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Author: Gustavo Segura Chávez

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Madness, Rejection and Violence in Cormac McCarthy's *Child of God*

Gustavo Segura Chávez¹

The following paper aims to analyze the relationship between social violence and madness present in Cormac McCarthy's novel *Child of God*. The analysis focuses on the novel's protagonist, Lester Ballard, as a man who becomes an outcast of society and is forced to live outside the social order. Ballard becoming a murderer is the direct result of the social violence perpetrated against him. However, this violence is never seen as such because society has created an objectified image of Ballard as a madman that dictates that he deserves this punishment. The image of the madman is analyzed from the perspective of Foucault's *Madness and Civilization*. Foucault's madman is able to see that this prejudice against madness is a symptom of humans' impossibility to understand each other, which reveals that the social system is an illusion, like the symbolic order Ballard creates with the corpses of those he murdered.

KEYWORDS: CORMAC MCARTHY, CHILD OF GOD, FOUCAULT, MADNESS, SOCIAL SYSTEM

"A child of god much like yourself perhaps" (4) is the way in which the narrator describes Lester Ballard, the protagonist of Cormac McCarthy's *Child of God*. It is, indeed, a statement that conditions the whole reading of the novel. As the story progresses, this description becomes more and more questionable as he succumbs to voyeurism, murder and necrophilia. His criminal activities intensify as he becomes aware of the rejection from his fellow citizens. This escalation of violence occurs as Ballard gradually departs from society as he tries to find a meaningful connection outside its

¹ Gustavo Segura Chávez holds a B.A. in English Literature at Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile. He is currently working as an editor for Santillana and will continue his studies to obtain a M.A. in Romance Languages and Literature in the University of Notre Dame.

boundaries. However, by creating a new social order with his group of corpses and trophies, he is able to see the meaninglessness he has created, and, by extension, the meaninglessness in which society is founded; society defends its order with violence, but it has nothing to defend other than the order itself.

The borders of society become blurry as Ballard diverges from social order. Losing his farm is the first step of a path he is forced to take; as Katie Owens-Murphy points out, “[Ballard] does not, after all, begin the story as a criminal but develops into one, advancing from voyeurism to necrophilia to murder through the narrative’s progression” (168). It is important to take into consideration this argument, as the social environment is partly Ballard’s creator; he gradually separates from society, having to live in its margins, which is where he finds ‘grotesque’ ways to connect with someone despite the ones to whom he relates are dead.

One of the ways that represents Ballard’s society is the novel’s detached portrayal of violence. A possible answer to this bluntness in the narration is that it reflects the feelings from the citizens of Sevier County, who do not seem to be affected by the violence they themselves perpetrate; their actions are all justified as long as they are done to defend society’s order. The most representative part of this condoned violence within the novel takes place at its beginning, where Ballard’s farm is about to be auctioned. The scene ends with him being hit with an axe and nobody cares about him lying on the floor, bleeding from his ear. This event marks a point of disruption between Ballard and Sevier County.

The blow with the axe can be seen as an act of violence in two different ways: first, as an act of rejection; and, second, as an act of justified violence. The line that opens the novel describes the people that attends this auction: “They came like a caravan of carnival folk” (McCarthy 3), expressing the cheerfulness of such a contradictory moment; Ballard is about to lose his family’s farm, but nobody seems to care about this because they are more interested on the opportunity of having a piece of land with great prospects. When Ballard decides to defend his territory, he interrupts this celebration with his foul language, but mainly by revealing the violence the auction conceals; they are indeed taking the farm away from this man. His reaction is shocking; there is a victim behind this celebration, which is why some auctioneers seem to have decided not to participate (9). Society takes away his farm and does not take responsibility of him; as a lawful action, the auction is celebrated like part of the civil life, but society is also symbolically and

physically expelling him from its order. As the last member of his family, the farm was the only possession that connects Ballard to them, and without it, he loses his most meaningful connection to society. The farm is a symbol of social inclusion, so being homeless increases the feeling of rejection. Furthermore, he also loses every chance of being successful among his townspeople. As he is unable to pay taxes, the county takes his land rather than, for example, helping him find a job. Instead, it worsens his already poor condition.

C B, the auctioneer, warns Ballard: “Lester, you don’t get a grip on yourself they goin to put you in a rubber room” (McCarthy 7), foreshadowing what happens at the end of the novel. C B, like every other citizen, does not want to deal with Ballard’s problems, so the only way in which Ballard can still be part of this process, and by extension, of society, is by behaving, which he does not. The auction physically and symbolically expels him from society, and the axe has a similar function. Knocking him to the floor is another representation of the subjugation society perpetrates upon him; selling his farm also conditions and forces him to live like society wants him to live, i.e. in its margins. These events show Sevier County’s forms of control and subjugation towards Ballard. The community limits him as one of its member, but then blames him for his behavior, which is mainly conditioned by the different violent forms of expulsion enacted by society.

A nameless Sevier County citizen says, “Lester could never hold his head right after that day” (McCarthy 9). This testimony describes, like many others, the image the county has of Ballard as a mythical figure, a well-known man of their society that creates the contrast they need to assure their grounds as a non-violent group of people. These unnamed voices share the telling of this story with the narrator, trying to figure the origin of Ballard’s behavior. In particular, this character believes that Ballard’s behavior changes after the events of the auction, which is a possibility. However, rather than trying to find the origin of his flaws, what matters the most for this analysis is society’s need to find a reason for his behavior in order to categorize it. They need to know what has made him ‘crazy’ to establish a distance from him, so they never have to take any responsibility for what he has become. By doing so, they do not have to question their role in society; in other words, they do not have to question why they can judge a man and consider him mad. When they confront the madman, they have to think the reasons why they confine him, having to explicit why they are sane and why he is mad. But the reasons for sanity are never given because they are ‘understood’ by contrast. The madman is the opposition of sanity, but what sanity really is is considered a given by society. If its members were to question society, it would imply insanity: a sane man does not

question his life, because it is by not restraining to the social order that a man becomes mad. By categorizing Ballard as mad, they create the opposition they need to locate themselves in society as the 'sane' ones.

In the auction, Ballard's behavior disrupts the social order, which is why C B warns him he should behave because what society seeks the most is a peaceful environment: "In its most general form, confinement is explained, or at least justified, by the desire to avoid scandal" (Foucault 62). Society's intentions are always to maintain its order and the figure of the madman comes to disrupt it. Throughout the history of reason analyzed in Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization*, the madman has been concealed so the 'sane' ones do not have to directly deal with them, which is perhaps C B's feeling regarding Ballard's presence in the auction. The presence of the madman provokes a sense of discomfort in society, because he is a man, yet different. The perception of madness has varied from the Middle Ages to the end of the eighteenth century, but what somehow connects them is the necessity of societies to distance themselves from it in order to assure their rationality; this distance has not necessarily been seen as negative – the Renaissance saw the madman as a genius, but the distance was still a social convention. Foucault's objective is "to return, in history, to that zero point in the course of madness at which madness is an undifferentiated experience, a not yet divided experience of division itself" (ix). Madness and reason no longer communicate; the rational man has created a language that does not include madness, as it is an equivalent of non-reason. Madness has lost every possibility of communication with the world of reason because there is no common language, "the man of madness communicates with society only by the intermediary of an equally abstract reason which is order, physical and moral constraint, the anonymous pressure of the group, the requirements of conformity" (x). What Foucault finally tries to achieve is to write the silence of the history of madness.

This silence has certainly been violent; madmen can only speak by subjugating to the language of rationality. When Ballard speaks out in the auction, he is silenced because he is using the language of non-reason. The auction, being an event set by the local government, is in complete opposition with Ballard's interference; the event is the representation of civil life and order, but Ballard threatens it by only being there and misbehaving. It is implied by the citizens' testimonies the constant fear Ballard provokes – he carries his shotgun everywhere and is an incredible shooter. Buster probably sees the whole auction being terrorized by Ballard confronting C B, so he is afraid and acts impulsively with his axe. This fear does not only come from the weapon and the risk of

people getting hurt, but from the threat of Ballard's passions. He is a character driven by his impulses; he kills a girl with his shotgun because he feels humiliated and rejected. Foucault explains that "[t]he savage fear of madness is related to the danger of the passions and to their fatal concatenation" (77). Thus, passions are the basis for madness' very possibility. Buster sees that Ballard is about to be driven by his impulses, because he already has an image of Ballard as a violent man, like his father and grandfather.

The violence of this act is not perceived as such because it is not against a man, but a madman; thus, it is justified as he does not have the same rights as a man. Foucault explains that the treatment given to madmen during the eighteenth century corresponded with the idea of madmen as beasts; "[t]he animal solidity of madness, and that density it borrows from the blind world of beast, inured the madman to hunger, heat, cold, pain" (69). Ballard does not need anybody's pity or sympathy; the image the townspeople have created takes away the responsibility of incorporating him to society. As a "beast," he can outlive anything they do to him, so there is no remorse if they are violent against him. As Ashley Craig Lancaster points out, "[t]heir version of Lester does not allow him to feel loneliness as a human does because, for the townspeople, their image of him depends totally in his continued isolation; he could not possibly want or deserve their acceptance" (141). As a 'hermit,' it is believed that Ballard has decided to leave society, so society outcasts him, taking away his right to communicate with the rational world, but also his right to be treated with respect. He can live freely in the outside, as he is capable of doing so because of his 'animality,' but if he tries to communicate with the rational world, like he tries with C B, he has to accept subjugation, as "[u]nchained animality could be mastered only by *discipline* and *brutalizing*" (Foucault 69). Within the walls of confinement, beasts can roam freely, but if they were to live among sane men, they needed discipline, or to be silenced. In the case of Ballard, the axe works perfectly: it silences him by means of brutalization, as an attempt to discipline him.

The auction is purposefully opening this novel since it gives an insight on Ballard's society and the way in which it deals with his existence. Through Sevier County's accounts of Ballard, it is possible to understand him and the county itself. Also, it is by being expelled from society that he understands its mechanisms: its systems of values and discourses. Ballard's expulsion from society starts a series of events that reveal the violence of a discourse that supposedly attempts to maintain the order. As order should involve peace, there is certain contradiction in the way in which Ballard is constrained to the margins of society so only the discourse of sanity and rationality remains. The

discourse of rational men is violent in the sense that it silences other truths and does not give possibility to a different member – the one they call the ‘madman’ – to live among them because of his differences with the standards of society. Whatever alternative truth may be stated, it will be silenced by the discourse of rationality; those who possess power are the ones that state the current truth. In confinement, physicians are the guardians of truth because communication is denied to madmen; it is through a language that resides outside rationality that Ballard is able to communicate.

As explained by Foucault, the madman is able to communicate by subjugating his ‘unreasonable’ language and using the ‘rational’ one. The myth of Ballard reinforces society’s boundaries, as he is that they will never be. Vince Brewton explains that McCarthy’s early novels, like *Child of God*, show certain correlation with “the era of American history defined by the military involvement in Vietnam” (121). The historical context in which McCarthy writes this novel is essential when understanding how a character like Ballard falls within Southern literature in the post-Vietnam period as “public discourse on Vietnam acts as a nether limit for American civilization and serves as a boundary for American behavior within the bigger story of our history in the last century” (125). Similarly to the national obsession with Vietnam, Ballard’s role within Sevier County reinforces the conviction that society’s margins do exist. Society uses Ballard as a scapegoat not only to reinforce rationality by explaining the roots of his madness, but also by establishing a moral hierarchy, where he is the amoral, thus creating the binary opposition of morality. Brewton explains that Ballard has a function similar to a taboo, like Vietnam, because the taboo “directs us away from the prohibited action while in the same movement fixating our interest” (125). As a boundary marker, Ballard is what is unlawful and immoral, but is interesting to know his story; telling Ballard’s story gives the county a reinforced conviction of the existence of their values, so Ballard is only given the possibility of being part of the community by becoming a myth: it is storytelling what “reinserts him, or his legend, into the heart of the community” (Brewton 124).

In a sense, the community expels Ballard from its territory, but it also construes Ballard’s new territory as “[t]he space of the margins is like the traditional space of war, located on the periphery, but one nevertheless generated by the cultural center” (Brewton 125). Ballard is set free by the community. So he, like the madman in his confinement, is able to do whatever he wants as long as he does not become a risk to society; like in warfare, nothing is forbidden. Soldiers are taken away from their homeland, so in their new territory (in the case discussed by Brewton, Vietnam) they are able to set their rules or not to set any rules at all because purpose has been taken away, and

without purpose, order is gone. Similarly, Ballard has the possibility of creating his set of rules in the woods. However, society expects no disturbance. As this is not fulfilled by Ballard because he murders people, society 'reads' his murders as part of his madness, but it is never attributed to Ballard being dispossessed of his purpose in life.

By expelling Ballard, the community takes away its responsibility of dealing with a character that does not fit into the parameters required by a 'proper' society – a social model that the U.S. has sought since Vietnam; however, it also uses scapegoating to confirm that by placing Ballard in a situation where he will most likely come as a broken man. By taking away his possessions, society has taken away his purpose. As Brewton explains “[n]ational mythology has linked purpose (mission) with place (paradise metaphors), a process that associates innocence with possession – McCarthy’s work charts the dissolution of both” (124). As Ballard gradually becomes less attached to society, his need for possessions also decreases. Then, Ballard’s evolution as a murderer is somehow expected by the community because the same community takes away his innocence by limiting his chances for a different life; as mentioned before, his possibilities of being part of society decrease as he is dispossessed of his farm. Labor and purpose are two elements tied to the notion of progress in society; as long as man works, he contributes to society. Ballard does not contribute to society in any way (one possible way could have been taxes, but he fails to pay them), so he is expelled from society, becoming what he is expected to become and fulfilling his myth.

Ballard is falsely accused of rape, and after he is released from prison, Sheriff Fate Turner tells him, “Let’s see: failure to comply with a court order, public disturbance, assault and battery, public drunk, rape. I guess murder is next on the list ain’t it? Or what things is it you’ve done that we ain’t found out yet.” Turner’s list of deeds represents what the town expects of Ballard to become. Ballard realizes that Turner’s attitude toward him is biased, which is why he answers “you just got it in me” (McCarthy 56). This bias, which is representative of Sevier County, makes almost impossible not to think Ballard as a possible murderer, which is why some characters say that they somehow ‘saw it coming’ after Ballard’s murders are revealed. Attributing his behavior to his racist grandfather or to his father killing himself and his mother leaving him is society’s means of reassuring its own order. By predicting Ballard’s behavior, society sets the grounds of such behavior. People who have gone to prison are prone to be more violent, but why they go to prison is of no importance. Society needs to judge to set a moral hierarchy; those who judge are the ‘good’ people and those who have committed a crime are ‘bad’ people. Ballard unjustly goes to prison because he is already judged as

the police thinks that he obviously raped that girl. Ballard cannot be innocent because he is seen within a preconceived notion of his behavior that will determine that he will commit more crimes which will escalate in magnitude. That is why Sheriff Turner anticipates that Ballard's next deed will be murder.

Sheriff Turner's expectations confirm that the social order does not fail. Vietnam, like madness, are examples of society not following its established order, and their outcomes prove that they cannot be the way in which society should act. The horror people see in the aftermath of war and the horror of seeing a man succumbing to madness and not being able to control his actions teach people that complying to the social order is the only way that leads to a positive outcome. Thus, Ballard becoming a murderer confirms that society is the system to which all men should abide. He is the scapegoat that reassures rationality as the discourse that gives man progress; a man can only have a purpose in life by remaining within the boundaries of society. As Brewton explains, mission is linked to place in national mythology. This place has to be within society. Outside society, there is no rationality, so there is only chaos. In chaos, it is believed that man loses himself and becomes something similar to Ballard. It is not expected that Ballard will return to society, or if he does, that he returns sane, as a worthy member of society.

As Ballard returns to society, but to murder and take people to his cave, he becomes a threat and his actions are his own responsibility. As Foucault explains, "the madman, as a human being originally endowed with reason, is no longer guilty of being mad; but the madman, as a madman, and in the interior of that disease of which he is no longer guilty, must feel morally responsible for everything within him that may disturb morality and society, and must hold no one but himself for the punishment he receives" (199). The madman is perceived by society as innocent of his own disease as long as he does not disturb the social order. Society is comprehensive regarding the existence of the madman and believes that it is possible to achieve certain harmony between both worlds as long as the madman lives in confinement. However, any disturbance in the order is seen as a threat because the madman cannot speak. If he does, his actions are considered violent because they are different from the hegemonic discourse of sanity. Ballard's actions, though they are evidently violent towards his victims, are attempts to speak a language which is opposed to the discourse of sanity, so it is finally repressed with a similar violence.

A case like Ballard poses a threat to the whole social system. If he succeeds in having a fulfilling life with his corpses, then another possibility to the social order is available. His victory means the failure of society as the only possible system. If society fails, other truths are possible, so the discourse of sanity would lose its hegemonic power. Ballard cannot succeed because his system would be possible. Every system of repression, like confinement (both for madmen and criminals), would be revealed as an unjust system that silences other truths. This possibility of achieving a new order is perhaps the greatest fear of the rational society as “[m]adness has become man’s possibility of abolishing both man and the world” (Foucault 225). The figure of Ballard does only cause fear because of the violence his image portrays, but also because he represents a man who has abandoned society and has succumbed to madness. The fear of losing rationality helps reaffirming the need to protect rationality by all means; if Ballard is the result of leaving society, then man needs to defend society in order to save the world from its destruction. Seeing his violence, society is afraid of the threat he poses to the whole existence of society. As a murderer, he does not let society live peacefully because of the constant threat of his existence, which is why, for example, a group of men kidnap him from the hospital in order to retrieve the corpses of his victims. Whatever they want to do to Ballard after having the bodies is not said, but Ballard knows he is not going to live after they get them, so he eludes the mob in the caves where he has the bodies. Ballard’s level of violence enables society to take every measure to defend itself; that great fear of irrationality does not only encourage man to defend society, but also justifies every violent action. Society’s fear gives place to passion; that group of men is united by their need for retaliation, and they seem to want Ballard dead. Men let themselves be driven by violence because it is the most effective way to silence every threat against social order. Society’s most effective weapon against threats is repression, so it would never reveal repression as an act of violence because it would be disregarded from its order as violence is supposedly against social values. Society conceals this form of subjugation within different forms that represent structure in order to keep using it; confinement is a very complex system that is supported by medicine, so it cannot be in any way considered violent. The constitution of psychiatry at the end of the eighteenth century was considered as freedom to the physically chained madmen. However, “this liberation, in Foucault’s eyes, masks a new form of confinement: madness is now reduced to the diminished status of ‘mental illness,’ to be caught in the positivistic net of erudite determinism” (Felman 40). When institutions condone systems of repression, violence becomes part of the social norm; the mob’s violence can be considered as a desperate action that only intended to help the institutional foundations of society. The mob only

seeks justice and peace for every other citizen, so it would never be considered as an act of personal retaliation, but as an act of selfless justice.

A problem that needs to be answered is the source of society's need to classify Ballard. The social discourse about madness is only a symptom of a deeper problem, which is understanding the external world. Men are encountered with the problem of understanding each other, so when a man does not fit in the convened notion of 'normal' behavior, a new classification is needed. The impossibility of knowing Ballard and entering his mind causes fear. Society takes those aspects which do not fit in the notion of 'normal' behavior, like his family background, his rudeness or his appearance, to build an image that 'completes' what cannot be known about him. By completing him, society creates the image of a dangerous madman. As some of his characteristics diverge from that archetype of the social man, society objectifies him and considers him a madman. The problem of understanding the other gives place to exclusion, which is what happens to those who are confined/marginalized because they cannot be fully understood as they speak in another language. As the language of the madman is different from that of the rational man, they cannot dialogue, so they exclude each other from their respective worlds:

In a sense, the study of Foucault involves, but at the same time puts in question, the very nature of discursive thought and philosophical inquiry. The fundamental question which, though not enunciated, is implicitly at stake, is: What does understanding mean? What is comprehension? If to comprehend is, on the one hand, to grasp, to apprehend an object, to objectify, Foucault's implicit question is: how can we comprehend *without* objectifying, without *excluding*? But if to comprehend is, on the other hand (taken in its metaphorical and spatial sense), to enclose in oneself, to embrace, to *include*, i.e., to contain within certain limits, the question then becomes: how can we comprehend *without* enclosing in ourselves, without *confining*? (Felman 41-42)

To comprehend something encounters certain problems. Man sees reality and classifies it with language, but this classification confines what it is perceived within certain limits. To give meaning to an object is to limit it to our reality, so to comprehend something leads to confinement. Shoshana Felman understands this confinement also in a physical sense because the confinement of mad people is symptomatic of this contradiction of understanding. The rational man has created an order

which has enabled him to understand his reality, but he also restricts everything that is not part of that reality. Madness would be a disrupting element that, because it is outside the limits of understanding, rational men cannot *include* it in their world, so they *objectify* it.

As man confines himself in his understanding, he excludes every other possible truth. In the case of Ballard, he is excluded as he has been objectified by society. As Ballard is rejected from his fellow citizens, understanding him becomes more difficult as he is gradually confined to the limits of the social order. The objectification of his image results in perceiving him as mad because madness is a possible result of objectifying what cannot be comprehended. For example, society never sees that Ballard really is in need for affection rather than wanting to destroy society. Ballard seeks a meaningful connection that he could not find with his family and constantly fails to obtain with his fellow townspeople. These attempts have not been considered by society, because it has included in its discourse only an objectified image of Ballard rather than an image of him according to another discourse, so seeing Ballard as a man in need for affection seems inconceivable.

Before encountering by chance a dead couple in a car, Ballard still wants to relate to people. However, his actions are constantly misinterpreted. It seems that because he provokes fear, his actions tend to have a different connotation. For example, when he tries to help a girl he finds in the woods, she immediately insults him, not seeing that he is trying to help her. This same girl accuses him of rape and the police watches while she beats him (McCarthy 42, 52). What Ballard learns from this situation is to distrust people even more, as the police are completely biased against him and believe the girl only because she says he raped her. Every attempt of helping, of establishing a relationship with another human being ends in misinterpretation. The misinterpretation comes from the community's bias against him. Even after he is released from prison, there is no regret from Sheriff Turner for having him imprisoned with no evidence.

Another example of the misinterpretation of Ballard's actions is when he gives a baby robin to a mentally impaired boy, who kills the bird by biting its legs off. The boy's sister blames Ballard for giving him the bird, but he sees what the boy intended to do, "[h]e wanted it to where it couldn't run off, he said." (McCarthy 79). Ballard can see that the boy is like him, an outsider that does not see violence as such. The boy acts outside the symbolic order, like Ballard. He feels uneasy, perhaps regretting the future the boy will have, probably one like his. Even though he is comfortable in the woods, he still feels the need to relate to people, so he empathizes with the boy, who, like Ballard,

does not understand the world in the way society wants him to understand it. What Ballard sees in the boy is representative of his current situation: he has already appropriated one body, so if society were to find out about this, he would be sent to a mental institution or prison because they do not understand that what he is trying to find is someone who can listen to him.

The violent, disrespectful way in which Ballard is treated occurs mainly because of objectification. By being objectified, the relation between the people of Sevier County and Ballard as equal members disappears; he is not perceived as a man as such, with all his rights and dignity, but a madman, considered almost not a human being. Every possibility of living in society is denied because both discourses cannot live together, as they are seen in complete opposition by man. People *must* see the discourse of madness as inferior in order to invalidate it as plausible; the treatment given to the madman is a way to repress, to diminish the validity of his own discourse.

The problematic of madness is that it is understood only within the discourse of sanity. When Foucault talks about the ‘silence’ of this discourse, he is referring to the impossibility of madness to talk in its own terms. As a person is only able to perceive and understand reality through his own discourse of rationality, the possibility to *speak* through any other discourse can never be understood. In the case of Ballard, as he is not able to relate to people, he has to find another way to speak, another language to be able to do this. This new discourse he creates is what society objectifies and defines as madness.

It is because society cannot understand why Ballard would kill and keep the corpses that he is considered mad. It is so horrifying how a man can detach so much from reality as killing people and keeping their bodies that everyone who observes this situation has no other option than to be horrified by it. Not being horrified is a sign of madness. The horror of his actions is attributed as it is an incomprehensible act, but for Ballard, they are not. Ballard does not see with horror his actions because they have meaning. In fact, perhaps his only kind of personal confession is given to a corpse: “He poured into that waxen ear everything he’d ever thought of saying to a woman” (McCarthy 88). It is interesting to see that even the reader does not know what he says to that dead girl, emphasizing the impossibility of actually being able to know Ballard. He is so detached from society’s reality that whatever he says to her is incomprehensible to everybody else.

As it has been mentioned before, the novel is characterized by the escalation of both violence and detachment in Ballard's deeds. The dead girl, to whom Ballard is able to relate, represents the moment in which Ballard completely detaches from society, in which he decides that he does not need (living) people to establish a meaningful connection. However, it is by chance that he finds this girl and her boyfriend. His murderous behavior is not premeditated, but comes from the desperation of not being accepted, and he sees the opportunity to be so in that dead couple. In this instance, he is still not a murderer, but he then needs to satisfy his needs and decides to murder with the sole purpose of having more people to whom relate. However, before he becomes a murderer, Ballard still needs society and still believes that living in community, establishing relationships, is the only way to find acceptance, even though his attempts have been unsuccessful.

In need for a meaningful connection, he is forced to find it outside society because everybody rejects him. As a man tells Ballard in the police station, "You are either going to have some other way to live or some other place in the world to do it in" (McCarthy 123). He realizes that he will never be accepted because of the way in which he is perceived, so he looks for other possibilities. They necessarily have to be outside society, and it is in the woods where Ballard finds a place to be at ease.

The relation between Ballard and nature seems to always have existed as he is a regular hunter, and this connection is accentuated as he deflects from society. Without his farm, Ballard retreats to an abandoned cabin, a place in the margins of society. His contacts with people during this period are limited to some visits to town or some random encounters in the woods, where he spends most of his time hunting and contemplating nature. The time when he lives in the cabin is when he develops his skills as a more self-sufficient man. This ability to survive by eating things he gets by hunting or recollecting represents how he needs less from society and begins living by the rules of nature, becoming a "perverse modern adaptation of the noble savage" (Owens-Murphy 166). The romantic notion of the noble savage, an outsider of society who is able to still be essentially 'good', suits Ballard in the sense that he is able to be in certain equilibrium regarding his natural environment. However, there is no innate goodness as he has already been tainted by the violence of society. Ballard still sees nature from a human's perspective, mostly understanding that he is there because he has been expelled from society. Ballard still sees society with contempt for having expelled him and not letting him be part of that order.

However, at certain moments, Ballard seems to forget that he is an outcast and embraces the harmony of his relation to this environment. This can be seen when he is about to shoot a bird “but something of an old foreboding made him hold. Mayhaps the bird felt it too” (McCarthy 25). Another passage of the novel which shows, perhaps, one of the few moments when Ballard feels at complete ease is, again, with birds, which Ballard tries to catch in a playful manner, but “[t]hey ducked and fluttered. He fell and rose and ran laughing. He caught and held one warm and feathered in his palm with the heart of it beating there just so” (76). The peace he finds in the woods creates a contrast when he visits the county. It gives Ballard a point of contrast to see the violence with which he is treated. However, nature does not give Ballard any type of meaningfulness in the way that relating to society would give him. In nature he is able to have a peaceful moment, away from the impositions of society.

The woods show there is a plausible way to live outside society. However, Ballard still needs meaning, a meaning he cannot get from nature, as he is not able to understand it. The animals and the silence of the forest are elements he is able to contemplate, but he is not able to relate to them as they do not share the same order. Ballard is still bound to the symbolical order. However, seeing nature has made him aware of the violence of society by learning that there can be peace in a place like the woods. Ballard has become used to the language of violence: to treat and be treated with violence. Ballard understands that society has constantly subjugated him and now knows that this subjugation has to be stopped. He has to dismiss society completely. He needs to find a way where he can communicate without the perception of him misinterpreting him. As nature proves to be unsuccessful in the sense that he cannot enter its order, he has to create a new order, which is given by chance to him in the form of the dead couple in the car.

When Ballard finds the dead couple, he feels he has control over the situation, but, especially, over them. At last he is the one who subjugates and not the subjugated. As expressed by Lancaster, “[i]ronically, even though Lester begins the book as “a child of god”, he becomes the god of his own world” (144). Ballard finds someone who does not reject him, but there cannot be any rejection, so he takes that inability as full acceptance. It is that acceptance he construes that lets him ‘pour’ everything he ever wanted to say to a woman. Ballard is finally able to relate to someone and thinks that he has created now a meaningful order that lets him have a new discourse that cannot be silenced (by its silent members).

The violence of such an act, like raping a dead body, cannot be seen but with horror. However, for Ballard it makes perfect sense. He lets himself be driven by his need for affection, by that need of inclusion. The fact that the dead body is ‘almost’ a person (a human being who used to be a human being) lets Ballard construe a person by using his/her corpse, so he does not see corpses, but people. Ballard decides not to consider the dead body as such because his new system would fail. He stops seeing reality with rationality because reason has never worked for him. He has been denied that discourse, as he is considered unworthy of it; as he has a history of violence, he is prone to violence, so the discourse of rational men and equality is unreachable. Ballard, then, embraces insanity.

Even though insanity cannot be really defined if it is not through the discourse of rationality, it is possible to say that Ballard, by embracing another discourse, defines what is correct by his own terms. Then, the bodies become living people who listen to him because he has come to believe this, so there is no defiling of corpses, but a consented sexual act which is meaningful for him. By having sex with the bodies is when Ballard feels connected to them. Penetration seems to have a double function: he does not only physically penetrate the bodies, but also tries to ‘penetrate’ their inexistent minds. Ballard’s order is necessarily a reminiscence of the old order. He uses bodies as people, and sex as a way to know the other: these are traits of the symbolic order. He has to use them because it is the only order he has ever known.

His actions become premeditated as he feels the need to have more bodies. Now that he has discovered the solution to his predicament, he now has to give it sustainability by having more bodies. By enlarging his environment, Ballard feels more in control of it and is able to see that this order is now more plausible. This relation between control and possession is discussed by Vereen M. Bell, who states that “every emblem Lester strips from the dead . . . marks an overcoming of death dread through a symbolic overcoming of the foe . . . Lester’s metaphorical consumption of objects and human remains confirms the Bakhtinian idea that to consume the world is to tame our fear of it” (qtd. in Brewton 126). The idea that the world produces fear in Ballard is certainly correct; the reminiscences of society in his new one reveal that fear of the world. He wants to feel safe and the bodies provide him that safety by creating a non-rejecting (silent) version of the world.

However, this new order encounters the same problem society has with Ballard and vice versa, which is understanding the other. This same problem makes Ballard escalate in the use of

violence in order to ‘penetrate’ the other’s mind. When Ballard appears in his old farm to kill Greer, the man who bought it, he appears “in frightwig and skirts” (McCarthy 172), becoming a grotesque version of a transvestite, who wears the scalp and the clothes of his victims. Ballard’s necessity to people the cave with more dead bodies and stuffed animals, and then, using body parts, like the scalp, is a symptom of the impossibility of knowing the other, especially now that they are already dead. Ballard wants to identify with the dead bodies, which is why he wears their possessions, but even the violence he uses against them is not enough to really *be* them, to feel like he is in their position.

The objectification Ballard has given to the corpses is finally clear to him as he is about to kill Greer. The system he has created proves to be unsuccessful as the corpses are only lifeless objects to which he gives an inexistent meaning. He lets himself believe that he is accepted by a group of people, but he realizes he has never been understood by them. The problem of solipsism becomes clear at this point for Ballard. He has never been able to really know another human being. That possibility has been taken away from him, and not even by leaving society he is able to do that. However, this grotesque imitation of society lets him see the meaninglessness of society.

As Ballard objectifies the corpses, he has condemned them to the same silence to which he himself is condemned. Society has silenced him by subjugating and categorizing him as mad, leaving him out of the symbolical order, but he has also subjugated these corpses by attributing them the meaning Ballard wants them to have. He condemns them to be living, understanding people. Ballard is completely alone because understanding cannot be but an objectification of what it is perceived, which, as stated by Felman, can also imply enclosing in oneself. Ballard realizes he has completely denied the influence of the outer reality. He is never able to see the violence he has perpetrated on the bodies because he is only concerned with his own self, his personal satisfaction. Ballard has deceived himself into believing that those dead bodies are actually listening to him, because if they are not, he would be completely alone. Like Ballard himself, they are the scapegoats that apparently solve the problem of understanding. Objectification reduces an object to something that can be understood in rational terms. Similarly, Ballard has reduced the corpses in order to believe he relates to them.

The case of Ballard is quite similar to that of Kurtz in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. Both characters have let themselves believe they can create their own ethical system and can

subordinate others because they are the creators of their respective orders. Both characters also embrace solipsism as a means to subjugate. However, Ballard realizes what he has done after the killing, while Kurtz, already realizing that society is meaningless, decides to create his own reality where his solipsistic conception of the world lets him subordinate the other as he can never know if they exist or not. Kurtz, like Ballard, is only sure that their minds exist. As stated by David Rudrum, “Kurtz is not so much a transcendental solipsist as a full-blown solipsist. He apparently believes, for example, that the world belongs to him . . . Marlow and the Russian Harlequin also claim that Kurtz recognizes no morality outside his own terms” (424-425). It is interesting to see how both characters come to the realization that every social construction (human relationships, ethics, and so on) is only the result of the illusion that people understand each other. This realization leads to the complete denial of the outer world and, like Kurtz, of every possibility of accepting an ethical code. Then, Ballard and Kurtz are free to use violence against the other because their existence, like Ballard’s existence for society, is denied. The other becomes an object for them to use.

The difference between Ballard and Kurtz is that, for the former, understanding that he is completely alone in a physical, and now metaphysical sense, leads him to a state of complete desolation. Completely lost in the caves for five days, he does not seem desperate, but prepared to die. It is on his way to kill Greer that he has prepared himself to die, as “[e]ach leaf that brushed his face deepened his sadness and dread. Each leaf he passed he’d never pass again . . . He had resolved himself to ride on for he could not turn back and the world that day was as lovely as any day that ever was and he was riding to his death” (McCarthy 170-171). At this moment, Ballard is completely resigned that his system does not work. He only intends to kill Greer to take revenge for what society has done to him. Greer encapsulates everything that society has taken away from Ballard, so Greer has to fall with him as a final statement against society. His plan goes wrong and this attempt ends in him lost in the caves. Society has defeated him again, which is why he decides to finally give himself up because he accepts that he cannot do anything to change the fact that really knowing another human being is impossible. In contrast to Kurtz, who decides to keep living within his order, despite knowing it is as meaningless as the social order, Ballard decides not to keep murdering people and just ‘surrender’ by willingly entering to a mental facility.

By finally returning to society, Ballard is not really accepting the symbolical order again. He is just resigned and only awaits his death. However, he is also giving society the responsibility of taking care of him. Society has ‘won’ in the sense that Ballard is finally confined in a place where, like

Ballard himself says, he is “supposed to be” (McCarthy 192). Ballard finally fulfills the role of scapegoat he has been given. Society is finally able to confine Ballard and give to its people the peace they need. The order is restored because a murderer is not roaming freely in the outskirts of society.

With Ballard’s submission, the possibility of another discourse to exist is denied. Ballard understands that society has the same problems that he has had and that society is as meaningless as the order he has created. Being able to see society from outside its order, he can see the illusion of living in community. Men create the illusion that all of them are similar and have the same set of values which enables them to live peacefully as a society. However, they are not able to really understand each other, so the order is, actually, an invention created by a group of men. Dead and living people are understood by Ballard as equally inaccessible, and that society uses different forms of violence to conceal that problem.

Society defends itself against every threat with rationality, and when it fails, it applies rationality to conceal the violence used to silence those threats. With Ballard’s confinement, society can still use these systems and violence continues. His existence in this society has only left the reassurance of society’s boundaries rather than their questioning. Now that society has confined him, the discourse of insanity is finally silenced within the walls of rationality. In the state hospital, he is put in a cage next to another serial killer who ate the brains of his victims. Ballard never talked to him, because “he had nothing to say to a crazy man and the crazy man had long since gone mute with the enormity of his crimes” (McCarthy 193). Like Ballard, that serial killer will die and no one will know why he committed those crimes. Society only needs to have them in confinement, where they can roam freely, because nobody cares about their reasons to commit crimes or to understand their discourse. Understanding their discourse, their crimes, would make them defensible. Society avoids that by objectifying their discourse, so every person in confinement is just a madman.

As any threat to the symbolical order has been neutralized, violence can continue existing as a valid form. Ballard’s death is met with more concealed violence, and it is precisely the violence from the medical system (the same that has used the rationality of science to create confinement) that goes unnoticed as such:

His head was sawed open and the brains removed. His muscles were stripped from his bones. His heart was taken out. His entrails were hauled forth and delineated and

the four young students who bent over him like those haruspices of old perhaps saw monsters worse to come in their configurations. At the end of three months when the class was closed Ballard was scraped from the table into a plastic bag and taken with others of his kind to a cemetery outside the city and there interred. A minister from the school read a simple service. (McCarthy 194)

The coldness of this very objective description can be considered as a critique to the medical system that has confined Ballard, but also to the whole foundations of society. An episode that somehow foreshadows this violence is when an old man tells Sheriff Turner: “I think people are the same from the day God first made one” (McCarthy 168). Society’s perception of violence has been concealed within rationality. Violent acts that defend society are rational acts of justice. So the old man’s answer to the Sheriff’s implication that people were more violent in the times of the White Caps contradicts the implied objectification of violence given by Sheriff Turner.

As it has been mentioned before, society has constantly used scapegoats to reassure the boundaries of rationality. Ballard is one of them who will only re-enter the symbolic order after his death by becoming a myth of violence, like the White Caps before him. However, the old man’s response contradicts that notion. What he is implying is that people have always had the same nature, that the ability to be violent is present in everyone, but it goes unnoticed. Society conceals its violence by encapsulating it in one subject; Ballard is blamed for the violence of Sevier County. His history of violence teaches people that they are not violent. As expressed by Brewton, Ballard having a similar function than a taboo, being interesting to see but at the same time prohibited, is a notion that shows how history is recurrent in order to delimit the boundaries of society. Sheriff Turner sees the time of the White Caps as more violent than his times, recurring again to a supposedly darker period to reflect upon his times, as a way to defend that this society has progressed in the sense that it has become more peaceful.

Finally, madness is a construction that has accompanied humanity from the Age of Reason, as described by Foucault’s study. Some of this history is represented in Sheriff Turner’s recount of the White Caps’ violent times. However, its function has not changed. Madness is always the opposition of rationality and it is defined by the latter. What Foucault tries to seek in his study is to describe the archeology of that silence to which madness has been condemned by the oppressive discourse of sanity. This silence is the symptom of man’s inability to understand another mind.

Ballard finds himself in that problem. He has been objectified by his community because of his difficulty to relate to its members. His behavior has been categorized as possibly violent, which is why he causes fear. His discourse is denied because of the constraint society imposes on him, so he has to find a language outside of society. This language, however, also proves to be as unsuccessful as society's. Ballard realizes that his society's discourse of sanity is as meaningless as his own.

Then, the question of Ballard being a "child of god" remains. If, like the old man says, man has always been the same, Ballard's still has the status of a man. He has only adopted another system, a non-social discourse, which has momentarily let him feel fulfilled. Ballard's search for meaning has given him certain realization. His quest has shattered every possibility of meaning. It is by abandoning society, that he realizes that the norms of society protect an order that is based on the idea that understanding is possible. The discourse of rationality conceals the fact that everyone is completely alone, unable to actually know another human being. Ballard is indeed a child of God, in the same isolation like his brothers and sisters.

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