man some water. In the course of the operation, Moss is surprised by compatriots of one of the initial groups of combatants looking to recover the drugs and the money and is forced to abandon his truck in a flight for his life. Though he escapes, he knows that he will have been identified in time (he speculates the next morning, when the county courthouse opens) by the plates on the truck registered in his name that he was forced to leave behind. For the remainder of the novel, Moss is fugitive against this blind, consumptive will, and he does not escape it. But before it claims him, it claims others, too. Chigurh, hired to reclaim the lost money for one of the involved drug interests, arrives by night at the scene of the desert shootout with two mercenaries of the same employer, and having performed an investigation that will set him on Moss’ trail, kills his fellows on principal of competition and in the deadly spirit of the scene, adding further to the sheriff’s near helpless bewilderment over the incident, over the burgeoning tide of man’s inhumanity to man which is the novel’s chief subject of inquiry, and to ours. When Moss is claimed himself by this orgiastic narcosis, gathered into death thereby, it is not at the original scene itself but at its distant recreation.

At the end of the novel, Moss has found a traveling partner in a teenage girl that he’s picked up from hitch-hiking. However, contrary to his widow’s later unfortunate suspicions,
their relationship is not sexual, though not for want of advances on the girl’s part. At the end of
their first and perhaps only day together (we cannot be sure if they spent more than one night at
the motel, and in point of fact the number is narratively insignificant), Moss gives her a key to
her own room to which she replies, in an indirect solicitation, “well...it’s up to you.” Moss,
perhaps enticed but ultimately unswayed, answers only: “Yes it is” (228). Moss has only taken
her up out of the need, having been wounded by Chigurh, for someone to drive while he rests
and recuperates and indeed, out of pity for her. Despite Moss’ taking up of responsibility in this
matter, despite this instance of his maintaining “access to the individualization of the relation to
oneself” (Derrida 22) by maintaining in the face of orgiastic temptation a rational, principled
perspective on his responsibilities to himself and to his wife as well as to the girl, to whom he
has unconditionally given in addition to shelter both money and sound advice (223), he is still,
by force of his initial succumbing to the temptation of the narcotics money, collected, along with
the girl, into its mortal consequence.

The scene of this collection is, again, something of a recreation of the desert orgy, though
it takes place outside of their motel rooms. Most of the killing is again the work of a
“goddamned machinegun” (237), the walkway is covered with blood and the participants have
been “all shot to pieces” (238). Moss and the girl have both been killed, and we are told that their
killer, airlifted to the hospital, will likely die of his wounds, inflicted by Moss, as well. Perhaps
most the most poignant detail about this scene is the lack of detail we, and the law enforcement
officers on site, are privy to from the perspective of Bell’s conversation with the local sheriff
concerning the individuality of the slain. Bell has arrived at the scene on suspicion that Moss
would prove to be one of those involved in the shootout. He asks the local sheriff, “do you know
who they were?” The sheriff can only reply: “No. One of them was Mexican and we’re waiting for a registration on his car settin over yonder. Wasnt a one of em had any identification. On em or in the room either one” (237). This fact is brought again prominently to the readers attention a page later when Bell, being told that the “girl was just shot dead,” asks “no ID,” and is answered, “No ID. The other old boy’s truck is got dealer tags on it” (238). They are nameless in the same way that Culla’s chap is never more than a “nameless weight” (5) in the cave of Rinthy’s womb, in the same way that, according to the chief of Culla’s judges at the end of Outer Dark, the “people in hell aint got names” (236). A retrospective re-analysis of the original desert bloodbath in No Country affirms for the reader that this is an artful anonymity, and an instructive one, on McCarthy’s part. There is almost nothing to distinguish any of the casualties of the original bloodbath from any other, except perhaps for the clinical/anatomical particulars of their deaths. Even the doomed man begging water is nameless, as are the cartel mercenaries Chigurh later kills at the scene. They are subsumed, all and identically, into each other and the cave, becoming each other, the cave, and no one.

Patocka writes that “the cave is a remnant of the subterranean gathering place of the mysteries” (qtd. in Derrida 13). The cave then, is man’s first temple. And where it is true that these scenes of a carnage orgiastic in their appetitive and all-consuming will-to-death do not take place in a cave as literal as the dream-caves and cannibal cellars of The Road or Lester Ballard’s corpse garden in Child of God (to which this essay will later attend), it is of course also true that neither are Plato’s or Derrida and Patocka’s formulations of the cave precisely literal. The cave is a metaphorical construct, an allegory, to which certain characteristics (lightlessness, blind eros, fusiveness, irrationality or pre-rationality, anonymity, thanatos, self-extinction, ritual
obliteration, etc.) are ascribed for our contemplation. With sufficient of these characteristics attributable to the death orgy in the desert, including its apprehensive and acquisitive (the words used here together to signify a sort of grasping fusion) self-perpetuation/recreation in the scene of the motel shootout, we may then in fact term it a death orgy, an instructive instance of the allegorical cave. If, for Patocka, the cave is man’s first temple, we may take this to mean that it is man’s first place for ritual. The ceremony of the cave is the ceremony of fusion through sex, appetite, narcosis, and therefore of ultimate obliteration in death. The Dionysian wine orgy, where cultists surrender themselves into the collective other is one manifestation of the ceremony of the cave, the narcotics driven death-rite of McCarthy’s desert is simply another, fully realized expression of the same; it is the wine orgy’s natural - we cannot say rational - entelechy. It is perhaps also helpful to remember that the word orgy itself is a form of the Greek orgia, meaning secret rite, deriving ultimately only from ergein, to work or perform.

Having laid the groundwork for the presence of the cave in No Country For Old Men, we can now proceed to a discussion of the advent of McCarthy’s recurring phrase “carrying the fire” which first appears in this novel, though the advent of the idea itself is at least as old as 1985’s Blood Meridian, which is to be attended to subsequently. At the end of No Country, McCarthy’s narrative action remains characteristically unresolved. Moss is gathered namelessly into death with a nameless woman and a nameless man, Sheriff Bell has come no closer to thwarting his “true and living prophet of destruction” (4) or to understanding the tide of violence, narcosis and degradation that he observes about him, and even the seeming angel and agent of death Chigurh is left traumatically injured with uncertain prospects by the perfect randomness of a traffic accident. The novel ends with a meditation by Bell on the question of the justification of hope in
view of the continued existence of such unresolved atrocities and degradations. He has earlier indicated, in a phrase reminiscent of the final lines of *The Road*, that “I always thought I could at least someway put things right and I guess I just dont feel that way no more” (296), and we find him at the end in contemplation of a carved stone water trough “hewed out of solid rock and it was about six foot long and maybe a foot and a half wide and about that deep. Just chiseled out of the rock” (307). Such is his wonderment at the creation of the trough:

And I got to thinkin about the man that done that. That country had not had a time of peace much of any length at all that I knew of. I’ve read a little of the history of it since and I aint sure it ever had one. But this man had set down with a hammer and chisel and carved out a stone water trough to last ten thousand years. Why was that? What was it that he had faith in? It wasnt that nothin would change. Which is what you might think, I suppose. He had to know bettern that. I’ve thought about it a good deal. I thought about it after I left there with that house blown to pieces. I’m goin to say that water trough is there yet. It would of took somethin to move it, I can tell you that. So I think about him settin there with his hammer and his chisel, maybe just a hour or two after supper, I dont know. And I have to say that the only thing I can think is that there was some sort of promise in his heart. And I dont have no intentions of carvin a stone water trough. But I would like to be able to make that kind of promise. I think that’s what I would like most of all. (308-9)
In the opening lines of this selection, we see clearly the Texas-Mexico border represented historically in a way that harmonizes with McCarthy’s vision of the area in present day. It is a waste torn by violence and inhumanity. This view is also supported, among other places, in an earlier chapter where Bell goes to visit his elderly, disabled Uncle Ellis who tells him of his own Uncle, Mac, who was a Texas Ranger and murdered on his porch by outlaws in 1879 (269-70). And though Mac’s wife was forced to sell and leave their land, and though their “house burned down sometime back in the twenties, what hadnt fell down,” Ellis tells Bell, “I could take you to it today. The rock chimney used to be standin and it may be yet” (270). Having come to the end of the novel and the above-cited meditation on the water-trough, the attentive and devoted reader of McCarthy knows somehow that the rock chimney does still stand, and that, like the water-trough, its endurance is representative of McCarthy’s curious and ultimate, though almost impossible, hopefulness.

Both the chimney and the water-trough are practical icons of man’s conversion out of the orgiastic into responsibility. In the conception and production of such edifice, man, becoming man, is able to move out of and beyond the natural shelter of the cave, which is as the shelter and the breeding place of animals, indistinct from the lion’s den or the serpent’s lair. In this assumption of practical responsibility, the human being, gaining and seizing access to the individualization of his ego, of his ownness, conceives of the necessity of shelter that defends him not only from the external elements, but from the internal voracities and fusive threats to identity and individuality, and therefore to responsibility, of the cave of the womb of the Earth Mother; in some sense then, we can also say that in this responsible fashioning of shelter, the human being fashions himself as human also: unmaking, by making, his natural, bestial and
orgiastic “self.” In “Cormac McCarthy’s The Stonemason: The Unmaking of a Play,” Edwin T. Arnold cites McCarthy as saying in one of his extremely rare interviews that “stacking up stone is the oldest profession there is...Not even prostitution can come close to its antiquity. It’s older than anything” (141). Here, especially in the use of the word “profession,” we can see the possibility of an analogy being drawn between Patocka’s concept of the conversion out of the orgiastic and into Platonic responsibility and Agamben’s revived classical distinction between zoe, bare/animal life or “the simple act of living,” and bios, a humanity-conferring way of life as detailed in Homo Sacer (Agamben 1). The tension in the analogy exists in the fact that where for Patocka and Derrida responsibility and humanity are rooted in individuality, for Agamben as for the Greeks since Aristotle this sort of responsible humanity is rooted ultimately always in the polis, in the political or biopolitical. Though it may seem that humanity for the former consists essentially in escaping community, we can easily negotiate this tension by remembering that the community to be escaped from is specifically the “community of fusion” (Derrida 22) of the cave of the womb of the Earth Mother, and that exiting from this cave is of course not a case of renouncing community altogether but of the categorical preferring of one community over another, be it the incorporating subordination (to bring more of Patocka’s conversional schema into the equation) of cave to polis, which if the cave is a “community of fusion” we may perhaps aptly, albeit broadly, term a community of laws, or the subsequently likewise incorporating subordination (remembering Patocka’s second transition in the European soul) of Greek polis to and into Christian koinonia, which we might aptly term a community of charity (in the sense of caritas) or love. This essay dares, and in part anachronistically, to contend, though the point is a relatively minor one as the analogy is rather more useful than it is essential, that Derrida, Patocka
and Agamben would no more object to the terms of this analogy than would Plato, who of course, despite his formula for humanity as expressed by Patocka being founded upon the individualization of the ego, famously preferred death to escape from prison and life in exile from the *polis* as recorded in the *Crito*. In any case, this sort of professional or technical/crafterly criterion for humanity, as instanced in the unknown carver of the water trough, while of course not a sole one, is a conceit deep-seated in McCarthy’s oeuvre.

In one of McCarthy’s earliest novels, *Child of God*, we see that the conceit is already in place, but to understand its significance we must first establish some narrative context. If in the Culla Holme of *Outer Dark* McCarthy gives to us a figure of conversional crisis, a soul standing at the brink of conversion to Platonic and perhaps to even Christian mystery, and in the man and boy of *The Road* figures who have attained these conversions and who demonstrate continually their ability to resist the temptations or even seeming necessities of apostasy, we have in the Lester Ballard of *Child of God* a figure that succumbs fully to apostasy, though as we will see some critics have questioned his culpability in this, preferring to place responsibility for his actions on other shoulders. In “Unhousing a Child of God,” the third chapter of *No Place for Home: Spatial Contraints and Character Flight in the Novels of Cormac McCarthy*, Jay Ellis writes:

McCarthy’s third novel opens with the procession of an auction to the dwelling of a man [Lester Ballard] who will resist that auction, unsuccessfully. At first, there is no mention of the protagonist. This is not unusual, but it is notable that the book’s first paragraph opens against him: the reader follows the movement of folk
from a community on its way to the dispossession and sale of the main character’s family home. From the beginning, we are implicated in his unhousing, before we even meet him. (69)

Ellis’ description of the opening is of course situationally accurate, though many readers might reasonably question his readiness to place responsibility for Ballard’s continuing apostasy into the bestial and orgiastic on society at large rather than, as Plato, Patocka and Derrida would, upon the individual ego. An unidentified speaker, who is of an age with Ballard and was raised in the same school district, in a chapter equaling less than one full page in length recounts a memory from their youth:

He lost a softball down off the road that rolled down into this field about...it was way off down in a bunch of briers and stuff and he told this boy, this Finney boy, told him to go and get it. Finney boy was some bit younger’n him. Told him, said: Go get that softball. Finney boy wouldn’t do it. Lester walked up to him and said: You better go get that ball. Finney boy said he wasn’t about to do it and Lester told him one more time, said: You don’t get off down in there and get me that ball I’m goin to bust you in the mouth. That Finney boy was scared but he faced up to him, told him he hadn’t thowed it off down in there. Well, we was standin there, the way you will. Ballard could of let it go. He seen the boy wasn’t going to do what he ast him. He just stood there a minute and then he punched him in the face. Blood flew out of the Finney boy’s nose and he set down in the road. Just for a minute and then he got up. Somebody give him a kerchief and he put it to
his nose. It was all swoll up and bleedin. The Finney boy just looked at Lester Ballard and went on up the road. I felt, I felt...I don’t know what it was. We just felt real bad. I never liked Lester Ballard from that day. I never liked him much before that. He never done nothin to me. (17-8)

Ellis lays the responsibility for Ballard’s apostasy or, to use his word, ostracization (79) at the feet of society, specifically for “unhousing” him and for dealing him a physical blow resultant in brain injury that leads to the possibility of his actually committing the horrible crimes that we know Ballard commits. When the caravan to dispossess Ballard of his family home comes at the opening of the novel, it comes with an auctioneer aimed at selling the home to the highest bidder. Ballard approaches the auctioneer, named CB, “holding a rifle” and demanding: “get your goddamn ass off my property. And take these fools with ye” (7). Closing the chapter, CB refuses to budge for Ballard, even to the point of inviting Ballard to shoot him (8), and at the beginning of the next chapter we learn that the situation does indeed resolve in violence, when Ballard is struck from behind by a man named Buster wielding an axe (9). Ellis writes that “as the axe blow removes what senses Lester had from their cranial home, an invisible civic blow, through the function of the auction, removes Lester’s body from its architectural home” (76) and that “this means that Lester Ballard, our child of god, begins his descent into psychopathic violence with a quick blow to the top of his head with the blunt-end [sic] of a full-sized single-bit axe” (74). Clearly then, Ellis fully attributes blame for Lester’s later crimes - the rapes, murders, arson and necrophilia - to a physical injury externally inflicted upon him by an ostracizing Sevier County, and not to an internal, pre-existing metaphysical condition of willful irresponsibility wherein Ballard has chosen not to pay taxes on his family home thereby preventing his
dispossession, and not to extract himself from a bestial, zoetic cave-life and into a responsible bios in a human, political community. And where of course this essay, its argument framed ultimately by a Greek metaphysics, does not deny the psychosomatic link, the possibility of external, physical influence on the soul within such a framework, where the word psyche was used to signify interchangeably and even indiscriminately “brain” and “soul” such that the soul could actually be understood as an organ of the body, Ellis’ argument in this particular conveniently disregards Ballard’s prior indications of violent, bestial and irresponsible behavior including, astonishingly, that indication occurring immediately previous to Ellis’ proposed somatically induced (via axehead) psycopathy: Ballard’s threatening to shoot an innocent man and agent of the state solely for the crime of conducting an auction.

Where it is true that across the range of his ten novels McCarthy concerns himself chiefly with the exploration of souls negotiating the margins of society or, just as frequently, those existing completely outside of it, for a contemporary writer he is almost uniquely apolitical, and his explorations of these liminal or utterly outcast souls and spaces, serve more readily to provide the reader with an opportunity to observe an individual entirely unfettered by societal pressures (physical, ideological, legal, etc.), but by the same token entirely fettered by the absolute responsibility of that equally absolute rational (or not, as the case may be) freedom, than it does to provide the reader with a space, as Ellis would have it, wherein to indict society at large. If it may be permitted this essay to offer one gross generality to its reader, with the rationale that though it lies properly without the scope of this exegetical attempt it might still be justifiably posed for the devoted reader of McCarthy’s own subsequent examination, I submit that where many, and perhaps most, contemporary novelists now being products of the academy as
McCarthy, who rejected it, is not, are at the heart of their endeavors more academic than artist, and more activist than academic, McCarthy’s situation of his fictional souls for the most part outside of any political framework allows him to escape the potential activist-artist’s trap of reducing his characters and his narratives to a form of one-dimensional propaganda and generate instead souls and stories that are, and only are, to invoke Faulkner, perhaps McCarthy’s greatest influence after Melville, in his Nobel laureate’s speech, instances of “the human heart in conflict with itself,” which seems to me only another way of saying the responsible gaining of access to, or the irresponsible rejection of, the individualization of one’s ego, and thereby freedom. In any event, the above cited passage concerning Lester’s actions towards the Finney boy, like the instance where he nearly murdered the auctioneer, prove that Lester’s violent and bestial tendencies were well in place long before Buster, who Ellis on little or no evidence reduces to an agent of the county, struck him in the head with an axe. Concretely, we know only that “Lester Ballard never could hold his head right after that [axe blow]. It must of thowed his neck out someway or another” (9). Ballard’s actions after the blow differ only from those previous in that they are more frequent and fuller expressions of the animality he has espoused since youth; at best we could say, though never more than uncertainly, that the axe blow acted, much like alcohol might, as a disinhibitor, allowing for the fullest expression of Ballard’s inveterate interior desires. The softball is lost in a field of briers, and where Ballard is quick enough to recognize the discomfort and inconvenience of retrieving it himself, he demonstrates absolutely no sympathy or sensitivity to the potential for that same discomfort and inconvenience in the Finney boy.
It is, or is as if, his potential for responsible willingness excepted, Ballard is incapable of perceiving, or conceiving of, the subjective alterity of people who are not himself as subjectivities in every way equivalent to, and as valid as, his own. They appear to him as objects existing to serve his pleasure and, as typified by his demand of the Finney boy to retrieve the softball from the briers, the ratification of his will. And where these inscrutable alterities refuse such ratification, Ballard’s instinct, his governing animus and animality, is to damage or destroy them for their insolence, to break them to his will, to establish dominance after the manner of animals and thereby to gain the same brute’s satisfaction; this is likewise typified by his assault on the Finney boy for the insistence on his own dignity, and, not to belabor the point, in another recollection by what is apparently the same unnamed narrator who told us of Lester and the Finney boy:

I’ll tell ye another thing he done one time. He had this old cow to balk on him, couldn’t get her to do nothin. He pushed and pulled and beat on her till she’d wore him out. He went and borry’d Squire Helton’s tractor and went back over there and thowed a rope over the old cow’s head and took off on the tractor hard as he could go. When it took up the slack it like to of jerked her head plumb off. Broke her neck and killed her where she stood. Ast Floyd if he didn’t. (35)

It’s quite clear that Lester’s getting the tractor and setting off “hard as he could go” had nothing to do with encouraging or even coercing the cow to move; his impotent will had been balked and outing for what it was, even if, alone in a field or a barn with a stubborn animal, only to himself, and in a characteristically frustrated pusilanimy, he resolves to destroy if he might that which
deigned (noting here that the use of this word acknowledges only our recognition of the 
resolution and legitimacy of other wills, not Ballard’s) to deny him. The unnamed narrator tells 
us after the end of the account concerning the Finney boy: “I felt, I felt...I don’t know what it 
was. We just felt real bad. I never liked Lester Ballard from that day. I never liked him much 
before that. He never done nothin to me” (18). Even having never been personally aggrieved by 
Ballard, and presumably never having witnessed any of Ballard’s unkindnesses previous to the 
altercation with the Finney boy, the unnamed narrator, along with the rest of the witnesses that 
day, has never liked Ballard. It is as if he and the rest can somehow sense the state exceptional 
from humanity into which Ballard has placed himself in his unwillingness to assume a rational 
responsibility for himself and for others.

However, giving credit where credit is due, we must also admit that Ellis’ implication of 
even we the readers in Ballard’s dispossession and apostasy, though of course unsupportable, is 
intentionally and effectively provocative; it calls us to a careful consideration of the reasons for 
Ballard’s bestiality and cautions us against a one-dimensional assessment of the nature of his 
monstrosity. For indeed, Ballard is a monster in the novels own terms. At the end of the novel, 
having been apprehended at last for his many crimes, Ballard is institutionalized in a hospital for 
the criminally insane, where he is “found dead in the floor of his cage” (194), bestial and/or 
bestialized at the last, depending, or not depending, upon whether one agrees with Ellis on the 
question of agency in Ballard’s apostasy. His body is shipped to the state medical school in 
Memphis where it is dissected (this dissection being rendered to us in dispassionate, clinical 
detail by McCarthy) and examined: “his entrails...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” (194). This is to say of course, monsters worse than Ballard. The invocation here of the figure of the aruspicer or haruspex, a classical Roman diviner working from the innards of animals, calls forth the word “monster” into the mind of the reader in its original etymological significance, “to show,” coming from the Latin monstrare and remaining with us today in words like “demonstrate” or “remonstration.” Ballard, then, is a monster in the sense that he shows us something; he is something from which we can learn by observation and study. What McCarthy wishes to show us in Ballard and in painful unsparing detail is what might be termed, in light of our recent analogy between principles delineated in The Gift of Death and Homo Sacer, the degradation of the zoetic-Dionysian state, or apostasy from humanity into the bestial and orgiastic.

Ellis’ article’s greatest strength is its highly logical, chiefly in that it is chronological, investigative progression through the narrative of the novel, arguing correctly that its three sections as divided by Roman numerals line up schematically with Ballard’s increasingly bestial series of dwellings:

The first section sees Ballard moved from his father’s house to take up residence in an abandoned house; the second sees this second home catch fire and Ballard go literally underground; the third section sees him arrested out of his cave, escaped back to it, and finally housed in an institution - until his death. Ballard’s identity slips down, from the status of an evicted homeowner, to a homesteading squatter, to a cave dweller. (71)
In the terms of this essay, it is a graduated schema for his apostasy. Ellis also astutely identifies McCarthy’s efforts to bestialize Ballard from his first appearance in the text, where he is “small, unclean, unshaven. He moves in the dry chaff among the dust and slats of sunlight with a constrained truculence” (McCarthy 4) and, in Ellis’ words, he is “standing in a barn...watching the approach of those who will take his home... ‘constrained’ in the domicile of animals” (69). We see the theme of his bestialization reinforced throughout the novel as his crimes worsen, and also after that point where they may not reasonably be said to worsen (where they have grown to include murder and necrophilia) but continue to become more vile only in that they continue to increase in number and frequency, and the reader thereby begins to intuit that Ballard’s remorse, or even his capacity for remorse, has much diminished or even vanished altogether. Bolstering Ellis’ initial identification of Ballard’s bestialization in this regard we may point to a number of additional moments in the text. First, in the house that Ballard squats in after he is dispossessed from his family home by the county “a hornetnest hung from the corner of the porch” and he must sweep out “the dried dung of foxes and possums” and the “bits of brickcolored mud fallen from the board ceiling with their black husks of pupae” (14). McCarthy further tells us that “hunters had stripped most of the boards from the inside walls for firewood and from the bare lintel above the window hung part of the belly and tail of a blacksnake” (16). Insofar as the cabin is the den and the breeding place and the waste-space of animals, it is already for the most part practically indistinguishable from the literal cave that is Ballard’s final home before his capture and institutionalization.

Ellis must also be lauded for his reading of the space of Ballard’s final volitional home, the cave, as an orgiastic space. That his reading is arrived at independently of Derrida, Patocka
and Plato does more than lend credence to the argument of this paper and to its half-anachronistic application of Derrida and Patocka’s schema to McCarthy’s older novels: it attests to the intellectual and cultural deep-rootedness of the orgiastic cave conceit entire, of the equation of the cave with the womb that is at once the grave; these several but similar readings, with their advents independent, attest each to the validity of the other, and to the general thematic importance of McCarthy’s novels. Ellis observes with regard to the cave where Ballard makes his home and keeps for company, sexual and otherwise, the corpses of his victims: “indeed, the cave is more alive than are the people in it, and the narration’s description further suggests a womb-like space that has been perverted to the intestinal, fecal place; it is wet and bloodred like a menstruating uterus (or a womb in miscarriage), yet these are the ‘bowels of the mountain’” (99-100). Nell Sullivan also independently notes that “the caves resemble the generative female body” (76). It is a place at once of birth and decay, of sex and death, of irresponsible, unregenerate and self-extinguishing, rather than self-affirming or self-creating eros. Ellis arrives at this conclusion chiefly from the following passage, though it is not of course elsewhere unsupported:

Here the walls with their softlooking convolutions, slavered over as they were with wet and bloodred mud, had an organic look to them, like the innards of some great beast. Here in the bowels of the mountain Ballard turned his light on ledges or pallets of stone where dead people lay like saints. (McCarthy 135)

This writing need not further trouble itself with establishing the cave-conceit of the orgiastic within one of McCarthy’s earliest novels as being as fully present as it is in his latest, The Road;
for a more complete establishment the interested reader need only look to Ellis’ fine essay, bringing with him perhaps a heightened understanding of the Platonically responsible significance of said conceit from the pages of this one. Rather, it is important only to establish that it is present in *Child of God* as it is in some way in most or perhaps all of his novels, and that Ellis’ mistake is chiefly that of short-sightedness: a failure to connect this thematic from novel to novel. In the phrases “the innards of some great beast” and “the bowels of the mountain,” we hear a sound and a theme that will echo through four decades of McCarthy’s work, and resound almost unchanged in the oneiric opening of *The Road* to which this essay began in attendance; man and boy are “lost among the inward parts of some granitic beast” (4), lodged, like Ballard, deep within the orgiastic daemon’s bowels. Though *The Road* had yet to be published at the time of Ellis’ writing, we may see in it now the natural resolution of the problem of responsible humanity, the answer to the question of how one must conduct himself in order to retain his humanity in a cave which has become the world entire.

But we first turned to *Child of God* in order to establish corpus-wide existence of a separate, though related, conceit: the human’s recognition of the need to recreate the cave as a shelter which shelters him or her not only from the elements, but from the internal fusion, bestiality and voracities of the cave as well, and which, in the fashioning thereof, the human being fashions himself as human also. Like many fine writers, McCarthy feels and expresses an interest in, and affinity for, other craftsmen, from the harnessmaker and the gunsmith of *Blood Meridian*, the trough cutter of *No Country For Old Men*, and the stone masons after which a play is named, among others. To hear craftsmen celebrated in writing of a skill to match their own is one of the many pleasures of reading McCarthy, but perhaps the foremost pleasure in this
particular vein is Ballard’s astonishing trip to the blacksmith to have the head of an axe sharpened. The smith is a consummate craftsman, and narrates to Ballard the important intricacies of his craft as he performs them. The smith immediately diagnoses the axe head as beyond sharpening (“you cain’t just grind a axe and grind it, he said. See how stobby it’s got?”) and in need of reforging, telling Ballard: “you want to wait a minute I’ll show ye how to dress a axe that’ll cut two to one against any piece of shit you can buy down here at the hardware store brand new” (71). The smith’s focus here, as it is in the entirety of the chapter wherein he describes, among other things, the proper hammer-manner of blows for each step of the reforging process and the right temperature at which to shape and reshape the steel and the colors significant thereof, is on craftsmanship or, to temper the link between other (non-literary) forms of craft and McCarthy’s almost lyrical attention to the smith’s process, poesis, which means “making” and is the root of our English word “poetry.” The following passage, narrated for the most part by the smith, is typical of the chapter’s crafterly/poetic character, and taken in conversational conjunction with evidence elsewhere in the chapter, of Ballard’s as well:

We take another heat on her only not so high this time. A high red color will do it. He laid the tongs on the anvil and passed both palms down hard over his apron, his eyes on the fire. Watch her well, he said. Never leave steel in the fire for longer than it takes to heat. Some people will poke around at somethin else and leave the tool they’re heatin to perdition but the proper thing is to fetch her out the minute she shows the color of grace. Now we want a high red. Want a high red. Now she comes. (72)
The passage sets up a dynamic between perdition and grace, where the former is associated with poor craftsmanship or non-craftsmanship, and the latter with consummate, rational craft. And if there is a sexual note to be heard in the smith’s “now she comes” referring to the achievement of the climactic (in that it is terminal) cherry red color at which the knowing maker must remove the steel from the fire in order to give it the hardest temper and most bitter edge, it is of course not the ultimately fruitless sexuality of the bestial cave, but, insofar as it rationally conceived and delivered, something genuinely generative and enduring. For it is possible to read the smithy as a sort of cave space. The introductory line of the paragraph sets the scene thusly, “In the smith’s shop dim and near lightless save for the faint glow at the far end where the forge fire smoldered and the smith in silhouette hulked above some work,” and we are told shortly thereafter that “he [Ballard] crossed the dirt floor to where the smith stood above his anvil” (70). Though the smithy has some of the features of the primal cave, in that it is (near) lightless and earthen-floored, it is also possessed of characteristics that set it, we might say evolutionarily, apart.

The smith is “hulked” above his work at the forge fire. The word “hulked” gives us a sense both of the smith’s size and power, which we might term Olympian, and a sort of uneasy or crippled mobility. The smith is an image of Hephaestus, the classical god of making of almost every kind, and his cave-like, subterranean-seeming smithy at the core of which smolders a generative fire is an image in miniature of the god’s paradigmatic forge built deep within the bowels of a volcano. For Plato, the light of reason enters the cave so that we may follow it out of the orgiastic and into responsibility. One way of reading McCarthy, at least up until The Road, is that man, recognizing the need for the shelter of the cave, but acknowledging also the hard disciplines requisite of the responsible ego insistent upon the making and maintenance of its
ownness, appropriates reason towards the creation of a cave that shelters man not only from external threats and inclemencies, but also from internal (those inside the cave and those inside the soul) voracities and the threat of subsumption into the orgiastic. This second way of sheltering is achieved only through this appropriation, wherein the creative fire of the forge burns in the heart of a smith/maker/writer/human just as it burns at the heart of the volcanic smithy that would be but a cave for its absence. It lives in the human heart as a promise of the sort that Sherriff Bell would like to make “most of all” (309) and which he recognized enduring in the carved stone trough long after the decease of its maker. It endures essentially and recognizably for the Sheriff in every considered chisel mark of the trough and in every brick of Uncle Mac’s chimney, still standing decades after the depredations that were the seeds of his family’s ruin. If in the volcanic forge we see something sacred, or at least godly, just as we see the word “volcano” in the name given to Hephaestus by the Romans, Vulcan, we should not now be surprised to learn that McCarthy sees in craft that which is salvific, or at least in the theoretical terms of this paper, humanity-conferring and sustaining. In a rare and relatively recent interview given to the Wall Street Journal and published online after the release of the film version of *The Road*, McCarthy, asked whether the prospect of aging and death affected his work or made it more urgent, replied: “your future gets shorter and you recognize that. In recent years, I have had no desire to do anything but work and be with [son] John...My perfect day is sitting in a room with some blank paper. That’s heaven. That’s gold and anything else is just a waste of time.”

But while in the smith we see a truly regenerate, in that it is rationally sustained and contextualized through *poesis* or *techne*, way of life (or *bios*), McCarthy makes sure to situate
Ballard on the opposite end of the biotic/crafterly spectrum in the space of the same chapter, such that the perdition of the cave to which we see Ballard ultimately assigned in the novel can be in part understood as the perdition pursuant to his rejection of poetic-crafterly activity of any kind, which in cleaving to he might have forged in the fires of reason an individual ownness, a purposeful way of being and a place in society. Consider the following sequence: “he [the smith] hammered steady and effortless, the bit cooling until the light of it faded to a faintly pulsing blood color. Ballard glanced about the shop. The smith laid the bit on the hardy and with a sledge clipped off the flared edges” (73). The smith has narrated every step of the re-forging process to Ballard, carefully, rationally explaining the proper timing and manner of every move he makes, and of course his expectation is that Ballard is paying the while respectful and interested attention. But Ballard only glances about the shop, entirely disconnected from, and disinterested in, the crafterly process at hand. Rather, what matters to him is only that his will is being ratified. He wants an axehead put into usable condition; the how and the who of the process is immaterial to him. That it is mysteriously, disturbingly an axe he would have put into prime workable condition (he also asks the smith to fit the head with an axe-handle) is also significant in that it is both a symbol and a practical extension of his primitively, unsympathetically tyrannical and appetitive will. The axe is perhaps man’s oldest tool, but the scene currently in question reminds us that it is also perhaps man’s oldest weapon, or second oldest, as an improvement upon the simpler club. Ballard has demonstrated himself in this scene to be entirely uninterested in craft or tools or the crafting of tools, in creative, productive and generative work. Given the context of his crimes both preceding and succeeding the scene in the smithy, the reader can only assume that Ballard’s desire for a well-cutting axe is on McCarthy’s part a dark but instructive irony.
It is perhaps useful to frame the scene momentarily within a Heideggerian phenomenological context. Within such a context, there are two prime modes by which tools or technologies reveal themselves to us; this is to say that there are two ways in which we can experience them. The smith’s experience of the axe as it is being re-forged falls into the category of *vorhandenheit*, or presence-to-hand, meaning that the smith is consciously and clinically aware of the axe as an object that can be scientifically observed and understood; he must be, as he is actively describing its actively changing objectivity (in the sense of object-ness) to Ballard, and directing that change. But even as the axehead reveals itself to the smith as present-to-hand, the very tools with which he directs its changing objectivity reveal themselves to him in a different way, by concealing themselves. This second mode of technological revelation or experience is termed *zuhandenheit*, or readiness-to-hand. Readiness-to-hand means that the tool in question is not actually in question; the smith is not consciously and clinically aware of the hammers, tongs, etc. that he is using to reshape the axehead of which he is consciously and clinically aware. In this mode, experience of the tool is not conscious experience; the smith understands his hammer by *hammering*, by using the tool such that it becomes pre-consciously an extension of his body and will. This is the only sort of technological understanding of which Ballard seems capable, glancing blankly about the shop during the smith’s discursus, and given that the smithy scene demonstrates to us that Ballard hasn’t a single creative/productive/constructive inkling or inclination, and given also what we know about Ballard’s sexually and violently appetite crimes, the reader is left to deduce only that the expression of the will for which the axe shall serve as an extension cannot prove other than destructive. It may seem strange to use the capacity for *zuhandenheit*-only experience of
technology as an argument for the sub-humanity of Lester Ballard, as this is the mode of experience that Heideggerian phenomenology champions as the chief mode of experience for human beings. However, it is chief for Heidegger in that it is the primal, natural mode of experience. In other words, it is a pre-rational mode of experience where *vorhandenheit*, objectively and diagnostically detached as consideration, takes as its prerequisite in the human soul the advent of reason. This essay, of course, is committed to a definition of humanity on what are largely Platonic terms, and where critics may differ on the question of Ballard’s agency in his bestialization and embrace of the cave, we have established at least that Ballard refused the light of reason when offered, or that it never shone on him at all.

There is one more point to be made from this scene and in this vein of thinking, and is worth pointing out insofar as it establishes and affirms a pattern in McCarthy’s presentation of persons who have not yet (if ever) affirmed, or are on the cusp of affirming, their rational and responsible humanity. The smith tells Ballard as he finishes the axehead, “shape ye fire for the job always,” still naively assuming Ballard’s interest in the poetic-crafterly process. Ballard replies only, “Is that it?” such that the reader gets the strong sense that his disinterest has transmuted into outright impatience for the task to be finished and his will ratified. The smith in turn says: “That’s it. We’ll just fit ye a handle now and sharpen her and you’ll be on your way.” We are told, “Ballard nodded,” constituting his first engagement of any kind in the activity; he seems pleased only that he will soon be on his way to setting the axe towards the expression of his destructive will (74). Then the chapter concludes with a few lines of dialogue that both astonish and echo eerily, but instructively, of an exchange from an earlier novel which has been already subject to the scrutiny of this essay. The exchange follows thusly:
It’s like a lot of things, said the smith. Do the least part of it wrong and ye’d just as well to do it all wrong. He was sorting through handles standing in a barrel.

Reckon you could do it now from watchin’ he said.

Do what, said Ballard. (74)

It is fitting that the chapter ends here, with no reply from the smith, for we can only imagine that, like the reader, he is stunned to silence. Each of the chapter’s pages is devoted almost entirely to the description of the crafting process in the most intricate and intimate detail; to have no inkling of the smith’s “it” is practically not to have been present at all, and yet the intimacy of the scene must be so much greater for Ballard, who is both within the scene and the direct addressee of most of its narration, than for the reader, who is held at the voyeur’s remove of the page. In the first chapter of this essay, attention was given to the scene early in *Outer Dark* where Rinthy delivers the child of their incest into Culla’s arms such that he is gore-stained to the elbows. Despite this, when Rinthy asks him, “what is it,” ostensibly inquiring after the sex of the child, Culla can only reply, “What?” (14). We arrived at the conclusion that the seeming impossibility of his ignorance betrayed his utter absorption/fusion into the cave of the orgiastic as an indicator of his inability to recognize a subjective alterity external to his own. Ballard’s equally astonishing “Do what?” operates according to the same principles, betraying with an impossible question a hole in his humanity. In Ballard’s instance, this lacuna consists negatively of what would be filled in a responsible soul by the awareness of and facility for *techne*, for creative and genuinely generative, rather than destructive, work, and by extension, perhaps, meaningful work in society, or *bios*. With their startling questions, Culla and Ballard each betray a blindness to an entire, and essential, facet of their personhood. And though with each question a different facet
of the soul is shown to us in privation, their blindnesses are each, ultimately, the blindness of the lightlessness of the irrational and orgiastic cave.

Having established across McCarthy’s novels the decades-long existence of the thematics and the problem of the cave, we are ready now to look to his solution. One of the first genuine hints of this solution occurs in the very last pages of No Country For Old Men. Sherriff Bell concludes his meditations, and the novel, by recollecting two dreams he has had about his father. The first dream seems of little consequence: “I don’t remember the first one all that well but it was about meetin him in town somewheres and he give me some money and I think I lost it” (309). Its inclusion in Bell’s meditation perhaps serves only to undercut or destabilize to some degree the vatic power and solidity of the second; without the inclusion of this throwaway dream commenting paratactically upon the value of the second, the hopefulness of the second dream might seem too easy, less genuine or even trite. Sheriff Bell tells us:

But the second one it was like we was both back in older times and I was on horseback goin through the mountains of a night. Goin through this pass in the mountains. It was cold and there was snow on the ground and he rode past me and kept on goin. Never said nothin. He just rode on past and he had this blanket wrapped around him and he had his head down and when he rode past I seen he was carryin fire in a horn the way people used to do and I could see the horn from the light inside of it. About the color of the moon. And in the dream I knew that he was goin on ahead and that he was fixin to make a fire somewhere out there in
all that dark and all that cold and I knew that whenever I got there he would be there. And then I woke up. (309)

Bell and his father are not in a cave in the literal sense, but their situation in the dream
nevertheless contains many of the essential elements of the cave. They are “goin through the
mountains;” though it is literally only a pass in the mountains, with the stone walls rearing up
around them they can be as easily understood to be, like Ballard, “here in the bowels of the
mountain” (135) or, like the man and boy of *The Road*, “pilgrims in a fable swallowed up and
lost among the inward parts of some granitic beast” (4). They are in a cold, lightless, earthen and
inimical place. It is a place not unlike, in terms of the atmosphere of both biological and spiritual
unsustainability and barrenness it suggests to the reader, the degenerate/unregenerate waking
world which Sheriff Bell inhabits, or the oneiric cave in which the father and son of *The Road*
are swallowed up. But like that latter space too, the otherwise lightless, warmthless hell of the
mountain pass *is* illuminated: not immanently or in and of itself, but by the responsible will of its
inhabitants.

Bell’s father carrying fire in a horn is a sort of literary prototype or precursor for what
could be understood as the more highly evolved image of the oneiric daemon fleeing in that early
dream-cave of *The Road* from the light of the man and the boy which, as established in the first
pages of this chapter, is described only as “*their light* [emphasis added] playing over the wet
flowstone walls.” (4) This image at the beginning of *The Road* can be said to be more highly
evolved than the similar image of Bell’s father at the end of *No Country For Old Men* in that the
effect accomplished in the latter scene is accomplished by virtue of a physical prop, where in the
former the light of reason seems simply to emanate from man and boy. Bell’s father has a blanket wrapped around him, and so we are to presume that the fire in the horn is carried not on high with arm extended after the manner of an Olympian torch-bearer, as he hasn’t the requisite freedom of arm, but rather held against his chest within the blankets and near to the core of his being, such that he is illuminated by a light that seems to be, and certainly symbolizes, a radiant expression of his internal being. There is an enduring, though certainly beset and embattled, hopefulness in the image of this rider carrying fire through the snowy mountain passes of what could be eternal oneiric night, and perhaps it is worth pointing out, even if as only ever so slightly more than a casual segue to the horseman-filled pages of *Blood Meridian* to which we must briefly look in order to fully unpack the dream-scene currently in question, that the fact that Bell’s father is on horseback, that he rides past his son “and kept on goin” lends a sort of knightly chivalry and purpose to the image. He is an image of the knight-errant: wandering unsure of his quest or destination, but wandering such that he is yet held in responsibility to an honorable code. Like Bell’s father, there is something of the image of the knight-errant in the man and boy of *The Road*, who again “wandered...like pilgrims in a fable swallowed up and lost among the inward parts of some granitic beast” (4) as they travel along the titular road toward they know not what, knowing only that to stay where they are is to die, and that they must carry the hope-light of reason and responsibility within them as the sort of promise that Sheriff Bell recognized in the carver of the stone trough and would himself like to make most of all.

Harold Bloom is important in McCarthy scholarship not as a major critic but as a major champion of his work, using his celebrity and large readership to promote his enthusiasm for the author’s work, which was almost entirely unknown, though McCarthy had already been writing
for decades, until the early 90’s and the publication of *All The Pretty Horses*. Nevertheless, he does occasionally offer valuable, though incompletely explored, insight into McCarthy’s work. Perhaps the most curious and exegetically-resistant passage in all of McCarthy’s ten novels is the epilogue to *Blood Meridian*. Bloom makes an intuitive, rather than clinically considered, observation about this mysterious epilogue, but it is nevertheless instructive, and that it is intuitively arrived at speaks perhaps only to its by-and-large validity. First let us turn to Bloom also for a distillation, if such a thing is possible, of the Judge’s complex character which is essential to understanding his insight into the epilogue: “we first meet the Judge on page 6: an enormous man, bald as a stone, no trace of a beard, and eyes without either brows or lashes. A seven-foot-tall albino almost seems to have come from some other world” (257). A slightly poetically-indulgent reading of the Judge’s complexion and his origin, but one admitting readily to this license and offering itself only in practical and expedient service to the structural and theoretical tenets of this essay, might maintain that the other world of his origin is the primal cave and that his deathly pallor, persistent even after years spent under the furnace-fire sun of the Texas-Mexico border, is the albinism incidental to almost all cave-dwelling creatures in the lightless, hopeless, irresponsible world the Judge espouses. Bloom further characterizes the judge as a “war-god” (259) who “never sleeps, dances and fiddles with extraordinary art and energy, rapes and murders little children of both sexes, and who says that he will never die. By the book’s close, I have come to believe that the judge is immortal” (257).

It is true that the Judge is a man of unusual artistry and rhetorical powers, and it would seem true that these abilities are requisite of a rational capacity that would not serve to align the Judge with the cave of the womb of the Earth Mother. However, he is rather the grand paradigm
of the apostate reason which humanity has perverted and poured back into its primal urges and origins. As the Judge himself states: “the way of the world is to bloom and to flower and die but in the affairs of men there is no waning and the noon of his expression signals the onset of night. His spirit is exhausted at the peak of his achievement. His meridian is at once his darkening and the evening of his day” (153). The Judge is the figure of such a meridian, where man’s apogee is at once his perigee, man’s zenith his nadir. The judge, in all his skill and erudition, in all his criminality and animal appetitiveness, is at once the best of humanity and its worst, radically and paradoxically excepted from each category back into the other. In this way is the Judge a symbol for reason apostate. His artful energies are all perverted into stoking the orgiastic fervor which attends him always, and his grandiloquent disquisitions, when parsed, are found rather to be casuistries than genuinely rational, philosophical truths. At the end of the novel, but of course before the epilogue, the Kid (the novel’s anonymous protagonist) encounters the judge almost thirty years after the dissolution/extermination of the Glanton gang in which they rode and raped, ravaged and rapined together and of which they are the last surviving members. They share a tense drink together and conversation which Bloom characterizes thusly: “knowing he is no match for the Judge, the kid nevertheless defies Holden, with laconic replies playing against the Judge’s rolling grandiloquence...to have known Judge Holden, to have seen him in full operation, and to tell him that he is nothing, is heroic” (262).

This essay will not take the space to establish the kid as a champion of responsibility emerging out of the orgiastic cave and gradually assuming his humanity through responsible action in an enactment of the historical series of conversions within the European soul by cataloguing each and every gradation of that process; such and endeavor would constitute an
essay in itself. Rather, for economy’s sake we will take what is occasionally dubious recourse to trusting Bloom when he tells us that “McCarthy subtly shows us the long, slow development of the Kid from another mindless [read “irrational!”] scalper of Indians to the courageous confronter of the Judge in their final debate in a saloon. But though the Kid’s moral maturation is heartening, his personality remains largely a cipher, as anonymous as his lack of a name” (257).

We will also point to that very anonymity and align it with the previously discussed anonymity of Culla and Rinthy’s chap born of the fusion of incest, the anonymity of the dead in the death-orgy of the desert in No Country For Old Men or the (un-discussed) anonymity of Ballard’s dead girlfriends. And we will also instead point briefly to the Kid’s introduction in the novel, where the father from whom he elopes “lies in drink” in true Dionysian fashion, and where his “mother dead these fourteen years did incubate in her own bosom the creature who would carry her off. The father never speaks her name, the child does not know it” (3).

In the mother who died giving birth to him we have the characteristic equation of sex, birth and death in the cave of the womb that is at once the grave. We see the cave as the Kid’s cradle also in the fact of his mother’s anonymity, and in the fact that “he can neither read nor write and in him broods already a taste for mindless violence” (3); mindlessness is only another word for irrationality and, coupled with his appetite for violence, for irresponsibility too. The kid falls in men who “fight with fists, with feet, with bottles or knives. All races, all breeds. Men whose speech sounds like the grunting of apes” (4). This is to say, he falls in with men who, like himself, are not quite men but rather bestialized by their participation in these violent orgies. That they use “bottles,” and what other sort of bottles could they be but the beer or liquor bottles with which they have first intoxicated themselves, ties perfectly together the idea of the orgiastic
cave as a place not only of the ultimate fusion in death through sex and the obliteration of the wine-rite, but through orgies of violence also. But the Kid, from the third line of his introduction and of the novel itself, “stokes the scullery fire,” and only a few lines later we see that “the boy crouches by the fire” (3). He seems from his first moments in the text to be associated with fire, and perhaps he too, like Sheriff Bell’s father and the father and son of The Road, could be said to be carrying the fire. Perhaps this is also why “at fourteen he runs away” (3) from the lightless cave of his home life, and “will not see again the freezing kitchenhouse in the predawn dark” (3-4). Though as Bloom has pointed out the Kid’s “moral maturation,” understood in the terms of this essay as the process of conversion towards reason and responsibility, is gradual, there seems to be from his beginnings enkindled in him the sparks thereof, and unlike Ballard, and perhaps like Culla in his crises, he does not extinguish them but rather tends to them such that by novel’s end he has the moral fortitude to stand up to the Judge though well he knows, as the Judge has told him, that “this night thy soul may be required of thee” (327), that the price will be his life.

Trusting at first to Bloom’s characterization of the Judge for economy’s sake, we may now see that characterization by-and-large ratified in a reading of the final scene of the novel, where the Kid encounters and confronts the Judge in an unnamed bar. The ratification of this estimation of the Judge’s character is achieved here mainly by an estimation of the space wherein he is found, that is to say, by reading the bar as a cave space. The first clue of the Judge’s presence in the bar comes even as the Kid rides into town: “fiddle-music issued into the solitary mud street and lean dogs crossed before them from shadow to shadow” (324). The devil has long been imagined as a fiddle-player in American folklore, sometimes appearing to hold contests of musical virtuosity with mortal fiddlers where their soul is wagered foolishly against
some earthly stakes. We also have in this image the lightlessness of shadow, and the importance of this detail is reinforced as the Kid enters the bar: “he looked back a last time at the street and at the random windowlights let into the darkness and at the last pale light in the west and the low dark hills around. Then he pushed open the door and entered” (324). As light leaves the Kid and nearly, save for the epilogue, the novel itself, we have the sense of the Kid’s being swallowed by the earth as the “low dark hills” rise up around him and he pushes open the door to the bar.

The first images we have of the bar upon the Kid’s entry are instructive: “a dimly seething rabble had coagulated within. As if the raw board structure erected for their containment occupied some ultimate sink into which they had gravitated from off the surrounding flatlands” (324). This “ultimate sink” is the very image of the primal cave. We know by the word “dimly” that there is little light, and the individuals within have lost their individuality, having “coagulated” into one orgiastic mass, one mindless, writhing, hungering yeast. The word “rabble” recalls within McCarthy’s own corpus the “clamorous rabble under a black sun” (5), discussed in the first chapter of this essay, out of which Culla is shaken from dark to waking dark and the collective flesh that is he, Rinthy and the nameless weight in her belly bred of incest. Solidifying the image of the bar as cave, the reader encounters “a bear in a crinoline” that “twirled strangely upon a board stage” (324). By the end of the scene the bar has devolved into a drunken dance, and that there is an animal dancing in the midst of it all confuses, or fuses, man with animal, bestializing man, as does the detail that the bear is wearing a human garment in the form of a “crinoline” or petticoat; the bar has literally become the den of animals.
The night devolves into a drunken, nightmarish dance where the collective bestial rabble are “dancing, the board floors slamming under the[ir] jackboots” (335) with “whole squadrons of whores...working the floor” (332). And the Judge presides over the Bacchanalia:

Tower over them all is the judge and he is naked dancing, his small feet lively and quick and now in doubletime and bowing to the ladies, huge and pale and hairless, like an enormous infant. He never sleeps, he says. He says he’ll never die. He bows to the fiddlers and sashays backwards and throws back his head and laughs deep in his throat and he is a great favorite, the judge. He wafts his hat and the lunar dome of his skull passes palely under the lamps and and he swings about and takes possession of one of the fiddles and he pirouettes and makes a pass, two passes, dancing and fiddling at once. His feet are light and nimble. He never sleeps. He says that he will never die. He dances in light and in shadow and he is a great favorite. He never sleeps, the judge. He is dancing, dancing. He says that he will never die. (335)

The Judge is a grand figure of the orgiastic daemon, dancing and drinking (330) and driving the Bacchanal to ever more frenzied heights. But where the facts of this terminal scene, haunting though it is to the reader, make for a seemingly pleasant pastime to those whom it (perhaps very wilfully) involves in the fullest sense of the word, it is paragraphs earlier betrayed, in microcosmic exemplar, as a seduction with an underlying ugliness and lethality. Within this grand Bacchanal McCarthy has hidden a smaller, uglier, more honest, more sober and sobering image of the cave of the womb of the Earth Mother. After their verbal confrontation, the Kid
leaves the Judge’s company and some hours later makes his way to the jakes to relieve himself:

“He opened the rough board door of the jakes and stepped in. The Judge was seated upon the closet. He was naked and he rose up smiling and gathered him in his arms against his immense and terrible flesh and shot the wooden barlatch home behind him” (333). The Judge, for all his enormous strength, is also grossly fat, and so McCarthy has left us with the image of the Kid being gathered perversely into the un-nurturing, milk-white but milkless bosom of the Judge as he is gathered also into death. This is truly the cave of the womb that is at once the grave. That it is a jakes, or outhouse, also aligns it with Ellis’ previously alluded to observation identifying Ballard’s cave in *Child of God* as a “womb-like space that has been perverted to the intestinal, fecal place” (100).

But that he has succeeded in gathering the Kid into death does not equate to a moral or philosophical victory for the Judge. The Kid’s heroic confrontation of the Judge is heroic in that it is a rejection of a philosophy of bondage to death and determined despair. For example, the Judge tells the Kid, enlisting the dancing bear (and the other, not so dissimilar creatures in the hall) as a metaphor for the violent, appetitive and doomed contest of life: “There is room on the stage for one beast and one alone. All others are destined for a night that is eternal and without name. One by one they will step down into the darkness before the footlamps.” In conjunction with the immediately earlier line, “and yet there will be one there always who is a true dancer and can you guess who that might be?”, we come to understand that that the Judge is speaking of himself, as the incarnation of the orgiastic and nihilistic universal will which is for him the driving and determining force of reality. But in response to this dark self-aggrandizement the Kid says heroically, “You aint nothin,” and the Judge in turn replies, “You speak truer than you
know” (331). The first-level, seductive reading of the Judge’s retort is that the Kid has spoken an unwitting irony where “you aint nothin,” grammatically converted out of its double negativity, in actuality signifies not “you aren’t anything” but “you are something,” and as the Judge sees it, the only something of lasting consequence. This is how the Judge reads the Kid’s reply, but there is a second, deeper irony of which even the Judge is unaware. It is possible to read the Kid’s “you aint nothin” not, as the Judge does, as a statement negating the validity of all entities except his own, but as a statement that affirms that validity, or at least potential for validity, in all persons, including even that vestige of, and/or potential for, humanity which must reside somewhere still within the daemoniac Judge. The Judge is seven feet tall and possessed of Herculean strength; as such he constitutes a physical obstacle which even the Kid in all his competencies cannot hope to overcome. But the Kid knows this, just as he knows that to defy the Judge in parley may mean his death. However, the alternative to defiance would mean the renunciation of his individuality and autonomy, their subsumption into the Judge’s spelaean dance. When the two first meet in the bar the Judge tells the Kid, “I recognized you when I first saw you and yet you were a disappointment to me. Then and now. Even so at the last I find you here with me,” but the Kid replies, in rejection of the Judge and everything he signifies and stands for, “I aint with you” (328). By insisting upon his own dignity and the distinct dignity of others, by taking responsibility for these dignities even in the face of death, the Kid has achieved a moral and philosophical freedom from the orgiastic cave; he has learned to give himself death by watching out for death, and taking care for life.
Now we may attend to Bloom’s observation about the mysterious epilogue of *Blood Meridian*, and generate from it insights into the novels-wide conceit of “carrying the fire” and the overarching project of *The Road*. The epilogue is as follows:

In the dawn there is a man progressing over the plain by means of holes which he is making in the ground. He uses an implement with two handles and he chucks it into the hole and he enkindles the stone in the hole with his steel hole by hole striking the fire out of the rock which God has put there. On the plain behind him are the wanderers in search of bones and those who do not search and they move haltingly in the light like mechanisms whose movements are monitored with escapement and pallet so that they appear restrained by a prudence or reflectiveness which has no inner reality and they cross in their progress one by one that track of holes that runs to the rim of the visible ground and which seems less the pursuit of some continuance than the verification of a principle, a validation of sequence and causality as if each round and perfect hole owed its existence to the one before it there on that prairie upon which are the bones and the gatherers of bones and those who do not gather. He strikes fire in the hole and draws out his steel. Then they all move on again. (337)

Bloom’s commentary on the epilogue is brief and could even be said to have been given in passing, but for that it constitutes the final note of the essay. Nevertheless, it is remarkably, we should not say unwittingly but rather intuitively, insightful:
The subtitle of *Blood Meridian* is *The Evening Redness in the West*, which belongs to the Judge, last survivor of the Glanton gang. Perhaps all that the reader can surmise with some certainty is that the man striking fire in the rock at dawn is an opposing figure in regard to the evening redness in the West. The Judge never sleeps, and perhaps will never die, but a new Prometheus may be rising to go up against him. (262-3)

Prometheus is the perfect figure to introduce to our discussion of McCarthy’s ultimate hopefulness and to let stand for the model of responsible humanity as further typified in the man and boy of *The Road*, Sheriff Bell’s dreamed of father, and the fire-striker of *Blood Meridian*’s epilogue. Chief among these reasons is that Prometheus, in classical mythology, was the Titan who stole fire from the jealous gods and gave it to humanity; he is the prototypical carrier of the fire in hope against the darkness, and indeed, his name signifies etymologically a “looking forward,” as in hope. His brother’s, Epimetheus in a minor aside, signifies the opposite, a “looking backward,” as in despair. The fire-striker, in quintessentially Promethean fashion, is “progressing” over the plains, bearing his flame with him. The holes he makes in the ground are perhaps in preparation for the laying of a railroad, itself synonymous in that time with “progress” and a symbol for the triumph of rational arts; the fire-striker can in this way be read as a salvific figure, bringing the light of reason and responsibility to the Judge’s western hell. In the fire-striker’s deliberate and technically-facilitated progress across the plain we may detect traces both of Bell’s steadfastly questing father and Ballard’s learned smith shaping material reality toward order and human good by fire. In this light, Prometheus is also the perfect figure through which to understand McCarthy’s ultimate hopefulness in that, according to some legends, it was he also
who shaped the first humans from clay and taught to us our rational arts. In Prometheus we have the image of humanity making itself as humanity, of creating creatures who, in creating according to the rational principles of their own creation, actively create themselves as human. But what is most important here, when applied to a discussion of The Road, which is set in a world so nearly complete in its unworlding that it has set bare-life survival at a premium, thereby wrenching from humanity traditional crafterly venues for self-definition and affirmation, is the hopeful constancy and responsibility of the fire-bearer.

The waking world of The Road is little different from the spelaean dream-world from which the man awakens in the novel’s opening pages. Its inhabitants are almost to the man animated by the figure of the daemon he encounters in the bowels of the earth. The remaining persons, we cannot say the remainder of humanity, for the most part sustain their animal, bare-life existence by surrendering themselves into what Derrida and Patocka would call communities of fusion (22). In The Road these communities take the form of “communes” (255) and “bloodcults,” bands of marauding cannibals, who the father thinks “must have all consumed one another” (16) in the beginning of the novel, and true to their nature in some part they have, but he soon discovers that, like the boy and himself, they are only moving farther south. The man and boy encounter several of these bloodcults on their journey, but one instance is particularly instructive. They awake one morning in the forest at the edge of the road to find a cannibal army marching along the way they themselves had come the day before and carrying spears, lances and pipes “threaded through with lengths of chain fitted at their ends with every manner of bludgeon” (91). Almost an entire paragraph is devoted here to the detailed description of their cruel and ragged arms such that the overwhelming sense conveyed to the reader is not of any
uniform and professional militarism where hostility is regulated, at least nominally, by a rational
code of honorable conduct, but one of an overweening, unconditional and unlimited appetite for
violence entirely inconsiderate of the price of its exaction upon others and, indeed, themselves.

The rest of the description of the bloodcult is as follows:

The boy lay with his face in his arms, terrified. They passed two hundred feet away, the ground shuddering lightly. Tramping. Behind them came wagons drawn by slaves in harness and piled with goods of war and after that the women, perhaps a dozen in number, some of them pregnant, and lastly a supplementary consort of catamites illclothed against the cold and fitted in dogcollars and yoked each to each. All passed on. They lay listening. (92)

The images of fusion and bondage are readily apparent. In a world where men have turned to eating other men for their regular sustenance, all animals have necessarily long been exhausted, and so these marauders have sought to make their fellows in the animals’ image. People have here become beasts of burden or sexual utility, drawing the supply wagons and chained after the fashion of dogs. But what they have failed to recognize, or have recognized and accepted and in that accepting surrendered their humanity, is the reflexivity of bondage as described in the Hegelian master-slave dialectic. In binding others against their will, they themselves become bound to the continued insurance of that bondage against escape, against insolence and rebellion; in laying chains on another they snare most inescapably themselves not only in the yoke of physical watchfulness against runaways and uprisings, but in the moral harness that perforce obliges us against the attainment of true freedom, trammled only by the reasoned responsibility
for self and other, upon which it is paradoxically but genuinely dependent, in the vigil against
death. The man and boy remain largely by themselves throughout the novel precisely because
persons such as these, who are the very image of the orgiastic, are unfortunately also perfectly
representative of the average person they might expect to encounter in this degraded world.

On their pilgrimage toward they know not what, knowing only that they continue in hope,
they encounter a number of waking-world microcosmic instantiations of the cave, such that the
frequency and seeming ineluctability of these instantiations alone, especially when measured
against the infrequency and seeming unattainability of anything better, would conspire to make a
cave of the world entire, even if it were not already explicitly an “ashen scabland” (16) and a
place of “eternal blackness” (96) where even:

the names of things [are] slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The
names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true.
More fragile than he would have thought...the sacred idiom shorn of its referents
and so of its reality...in time to wink out forever. (88-9)

Each instantiation highlights a different brutal reality of the cave. The first instantiation of the
cave after the initial oneiric one takes the form of a tractor trailer which had years before slid out
of control and wedged itself perilously across a bridge spanning a river gorge. The man decides
that he must investigate the cargo container, a night-dark enclosure into which he resolves to
descend, against the possibility that there is food or some other necessaries within. He accesses
the container by climbing onto the roof and peering through an open skylight through which he
has let fall the burning pages of a magazine for illumination:
The small fire burning in the floor seemed a long way down. He shielded the glare of it with his hand and when he did he could see almost to the rear of the box. Human bodies. Sprawled in every attitude. Dried and shrunken in their rotted clothes. The small wad of burning paper drew down to a wisp of flame and then died out leaving a faint pattern for just a moment in the incandescence like the shape of a flower, a molten rose. Then all was dark again. (47)

The reality of the cave revealed to us here is a simple one: it is, in the end, only a grave. The bodies within are sprawled, un-mourned and unremembered, utterly without dignity or ceremony. They are shrinking, disappearing as they rot, returning, to borrow a phrase from Blood Meridian, to “dust and nothingness” (333). The cave of the womb of the earth mother is necessarily, as a womb, a generative space, but one that is ultimately, in and of itself, unregenerate. The image of the brief-lived fire-flower is a perfect representation of this fact. For a single instant, something does live in the cave, but the fire-flower’s fleeting, consumptive moment reminds us that what the cave engenders it gathers quickly back into ashen oblivion.

The second instantiation of the cave reinforces the reality revealed in the first as the consequence of the reality of mindless, irresponsible appetite. Searching, ever searching for food that the eating of which will not constitute a renunciation of their humanity, the man and boy enter what they hope is an abandoned house and pry open a floor hatch leading to an unlit, decidedly cave-like, basement with “stone wall[s]” and a “clay floor.” As they descend into the cellar holding a lighter out into the darkness, they discover “huddled against the back wall...naked people, male and female, all trying to hide, shielding their faces with their hands. On
the mattress lay a man with his legs gone to the hip and the stumps of them blackened and burnt” (110). They have wandered into a cannibal’s larder, where people, not bestial persons, are being held live so that their meat does not spoil. The chief aim of the passage is the impression of the horror of irresponsibility upon the reader. The man with his legs gone to the hip is being eaten alive a piece at a time so that the cannibals might make the most meals of him, his stumps cauterized against exsanguination. Though the people trapped in the cellar are naked and being treated as slaughterhouse stock, the master-slave reflexivity still holds sway in the passage, such that in their mannered imprecations, “help us...please...please” (111), we hear only more poignantly their unrelinquished humanity, and such that when father and son ascend the stair and see “coming across the field toward the house...four bearded men and two women” we, like the father, go “cold all over” (111), recognizing in their approach the onset not of men but monsters, the hunger-purposed return of Polyphemus to his cave.

After their escape from this lion’s den they sit at the side of the road eating their last apples, and the father can tell that something is troubling the boy. Probed, the boy opens into conversation:

We wouldn’t ever eat anybody, would we?
No. Of course not.
Even if we were starving?
We’re starving now.
You said we weren’t.
I said we weren’t dying. I didn’t say we weren’t starving.
But we wouldn't.

No. We wouldn't.

No matter what.

No. No matter what.

Because we’re the good guys.

Yes.

And we’re carrying the fire.

And we’re carrying the fire. Yes.

Okay. (128-9)

This conversation encapsulates the philosophy of responsibility laid out in *The Gift of Death* as “nothing other than this vigil over death that watches out for death and watches over death...such a caring for death, an awakening that keeps vigil over death, a conscience that looks death in the face, is another name for freedom” (17). Earlier in the novel, the man saves the boy from a cannibal who has seized him and put a knife to his throat by shooting him through the head with one of their two remaining bullets. The next morning the man reflects silently on the fact that this was the first man he had spoken to for a year or more: “My brother at last. The reptilian calculations in those cold and shifting eyes. The gray and rotting teeth. Claggy with human flesh. Who has made of the world a lie every word” (75). Cannibalism is perhaps the ultimate surrender of the self into the appetitive fusion of the cave; we see even in this brief recollection of the cannibal the utter renunciation of his humanity and assumption of the character of the cave. Here there is not human reason, but rather “reptilian calculation.” His eyes are cold, reflecting his complete lack of empathy; he does not balk to take the life of a child. His teeth are
rotting; by synecdoche we see the decomposition of the man entire, body and soul, back in to bowels of the cave.

Later in the novel, father and son espy on the road ahead of them “three men and a woman. The woman walked with a waddling gait and she approached he could see that she was pregnant” (195). Later, they come upon their abandoned campfire. The three men and the woman had “taken everything with them except whatever black thing was skewered over the coals” (198). The father is investigating the surroundings when the boy, suddenly distraught, buries his face against the man’s body: “what the boy had seen was a charred human infant headless and gutted and blackening on the spit” (198). Here we have again the ephemeral fire-flower’s image of the cave, what Ellis, speaking about Ballard’s cave, calls the “womb-grave” (103), and Cobain the “umbilical noose.” Given the unequal gender distribution of the party, three men and one woman, the reader is left to surmise, left also in no doubt by the campfire spit that there is no transgression to which they would not commit themselves, that the woman is made use of by all three men, that the child’s paternity is unknown and therefore that the child itself is of uncertain, collective, and unknowable identity, that the infanticides are not really three men and one woman but one writhing orgiastic yeast tending toward immemorial oblivion through self-consumption. Father and son have peered more than once into the cannibalistic bowels of the cave, and have recognized the non-humanity of its denizens. Against subsumption into that non-humanity they knowingly set any price, even their lives: “no matter what” (128). In this manner that take care for death by watching out for it; by taking care for the way they live they have learned to give themselves death if need be. In the words of the child, they are “the good guys” (129). They are responsible in that, for them, the Good is more than simply a
“transcendental objective;” it is instead characterized by “the relation to the other, a response to the other; an experience of personal goodness, and a movement of intention” (Derrida 51). Unlike the cannibals of this cave-world, they still rationally resolve to perceive the other as other, relating to their individual dignity, suffering and potential for suffering through an understanding of their own. “Carrying the fire” is an inherently Promethean phrase; father and son, though they are very literally starving, continue to look and move forward in hope, carrying the fire of the light of the sun of the Good with them for the sustenance of their souls and the succor of others.

One might expect the boy to take care for the life of the old man they pass traveling down the road bent over his cane, and to argue with his father about giving the old man more of their precious food stock when they parted ways (173). However, the boy’s charity extends even to those who would do him harm. A thief absconds with their cart of food and supplies, and when they catch him, the father does not kill him but takes his clothes and shoes so that he can no longer pose a threat to them. The father’s actions are motivated out of the desire to protect the boy, and in no way is the thief undeserving; they would have quickly perished of inanition or exposure without their cart of necessaries. The father has a highly principled, but narrower view of responsibility than does the boy. After he saves the boy from the claggy-toothed cannibal he tells him: “my job is to take care of you. I was appointed to that by God. I will kill anyone who touches you. Do you understand?” (77). The man knows “only that the child was his warrant...if he is not the word of God God never spoke” (5). But as they leave the thief “the boy [is] crying and looking back at the nude and slatlike creature standing there in the road shivering and hugging himself,” and he “kept looking back and when he [the boy] could no longer see him he
stopped and then he just sat down in the road sobbing” (258). He persuades his father to go back and give the man his clothing. Indeed, he convinces him of the rightness of doing that. The boy, out of his profound capacity for the “relation to the other” (Derrida 51) tells his father: “he was just hungry, Papa. He’s going to die...He’s so scared, Papa” (McCarthy 259). The father replies that he is scared too, for him and for the boy, and that the boy is “not the one who has to worry about everything.” The boy looks up at his father and says,“Yes I am...I am the one” (259): such is the gravity and far-reachingness of his vigil over the life and death of others, and so ultimately over their own. The boy is an icon of responsibility.

Where in the man, and in the boy most of all, we have paradigmatic images of the taking up of responsibility through relation to the other, McCarthy renders for us also its categorical renunciation in the figure of the man’s wife, the boy’s mother. The reader is given a scene wherein she tells her husband that she is going to commit suicide. The scene’s first line instructively marks their divide: “We’re survivors he told her across the flame of the lamp” (55). They are literally separated by the Promethean flame of hope. She does not carry the fire. She tells him, “what in God’s name are you talking about? We’re not survivors. We’re the walking dead in a horror film;” hers is an Epimethean, rather than Promethean world-view. She looks not forward in hope but backward in despair. Her husband, not only on his behalf but on hers and on behalf of their young son tells her, “I’m begging you.” She tells him only, “I dont care. I dont care if you cry. It doesnt mean anything to me” (55). Her husband, her child, mean nothing to her, do not move her. She has lost her capacity for the relation to the other and response to the other and surrendered herself to the cave. She offers other evidences when he tells her that he would not leave her as she intends to leave him: “I dont care. It’s meaningless. You can think of
me as a faithless slut if you like. I’ve taken a new lover. He can give me what you cannot.” The lover she speaks of is “Death.” In deed and language she espouses the promiscuity and irrationality of the cave, ascribing no meaning to life or hopeful intentionality. She tells him that she has been done with her “own whorish heart...for a long time” and that “you talk about taking a stand but there is no stand to take” (57). Her concerns privilege what she hopelessly thinks of as physical, material realities: “Sooner or later they will catch us and they will kill us. They will rape me. They’ll rape him. They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us and you wont face it. You’d rather wait for it to happen.” But these are only realities from the Epimethean viewpoint she espouses irrevocably with the line: “As for me my only hope is for eternal nothingness and I hope it with all my heart” (57). The stand that she refuses to recognize she does not recognize because its grounds do not exist, cannot exist, in a world which, in terms of its material realities, has been entirely recreated, or rather unmade, in the image of the cave. We must look for it elsewhere.

The third and fourth waking-world instantiations of the cave give us clues as to where that stand must be made. About midway through their travels, father and son find a hidden bunker underground. From the door of this bunker they must “shovel away the dirt” (134) to gain access. Descending into the bowels of the earth, they find, among other necessaries, “crate upon crate of canned goods. Tomatoes, peaches, beans, apricots. Canned hams. Corned beef. Hundreds of gallons of water in ten gallon plastic jerry jugs. Paper towels, toiletpaper, paper plates. Plastic trashbags stuffed with blankets” (138). In short, they have found everything necessary to sustain their biological lives for the immediate future. However, after a day or two of rest the father already knows that “they weren’t going to be here that long” (144). The reason is
not only that eventually someone would find the bunker as they found it, but because like all
caves, its comforts are seductive and illusory or short-lived. Though the place has the seeming of
a “tiny paradise” (150), and though its supplies seem ample, they are ultimately finite, non-
renewable, as has become their world at large in the wake of whatever apocalypse befell it; it is
in the end a place as unregenerate as the cave of the womb of the Earth Mother. In addition to its
illusory or ephemeral comforts, the bunker betrays other spelaean qualities as well. As the boy
has not “eaten in a long time” (141), the sudden gorging on the food and drink they find there
induces something like narcosis in the boy: “he looked at the boy. The boy looked drugged”
(145). Likewise, the father “found four quarts of bonded whiskey still in the paper bags in which
they’d been purchased and he drank a little of it in a glass with water. It made him dizzy before
he’d even finished it and he drank no more” (152). The boy dallies in the land of the lotus-eaters
while the father drinks of the Lethe, river of oblivion and forgetting; like the cave of the womb
of the Earth Mother, this place too is a temple for the wine-rite. But the father, recognizing its
insidious effects, does stop drinking, and has earlier observed of the boy, who is “sitting quietly
on the bunk, still wrapped in the blanket” as if dazed: “he [the boy] had probably not fully
committed himself to any of this. You [the boy] could wake in the dark wet woods at any time”
(141). Carrying the fire as they do, they implicitly mistrust the seductive comforts of the cave,
and so they leave it. Like Nazarites they set themselves apart, forsworn of wine and other fusions
and so consecrated to the Good.

There exists in the novel precedent for this implicit mistrust for what is seemingly a place
of succor. They arrive early in the novel at an “old frame house with chimneys and gables and a
stone wall.” Asked where they are, the father tells his boy, “It’s the house where I grew up.”
Sensing the boy’s reticence, he asks him, “Dont you want to see where I used to live?” The boy answers firmly and immediately: “No” (25). But they do enter the house, and the man lingers in nostalgic memories like this one: “He stood there. He felt with his thumb in the painted wood of the mantle the pinholes from tacks that had held stockings forty years ago. This is where we used to have Christmas when I was a boy.” The boy “watched him. Watched shapes claiming him he could not see” (26). Disconcerted, the boy twice tells him, “we should go, Papa” (26, 27) because, unable to participate in the nostalgic visions setting their hooks into his father, he is able to see house for what it truly is, simply another hopeless iteration of the cave. Details are given sparingly (the whole scene takes less than three pages), but those which are offered are telling. Two of the things that disconcert the boy are as follows: “in the living room the bones of a small animal dismembered and placed in a pile. Possibly a cat. A glass tumbler by the door” (26). In just three lines McCarthy has established the childhood home as a cave, a place of death and, as a tumbler is of course a drinking glass for whisky or other spirits, a place also of Dionysian fusion. The detail that most troubles the boy, however, must be this one: “they walked through the diningroom where the firebrick in the hearth was as yellow as the day it was laid because his mother could not bear to see it blackened” (26). Nostalgia, as a looking homeward, or backward to past times and places, is an essentially Epimethean activity or experience. This is the real reason why no Promethean flame burns in the hearth, and never has. In the end even the father admits, “we shouldnt have come” (27).

There is a final instantiation of the cave that bears mentioning in that it illuminates further the falsehoods of the bunker, the father’s boyhood home and the mother’s suicide. This
instantiation occurs before the apocalyptic event in which the primary action of the novel takes place, during the father’s childhood:

Standing at the edge of a winter field among rough men. The boy’s age. A little older. Watching while they opened up the rocky hillside ground with pick and mattock and brought to light a great bolus of serpents perhaps a hundred in number. Collected there for a common warmth. The dull tubes of them beginning to move sluggishly in the cold hard light. Like the bowels of some great beast exposed to the day. The men poured gasoline on them and burned them alive, having no remedy for evil but only for the image of it as they conceived it to be. The burning snakes twisted horribly and some crawled burning across the floor of the grotto to illuminate its darker recesses. As they were mute there were no screams of pain and the men watched them burn and writhe and blacken in just such silence themselves and they disbanded in silence in the winter dusk each with his own thoughts to go home to their suppers. (188-9)

It is the nature of caves to echo, and in the description of this cave as “the bowels of some great beast exposed to the day,” we hear the echo of Ballard “here in the bowels of the mountain” (135) and of the man and the boy “swallowed up and lost among the inward parts of some granitic beast” (4) in the oneiric cave of The Road’s opening pages. These linguistic resonances invite us to bend our attention to the recurring imagery of cave-spaces, and to shed light on their thematics by reading them against each other. That this too is an image of the cave of the womb of the Earth Mother is little in question; there are perhaps a hundred serpents in the cave-space, but they have become, or are perceived to have become a “great bolus,” one great orgiastic
collective singular. And they are put to route by fire. However, we are told that thereby evil is not remedied, but “only the image of it as they conceived it to be” (188). The serpent-burners perceive in this particular instantiation of the cave the horror of the cave as concept, but their efforts to destroy that greater, conceptual horror are fruitless, and the silence of their leaving is the silence of impotence and defeat. Like the boy’s mother they have put too much stock in the cave’s physical manifestations. The mother believes that because the world has been unmade, hope has been unmade with it. Her fear is ironically the fear of subsumption into the orgiastic fusion of the cave-world in which she finds herself; her fear is that “they,” an indefinite of identity and appetitive orgiastic collective singular, will rape her and her son. She seeks to escape the cave through suicide. But in giving herself death hopelessly in the dark, she only serves to extinguish herself into it, to become part of the darkness of the cave itself and indeed, to deepen it by virtue of the shroud her death and her memory will cast over her husband and child. As the man tells the boy concerning one’s relation to the Good when the boy is afraid to enter the bunker: “Okay. This is what the good guys do. They keep trying. They dont give up” (137). They do not give up - “no matter what” (128) - even when the physical realities of their situation mandate that they must probably die. In this fashion, not by despairing suicide, are they genuinely to give themselves death, and in so doing, to overcome it. This is why they know they must leave the seemingly paraisaical bunker and the man’s boyhood home. The latter is a nostalgic illusion, the former but a finite repository for the “richness of a vanished world” (139). Each contains brief pleasures or comforts, but are in the end, with their stores exhausted, nostalgic or otherwise, just another hole to die in. To stay would be to wrongly privilege, just as the mother has done, an unregenerate materiality.
How then, are the man and boy to conduct themselves? How will they achieve what Derrida would call their “Platonic anabasis” (10) in a world which has been unmade and “which could not be put back. Not be made right again” (McCarthy 287)? In other words, how can they be expected to escape a cave from which, as the world entire, there is no egress? The physical realities of the cave-world, do claim the life of the father - years of breathing toxic ash have ruined his lungs and racked his body - but he is not gathered into it. In each seemingly groundlessly hopeful step forward, taken for the boy’s sake as much as, and more than, for his own, he takes care for life and so is able to give himself a genuinely human death. His Promethean spirit is epitomized in his parting words to the boy: “You need to go on...I cant go with you. You need to keep going. You dont know what might be down the road. We were always lucky. You’ll be lucky again. You’ll see. Just go. It’s all right” (278). When the boy lovingly tells him he wants still to be with him, even in death, a small conversation ensues: You cant. You have to carry the fire.

I dont know how to.

Yes you do.

Is it real? The fire?

Yes it is.

Where is it? I dont know where it is.

Yes you do. Its inside you. It was always there. I can see it. (278-9)
In order to truly achieve our *anabases*, we must look within ourselves toward the en-kindling and tending of our Promethean souls through taking care for our lives and the lives of others; we must carry the fire, the light of the sun of the Good, within us. So doing, the cave may physically encompass us but it may not subsume us and legislate to us a fusive destiny against our responsible will. Such a soul “identif[ies] with the Good while breaking free of the demonic and the orgiastic...the soul is absolutely free, that is, it chooses its destiny” (Derrida 18).

By his father’s observation, the boy’s head is a “golden chalice, good to house a god” (75), or at least the fire that has been stolen from the gods, and indeed the boy receives from the heavens a single snowflake which “he caught...in his hand and watched...expire there like the last host of christendom” (16). That it is his head that constitutes the chalice makes of its contents, his *psyche*, which again in Greek signifies without distinction both mind and soul, a unification of reason and responsibility, responsibility in the form of empathy or the experience of “relation” and “response to the other” (Derrida 51). The boy, like his father, re-inscribes the cave of the womb of the Earth Mother as the tabernacle of the human heart. Though the world is changed perhaps irrevocably into an ashen waste, the light of the sun of the Good is proven yet to exist within the heart of man, if he chooses to take responsibility for it. The boy, after his father’s death and because of their responsibly Promethean steadfastness, is discovered by and received into a family that, having watched him a while solicitously from afar, is “so glad” (286) at last to have found him and to have taken him into their care. The family has a “little girl” about the boy’s age (284), and perhaps the idea is that there might be at last a truly regenerate perpetuation of the race achieved through responsibility for the other. The members of this family too, new-forged to include the boy, are carrying the fire, and it is in the action of their taking responsibility
for themselves and, especially, for others that their Platonic and Christian conversions are achieved within them, even though the whole grounds for this action, the world entire, has been transformed into the cave of the womb of the Earth Mother. The light of the sun of the Good may transcend even this cave when it is enkindled, carried and cultivated within the volitional human heart. The orgiastic is thus defeated in utero, transforming the false “community of fusion” of the cave into a true and truly human community of political, personal and interpersonal responsibility.
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