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A novel of de-formation: Cormac McCarthy's Child of God as a postmodern Gothic parody of the Bildungsroman

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Cormac McCarthy's fiction has been widely acclaimed for its unstinting exploration of the subterranean recesses of human subjectivity and its inarticulate horrors. His third novel, *Child of God* (1973), achieves the foregoing by tapping into Gothic and postmodern features, both of which demonstrate a corresponding concern with human subjectivity. As a literary tradition intimately intertwined with the teleological discourse of humanism, the Bildungsroman or the novel of formation can provide an optimal point of departure for participation in the contemporary debate on human subjectivity. Despite the distinct imbrication between *Child of God* and the Bildungsroman, a systematic study of its significance vis-à-vis the novel's stance on human subjectivity in postmodern times has not been conducted. Accordingly, the present study stakes out a new terrain in postmodern Gothic studies by establishing a line of communication between the Gothic, postmodernism, and the tradition of the Bildungsroman based on their relationship with the discourse of humanism. The interplay reconfigures the significance of Gothic horror in the postmodern world. In particular, the current paper argues that *Child of God* is a postmodern parody—in accordance with Linda Hutcheon's definition—of the Bildungsroman, which draws on subversive Gothic elements in order to make a polemic statement about the status of Man in the postmodern world. It will be demonstrated that the novel reiterates the elements of the Bildungsroman with ironic critical distance, portraying the horrid dissolution of humanist subjectivity rather than its teleological progress toward positive identity formation and social integration. It will be indicated, however, that although the protagonist edges toward posthuman monstrosity in such a way as to limn the failure of the Bildungsroman and its humanist tradition, the posthuman liminality and marginality ensuing from this disintegration are not celebrated in the novel, as its Gothicity serves to voice the consequent horrors of this dissolution.

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Introduction

"Reckon you could do it now from watching? He said. Do what, said Ballard."

—(*Child of God*, p. 58)

As one of the greatest living American novelists, Cormac McCarthy is renowned for his daunting plunge into the darkest, scarcely plumbed recesses of the human mind and subjectivity, particularly when his writing is entangled with the Gothic with its unflinchingly visceral confrontation with the grossly material horrors of human existence. McCarthy presents one of his most morbid explorations of human degradation and monstrosity in his third novel, *Child of God* (1973). The novel traces the life and monstrous becoming of a rural Tennessee man called Lester Ballard, who gradually turns into a cave-dwelling serial killer and follows a path to ruin. Although various studies have explored certain aspects of the novel appertaining to identity and the psychological formation of the protagonist,[1] the relationship between the novel and the tradition of the Bildungsroman vis-à-vis human subjectivity has been afforded scant critical attention. Eric Hage is one of the very few scholars to point out the link between McCarthy's novel and the Bildungsroman, but even his study gives it a passing mention. In *Cormac McCarthy: A Literary Companion* (2010), Hage argues that *Child of God* is "as much bildungsroman as work of grotesque horror; it just happens to be about a serial killer" (p. 57). Nevertheless, perhaps partly because of the encyclopedic format of the book, Hage does not delve into this uncharted territory of *Child of God*, which could shed more light on the multifaceted nature of the foregoing novel as an example of the postmodern Gothic genre, particularly as it pertains to one of the most central concerns in the second half of the twentieth century, that is to say, human subjectivity. Moreover, Hage contends that McCarthy's novel fits comfortably into the tradition of the Bildungsroman, as it follows a trajectory consonant with the progressive development and self-realization of the protagonist typical of that tradition. Taking into consideration the original contribution of the discourse of humanism to the Bildungsroman and their inextricable relationship, which make for a cogent point of departure, the present study posits that *Child of God* targets the tradition of Bildungsroman or novel of formation in order to partake in the postmodern debate about the condition of human subjectivity. This study, however, dissents from Hage's argument that the novel stands in an uncritical and harmonious relationship with the Bildungsroman. Instead, foregrounding the humanist tradition of the Bildungsroman, the current study argues that *Child of God* is a postmodern Gothic novel that parodies the tradition of the Bildungsroman and its humanist ideals. It will be demonstrated that the use of parody in the novel corresponds to Linda Hutcheon's definition of postmodern parody propounded in her *A Theory of Parody* (1985) and *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988), as "imitation characterized by ironic inversion" (2000, p. 6). Exploring the intimate connection between the Bildungsroman and humanist principles, this study will subsequently indicate that the target of this parodic reprise of the Bildungsroman is specifically its reliance on such humanist notions as self-acculturation, self-empowering reason, mastery, social acceptance, and harmony. Furthermore, it is indicated that this parodic representation is actualized by dint of the Gothic, whose parodic nature and horror-filled obsession with human subjectivity dovetails with and amplifies its correlates in postmodernism. As a result, the disturbing playfulness of the Gothic, intensified by its combination with postmodern ontological and epistemological subversion, which lends *Child of God* its concurrently "comic and tragic" tenor (Pacientino, 2006, p. 199), disrupts the wonted path of the Bildungsroman toward positive development and social acceptance, thereby registering the critical "difference at the heart of similarity" characteristic of postmodern parody (Hutcheon, 2000, p. 8). In other words, the advancement of the narrative depicts the disintegration of the humanist subjectivity in lieu of its positive consummation, leading, instead, to the formation of a posthuman subject with monstrous overtones and radically liminal, as well as marginal, modes of existence. The parodic representation of the Bildungsroman serves as a semi-transparent pall beneath which *Child of God* lends voice to the Gothic horrors of the dissolving humanist subjectivity in the postmodern world. Accordingly, this study probes into a fresh reconceptualization of the significance of Gothic horror within a postmodern context as depicted in McCarthy's novel.

The following sections will break down and coherently expound on each of the foregoing elements that comprise the theoretical framework of this study. Following an investigation of the intimate link between the tradition of the Bildungsroman and Enlightenment humanism, it will be demonstrated that the novel can be regarded as a special imitation of the Bildungsroman according to Wilhelm Dilthey's five characteristics of the genre presented in his *Poetry and Experience* (1906). Subsequent to the introduction of Hutcheon's definition of postmodern parody, the apt imbrication between parody, the Gothic, and postmodernism—with particular emphasis on the question of subjectivity—and its relevance to the novel are discussed. Lastly, by tracing the protagonist's ironically degenerative process of becoming a posthuman monster, which is represented through contributive Gothic elements deployed in the setting and characterization of the novel, it will be shown that *Child of God* is a postmodern parody of the humanist tradition of the Bildungsroman. Furthermore, as it will be indicated, the postmodern Gothic nature of the novel undercuts any optimistic vision of the posthuman alternative in the wake of the dissolution of humanist subjectivity.

The Bildungsroman and the humanist tradition

Save for the German origin of the term Bildungsroman, virtually every other aspect of the genre has been open to debate. According to Tobias Boes, the term Bildungsroman was first coined by a professor of rhetoric called Karl Morgenstern in a lecture entitled "Concerning the Spirit and Cohesion of a Number of Philosophical Novels" delivered in 1810. The term, however, was discussed in a more systematic manner by Morgenstern in another lecture entitled "On the Nature of the *Bildungsroman*" nine years later (Boes, 2012, p. 1). Nevertheless, it was with Wilhelm Dilthey's 1870 biography of Friedrich Schleiermacher and his 1906 study *Poetry and Experience* that the term gained traction in modern criticism (Boes, 2006, p. 231). It has been commonly acknowledged that Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795) is the "paradigmatic example" of the German Bildungsroman or the novel of formation (Boes, 2012, p. 1), which is "linked to *Humanität* as harmonious development of individuality" through "a metamorphoses of role and character" (Ryan et al., 2022). Despite the lack of general consensus as to the specific definition of the term, its birth, as Sarah Graham points out, is "deeply implicated with the German Enlightenment" (2019, p. 2). The association with Enlightenment humanism has been noted by Dilthey, who posits that the Bildungsroman is "an aesthetic expression of the Enlightenment concept of *Bildung* and… presents a regulated development of the hero or heroine who has to reach fulfillment and harmony by passing through various conflicts of life" (Golban 10). Jean Francois Lyotard also points out the intimate relationship between Cartesian philosophy and the Bildungsroman when he notes that in Descartes the legitimacy of

science is demonstrated "in a *Bildungsroman*, which is what the *Discourse on Method* amounts to" (1984, p. 29; italics in the original). As for the translation of the word into English, although the "roman" in the word Bildungsroman means "novel," "bildung" is more elusive and could be translated into English as "formation," "development," or "growth" (Graham 2). Nevertheless, as Petru Golban notes, the "novel of development" and the "novel of formation" are the most frequently used English equivalents of the Bildungsroman (2018, p. 8), the latter of which is the one used in this study because of its correspondence to Dilthey's definition of the genre. Dilthey's insistence on the idea of formation is also in tune with Mikhail Bakhtin's "process of becoming" (1986, p. 23), which he identifies as the focal point of the genre in "The Bildungsroman and Its Significance in the History of Realism" (1936–38). Although this study employs the five characteristics stated by Dilthey and his definition of the Bildungsroman as "a type of novel that portrayed personal emergence simultaneously as a psychological maturation and social integration" (Graham, 2019, p. 90), it dissents from Dilthey's insistence on its peculiarity to German literature. It need not be stated that this study also rebuts the claim made by a number of scholars that the novel formation is "primarily a nineteenth-century phenomenon" (Boes, 2006, pp. 230–231).

Although the term "humanism" resists a single unified definition, the definitional framework used in this study focuses on the Western ideal of Man formulated by "Protagoras as 'the measure of all things'" with bodily normativity and a capacity for mental perfectibility, which constitutes the warp and woof of the humanist conception of subjectivity (Braidotti, 2013, p. 13). While this study refuses to reduce Western humanism to a caricature of the Enlightenment, its focus is mainly on the Enlightenment aspects of the humanist discourse, rather than the primarily pedagogical humanism of the Renaissance. As Tony Davies argues, although some of the notions frequently associated with the tradition of humanism can be traced back to the Renaissance, the term was coined for the first time by Enlightenment scholars, such as Friedrich Immanuel Niethammer, in Germany in the nineteenth century (1997, p. 9). Although Davies stresses the protean and elusive nature of the concept, it is possible to demarcate some of its constitutive convictions, which extensively overlap with Enlightenment ideals as one of its phases. According to Rosi Braidotti, humanism "combines the biological, discursive and moral expansion of human capabilities into an idea of teleologically ordained, rational progress" (2013, p. 13). There is fundamental faith, Braidotti continues, "in the unique, self-regulating and intrinsically moral powers of human reason" embedded in the discourse of humanism (2013, p. 13). In particular, the Cartesian subjectivity enmeshed in the Enlightenment discourse, which Charles Taylor regards as an "epistemological revolution with anthropological consequences" (1977, p. 4), operates as one of the emblems of the doctrine of humanism. The Cartesian subject with its mind/body dualism is predicated on three notions vis-à-vis the subject's relation to knowledge and the external world, that is to say, the "self-defining, all-knowing, and formally empowered subject of consciousness" comprises the Cartesian subject of humanism (Gandhi, 1998, p. 35). Accordingly, it is easy to discern the imbrication between the thematic concerns of the Bildungsroman and such humanist notions as self-acculturation, self-empowering reason, mastery, social integration, and harmony. As Paul Sheehan aptly puts it, the Bildungsroman is "essential to an emplotment of the transactions between the human (humanism, *humanitas*) and the novel" (2004, p. 5). Sheehan further argues that

> If Cartesian individualism gave to the novel a model of subjectivity, Cartesian dualism provided the dilemma that only the *Bildungsroman* could overcome: Enlightenment frustration with the relationship between *res cogitans* (rational human subjects) and *res extensa* (lifeless objects, including animals). The 'solution' proffered was to see discursive philosophy as a kind of category mistake. It is *fiction* that can perform this task, not philosophy. (p. 4, italics in the original)

Consequently, "humanistic historicism, conceived as an ideology of perfection through time" (Boes, 2012, p. 157) constitutes "the logical domain of the novel of formation" (Boes, 2012, p. 150). In a similar vein, Stanley Bates argues that the formation of the Bildungsroman somehow "confirm[s] Hegel's view that a central line of literature will concern the formation and development of individual consciousness in a variety of contingent circumstances. Hence, a character in this kind of literature is both a component and a topic of the work of art" (Bates, 2009, p. 403) In other words, in this type of literature, "the plot *is* the character—the representation of 'how one becomes who one is'" (Bates, 2009, p. 404; italics in the original). Thus, the idea of individual advancement toward a final destination constitutive of the Bildungsroman concurrently suggests a "universal" rather than a "merely singular telos" (Boes, 2012, p. 19) and is, therefore, inextricably interwoven with the discourse of humanism. Following a discussion of the congruence between the Gothic, postmodernism, and parody, the following section will attempt to demonstrate that "the realization of the self," particularly in terms of "a sense of who one is, gender distinction, family and professional perspectives, social and interhuman status and role,… communication and behaviour, [and] personal discernment" (Golban, 2018, p. 18) is subverted in *Child of God*.

Child of God as a postmodern Gothic parody of the Bildungsroman

As Maria Beville argues in her insightful study of Gothic postmodernism, a link could be forged between the Gothic and postmodernism based on the notion of terror as well as an emphatic concern with (de-centred) human subjectivity. According to Beville, the terror of the Gothic, "often inherent in its monsters and othered bodies, functions as a deconstructive counter-narrative which presents the darker side of subjectivity, the ghosts of otherness that haunt our fragile selves" (2009, p. 41). The enunciation of the sublime effects of terror is the "primary function" of both Gothic rhetoric and postmodernist literature, both of which can be perceived as routes to "the unknown, unrepresentable aspects of self and reality" (Beville, 2009, p. 15). Accordingly, presenting a hybrid mode that "emerges from the dialogic interaction of Gothic and postmodernist characteristics in a given text" (2009, p. 9), Beville contends that the Gothic serves "as the clearest mode of expression in literature for voicing the terrors of postmodernity; a mode that is far from dead and in fact rejuvenated in the present context of increased global terrorism" (Beville, 2009, p. 8). However, as Catherine Spooner points out, the components of the Gothic can be "reordered in infinite combinations, because they provide a lexicon that can be plundered for a hundred different purposes, a crypt of body parts that can be stitched together in myriad different permutations" (2006, p. 156). Thus, unlike Beville who analyses postmodern texts that are characteristically Gothic (2009, p. 10), this study regards *Child of God* as a primarily Gothic text that is embedded in a postmodern context, which, according to Jean Baudrillard, is also "a culture of death" (1993, p. 127). Postmodernism can be regarded as being similarly concerned with "excess, anxiety, fear and death" (Beville, 2009, p. 11). Baudrillard notes, however, that this death does not simply affect "a subject or a body" as "the real event" but is "a form in which the determinacy of the subject and

of value is lost" (1993, p. 5). Therefore, in the postmodern world, identity "is untenable: it is death" (Baudrillard, 1993, p. 4). Furthermore, the Gothic "fascination with terror, the negative and the irrational, and its hostility toward accepted codes of reality, place it firmly in the realm of revolution," and what makes it more "terrifying is that this revolution is against humanity itself" (Beville, 2009, p. 19). According to Fred Botting, the Gothic "shadow[s] the progress of modernity with counter-narratives displaying the underside of enlightenment and humanist values" (2005, p. 1). In other words, the Gothic "condenses the many perceived threats to these values, threats associated with… imaginative excesses and delusions,… human evil, social transgression, mental disintegration and spiritual corruption" (2005, p. 1). The Gothic, Botting continues, "remains fascinated by objects and practices that are constructed as negative, irrational, immoral and fantastic" (2005, p. 1). Accordingly, both the Gothic and postmodernism disrupt "the narrative construction of the [humanistic] self" and undermine its validity in their idiosyncratic contexts (Beville, 2009, p. 16). Botting suggests that the imbrication between the postmodern and the Gothic transpires with "[t]he loss of human identity and the alienation of the self from both itself and the social bearings in which a sense of reality is secured," materializing "in the threatening shapes of increasingly dehumanized environments… and violent, psychotic fragmentation" (2005, p. 102). A fusion of Gothic and postmodern characteristics can, therefore, synergize their effects and better voice the more recent terrors of the postmodern age, whereby the inherent hybridity of the fusion echoes the liminality of the postmodern subject. Nevertheless, the current study also establishes a connection between the two based on another common and equally hybridizing, denominator, namely parody.

As Leslie Fiedler argues, "the Gothic mode is a form of parody, which carries out its attacks through exaggeration to the limit of grotesqueness" (1960, p. 406). This study expands on the parodic nature of the Gothic by forging a complementary link with Hutcheon's notion of postmodern parody. In *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988), Hutcheon explores the role of parody in postmodern fiction, maintaining that it is "a perfect postmodern form" as it "paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies" (2004, p. 11). For Hutcheon, postmodern parody does not rely on humour to provide playful pleasure. Rather, the pleasure of its irony comes from "the degree of engagement of the reader in the intertextual 'bouncing'… between complicity and distance" (Hutcheon, 2000, p. 32). Thus, Hutcheon defines parody as "a stylistic confrontation, a modern recoding which establishes difference at the heart of similarity" (Hutcheon, 2000, p. 8). In other words, "in its ironic 'transcontextualization' and inversion," parody is "repetition with [critical] difference" (Hutcheon, 2000, p. 32). Hutcheon speculates that the ubiquity of parody in postmodern world could be traced to "a crisis in the entire notion of the subject as a coherent and continuous source of signification" (2000, p. 5). As Arthur Kroker also notes, the situation of postmodernity involves humans who are "[n]o longer the Cartesian thinking subject,… but a fractal subjectivity in an ultramodern culture where panic science is the language of power" (1987, p. 181). Both the Gothic and postmodernism exploit exaggeration and intertextuality to produce a polemic relationality to another discourse. Moreover, the parodic effects of both the Gothic and postmodernism show a consistent concern with the failure and disintegration of the humanist subject. Their combination affords the author an opportunity to "speak *to* a discourse from *within* it" (Hutcheon, 1985, p. 35; italics in the original) by relying on the difference between "parodic foreground and parodied background that is ironically played upon" (Hutcheon, 2000, p. 31). This "dialogic, parodic reappropriation of the past" (Hutcheon, 2000, p. 72),

which corresponds to the Gothic as also a "reappropriation of the past" (Punter, 1996a, p. 27), makes a statement about the present as well. As Robert Miles argues, "the Gothic is a discursive site, a carnivalesque mode for representations of the fragmented subject" (1993, p. 4). In other words, as two comparable discursive sites, postmodernism and the Gothic rework and synthesize the past and the present with critical intent. Nevertheless, it bears noting that the Gothic is not a mere fictional reflection but, rather, a forerunner in the struggle to tackle the growing horror of floundering "masternarratives about humanity" (Halberstam and Livingston, 1995, p. 4). According to Jerold E. Hogle, Kristeva argues that "grotesques" were "explicitly created to embody [the] contradictions" and indeterminacy of our identities (2002, p. 7), or in Beville's terms, "those obstacles to subjective knowledge and the creation of coherent identity" (2009, p. 39). In fact, as David Punter and Glennis Byron note,

> The distortion of perspective which is a constant hallmark of Gothic fiction finds a further 'home' in the postmodern, and… this twist of history has precisely to do… with the Gothic's 'origin' as a counter-discourse to the modernizing impulse of the Enlightenment, and with postmodernism's complex rebuttal and development of Modernism's own post-Enlightenment progressive dictates. (2004, p. 53)

As a result, it is easy to discern how the parody embedded in both the Gothic and postmodernism could be trained at the Bildungsroman with its humanistic conception of subjectivity. Now that a synergic relationship between the Gothic and postmodernism has been established through their mutual engagement with terror, human subjectivity, and parody, these elements and their function can be examined in McCarthy's *Child of God*, which this study considers a postmodern Gothic novel that makes a statement about the present through a parodic reappropriation of the humanist Bildungsroman.

In order to establish a link between *Child of God* and the tradition of the Bildungsroman, an examination of the characteristics of the Bildungsroman and their compatibility with the novel would be vital. As stated above, the primary features of the Bildungsroman on which this study draws are those proposed by Dilthey. G. B. Tennyson enumerates the five main characteristics Dilthey attributes to the Bildungsroman in the chapter entitled "Friedrich Hölderlin" in his *Poetry and Experience* as follows:

> (1) the idea of Bildung, or formation… shaping of a single main character, normally of a young man; (2) individualism, especially the emphasis on the uniqueness of the protagonist and the primacy of his private life and thoughts, although these are at the same time representative of an age and culture; (3) the biographical element… in what Dilthey calls the 'conscious and artistic presentation of what is typically human through the depiction of a particular individual life'; (4) the connection with psychology, especially the then-new psychology of development; and (5) the ideal of humanity, of the full realization of all human potential as the goal of life.' (1968, p. 136)

Similarly, McCarthy's *Child of God* depicts the conflict-plagued life and identity formation of a single character, that is, a young man named Lester Ballard. The pervasive concern with identity could be summarized in Ballard's reflection rendered in free indirect style when he watches "cold stars sprawled across the smokehole and wonder[s] what stuff they [are] made of, or himself" (p. 107). The individualism in the novel is evident, as the narrative pivots around Ballard and the process of his becoming. The Frankenstein-like isolation and claustrophobic focus on Ballard highlight the individualism and the concern with individual identity formation in the novel. However, the uniqueness of

the protagonist has culturally representative overtones, which will be further analysed in the postmodern Gothic context of the novel. As Philip L. Simpson argues, "any given depiction of the Gothic killer will be inextricably linked to the historical context in which the author composes his or her work" (2000, p. 135). In other words, the serial killer opts to "write an identity on the body politic" (2000, p. 135). Accordingly, in keeping with the Bildungsroman, the elements of identity formation and individualism surrounding McCarthy's Gothic serial killer have socio-historical implications.

The biographical element is manifest in both the concentration of the narrative on Ballard's life as its focal point and the episodic, yet significant, information about Ballard's childhood and background, which the postmodern Gothic nature of the novel accommodates. In a number of chapters, the reader learns about Ballard's troubled childhood through minor characters. For example, the reader learns that Ballard's father committed suicide by hanging himself when Ballard was about "nine or ten year old [sic]" (p. 22). Moreover, his "mother had run off," which, following the death of his father, made him an orphan (p. 22). In another chapter, it is related that Ballard "worked for old man Whaley settin fenceposts" to buy a rifle "when he was just almost a boy," and he was a crack shot, who could "hit anything he could see" (p. 47). One character recounts an anecdote about Ballard's grandfather, who was a cheat, and had a younger brother, who was hanged (p. 63). At the end of his account, he concludes, "You can trace em back to Adam if you want and goddamn if he didn't outstrip em all," suggesting that the Ballards' genealogy has followed a degenerative trajectory (p. 63). Analysing the Gothic body in the nineteenth century by drawing on Bénédict Morel's degeneration theory, Kelly Hurley notes that "degeneracy was [deemed] progressive in its effects, as the original contamination… intensified itself in the offspring, and was manifested in the increasing mental and physical deformity of each successive generation" (1996, p. 68). As it will be demonstrated, a similar degeneration can be detected in Child of God, which is not merely genealogical but also individual. Accordingly, the reiteration of the foregoing characteristics in the novel does not follow an uncritically affirmative trajectory. Rather, it is in the psychological formation and the progress of the protagonist toward the ideal of humanity by the realization of his potential that postmodern parody intercedes, as the narrative and character development depart from the wonted path of the protagonist in a typical Bildungsroman.

Regarding the postmodern context of the novel, Robert L. Jarrett argues that Child of God "trace[s] the outlines of postmodern alienation in which the solitary consciousness—the narrator's and the reader's—reflects and operates on an externalized nature, man, and history" (1993, pp. 29–30). According to Jarrett, "McCarthy's fiction places an increasing emphasis on interpolated tales, exhibiting thereby a pronounced self-consciousness about narrative and the function of the novels within the postmodern world" (1993, pp. 145–146). Furthermore, the theme of "the quest undertaken through a visionary landscape" (Jarrett, 1997, p. x), which involves a concern with human subjectivity, and the role of "interpolated tales" (p. x) accommodate the engagement with intertextuality through the use of parody. As stated earlier, the postmodern parody in Child of God operates through Gothic elements, whose principal effects are horror, terror, and degenerative excess associated with "the primitive, the barbaric, and the tabooed" (Punter, 1996a, p. 4). Underscoring the pivotal roles of character and setting in the Gothic, Punter and Byron maintain that there is "a double sense of dislocated space and threatened subjectivity" in postmodern Gothic (2004, p. 51). Similarly, as it will be indicated in the following sections, the Gothic elements turning the wheels of postmodern parody in Child of God

materialize, for the most part, in the setting and the monstrous characterization of the protagonist, who follows a path toward becoming posthuman, which the novel equates with monstrosity. It bears noting that the primacy of the setting and characterization in the Gothic corresponds to the dominance of the same components in the Bildungsroman, making them an apt target for parody.

Degeneration and Gothic space in Child of God
As K.L. Poe points out, the setting is "[c]rucial to the narrative structure of the Bildungsroman" so much so that it is "practically a character itself" (2002, p. 147; italics in the original). The series of settings in the Bildungsroman usually follow a "controlled sequence… each a further step towards the harmonious and meaningful integration of the… individual into society" (Ehland, 2003, p. 92). A cognate concern with the setting feeds into both the Gothic and postmodernism insofar as "the complications of postmodern writing, particularly in the areas of subjectivity and location (the inner and outer worlds), reflect back onto and into the Gothic" (Punter and Byron, 2004, p. 53). The Gothic setting usually deals either in "claustrophobia, so often the obvious image for the repressed and dislocated psyche," or "in anxieties about being… dwarfed into insignificance by [nature]" (Punter, 1996b, p. 81). Both effects can be found in the spatial setting of Child of God, in whose procession the typical progressive setting of the Bildungsroman is subverted. Nevertheless, even though there are scenes when Ballard is dwarfed by nature,[2] the Gothic setting in the novel primarily serves a playfully specular purpose for the reflection of the growing alienation and degenerative journey of the protagonist. Images of decay pervade Ballard's surroundings. The novel opens with a scene in which the narrator compares the auctioneer's voice to "a ghost chorus among old ruins" (p. 10). The "empty shell of a house" Ballard squats (p. 33) is strewn with "old newspapers," "dried dung of foxes and possums," and "bits of brickcolored mud fallen from the board ceiling with their black husks pupae" (p. 16). There is "a spider hung" in the chimney, which reeks of "a rank odour of earth and old woodsmoke," and the floor of the hearth is "ashy" (p. 16). Other houses also evoke images of decay and degeneration. For example, when Ballard stops by Ralph's house and brings a robin for Billy, the place is described thus: "familiar of the warped floorboards and the holes tacked up with foodtins hammered flat, a consort of roaches and great hairy spiders in their season, perenially benastied and afflicted with a nameless crud" (p. 60). As Jarrett notes, McCarthy's setting functions both as "realistic regional detail and as universal symbols of postmodern contemporary existence" (1993, p. 47). The ruined house, for instance, is a recycled Gothic image indicative of contemporary alienation. Cars are also described as "degenerate" (p. 25), leaving "coiling dust" behind (p. 33), or "rusting" in a corner (p. 32). The ashy snow, too, is a Gothic "palimpsest" revealing "old buried wanderings, struggles, [and] scenes of death" (p. 106). Nevertheless, it is not only that the novel is riddled with Gothic images of decay, but that an incremental degeneration pervading the Gothic setting feeds the parodic effect of the novel by undermining the advancement of the narrative toward positive progress and social integration. The further the narrative advances, the more claustrophobic and primitive the atmosphere of the setting becomes. Following the loss of the relatively civilized house in the fire, the cave, which is the quintessential image of the primitive, the barbaric, and the tabooed, becomes Ballard's new home. There is a subversive edge to the irony that permeates the image of the cave succeeding that of the ruined house. The irony intimates the "primal wilderness" (Jarrett, 1997, p. 41) lying beneath the rusting patina of postmodern civilization that had been precariously sustained by the image of the ostensibly civilized house before giving way to the

veritably primitive cave. In other words, the already crumbling image of civilization collapses into the archetypal image of the cave. This spatial degeneration correlates to its counterpart in characterization. It is "in the bowels of the mountain," where the convoluted walls were "slavered over… with wet and *bloodred* mud [and] had an *organic* look to them, like the innards of some great *beast*" (p. 102; italics added), that the setting evolves into a double character embodying the extreme alienation and degenerative transformation of the protagonist, who undergoes an ironically regressive rebirth into a cave-dwelling, corpse-hoarding posthuman monster. The ironic rebirth, in turn, parodies the epiphanic sense of regeneration typical of the Bildungsroman.

Toward the end of the novel, the setting occasionally employs the phantasmagorical character of the Gothic as a morbid harbinger of death. At one point in the cave, the setting melds with Ballard's morbid dream, in which "he was riding to his death" as "each leaf that brushed his face deepened his sadness and dread" (p. 129). The inextricable relationship between Ballard's stage of degeneration and the setting is once again suggested in the hospital, where he was taken following his assault on John Greer, which resulted in the loss of his arm. In the hospital, Ballard "lay in a waking dream," as "the cracks in the yellowed plaster of the ceiling and upper walls seemed to work on his brain" (p. 130). His "spindly legs lay pale and yellow looking on the sheet" (p. 132). It is easy to discern that the yellow in the setting, which symbolizes decay, correlates with the yellow of Ballard's body and mind. The collapse of the setting into more degenerative and claustrophobic spaces continues when Ballard is symbolically interred in "a cage next door but one to a demented gentleman who used to open folks' skulls and eat the brains inside with a spoon" (p. 145). Even following his death, the space Ballard occupies shrinks as he is shipped to the basement room of the state medical school at Memphis, where he is "flayed, eviscerated, [and] dissected" before being "scraped into a plastic bag" to be taken to a cemetery outside the city reserved for his kind (p. 145). Accordingly, the degenerative setting of the novel is most strikingly manifest in Ballard's habitation shifts from a passably civilized house to a cave, a cage, the dissection table of a medical school, a plastic bag, and ultimately a remote cemetery. Consequently, instead of progressing toward a better condition of life and successful social integration, which are typically reflected in and facilitated by the setting, the Gothic setting of *Child of God* is subversively degenerative in a way that mirrors both the physical and psychological degeneration of the protagonist. In other words, the Gothic setting in the novel directly contributes to "the ironic inversion" constitutive of the parody at play. Nevertheless, the setting supplements the overriding component of the Bildungsroman, namely, characterization, which comprises the focus of the following section.

Lester Ballard: a "bedraggled parody"[3] of Bildung

The Bildungsroman pivots around the identity formation and psychological development of the protagonist. Since it consists of a teleology of individuality as "an ideal type" that "carries with it many assumptions about the autonomy and relative integrity of the self [and] its potential self-creative energies" (Sammons, 1991, pp. 41–42), characterization is arguably its most vital constituent. If the plot and the character are virtually identical in the Bildungsroman (Bates, 2009, p. 404), one can go so far as to argue that the character is the plot. Thus, in order for the "critical ironic distance" of parody (Hutcheon, 2000, p. 34) to work in the novel, it needs to target characterization above all. Similarly, in *Child of God*, postmodern parody operates chiefly through Gothic lineaments in characterization. Through postmodern parody as "the [concurrent] inscription of continuity and change" (Hutcheon, 2000, p. 36), the novel depicts the life and becoming of Ballard in imitation of the

typical Bildungsroman but with ironic critical distance finessed by the Gothic, which undercuts "the humanistic concept of the shaping of the individual self from its innate potentialities through acculturation and social experience" (Sammons, 1991, p. 41). Instead of approximating to the ideal Man, the protagonist is portrayed as becoming a monster, which the novel equates with the posthuman. There is a relatively implicit congruence between the Gothic and the posthuman, which *Child of God* vehemently underscores in order to vent the horrors of the postmodern world. At the heart of the Gothic resides "materialism without transcendent anchor" (Hurley, 1996, p. 9), which "discloses bodies as partial and plural categories rather than definite objects" (Botting, 2019, p. 241). Along similar lines, what is meant by the posthuman here corresponds to Cary Wolfe's conceptualization of posthumanism as the condition of being mired in corporeality as opposed to the humanist insistence that "'the human' is achieved by escaping or repressing not just its animal origins in nature, the biological, and the evolutionary, but more generally by transcending the bonds of materiality and embodiment altogether" (2010, xv). If we add Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's monster theory to the equation, the overlap between Gothic monstrosity and the posthuman becomes more striking. According to Cohen, the monster is "the harbinger of category crisis" (1996, p. 6) and "stands at the threshold of becoming" (1996, p. 20). The category crisis characterizing the monster consists in the very essence of human subjectivity. As a liminal body, the Gothic monster, or in Hurley's terms the abhuman body "that retains traces of human identity but has become, or is in the process of becoming, something quite different" threatens "the integrity of human identity," while "occupying the space between the terms of such oppositions as human and beast, male and female, civilized and primitive" (Punter and Byron, 2004, p. 41). Characterization in *Child of God* capitalizes on both of the foregoing features in order to exert its parodic effect. McCarthy infuses Ballard with "the primitive, the barbaric, and the tabooed" (Punter, 1996a, p. 4) characteristic of Gothic monstrosity through animal imagery, sexual behaviour, as well as physical and psychological characterization. Animal imagery is used both to describe the physical features of the protagonist and convey his increasing alienation from human society. Ballard's life is crowded with animals. Throughout the novel, he keeps a household with all kinds of animals: spiders, crickets, snakes, dogs, cats, fish, doves, a robin, and even teddy bears and a stuffed tiger, which he won in a shooting contest at the country fair. At multiple points in the narrative, the narrator blends the protagonist's subjectivity with animals and beasts using the Gothic element of grotesque exaggeration. Ballard is limned as "a misplaced and loveless simian shape" (p. 20), a "gargoyle," which represents animal-human hybridity (p. 37), "a crazy winter gnome" (p. 83), "a crazed mountain troll" (p. 114), "a part-time ghoul" (p. 130), and even as an infra-animal "thing" (p. 88, p. 115). At several points in the novel, Ballard visits a house belonging to a man named Ralph. There he meets a child named Billy, whom the narrator introduces as "a huge headed bald and slobbering *primate* that inhabited the lower reaches of the house" (p. 60; italics added) and could hardly be perceived as a child (p. 61). Ballard brings a robin for Billy and seems to understand him very well. In fact, the narrative suggests that there is an affinity between Ballard and Billy, whose names also tellingly resemble one another. When Billy chews off the legs of the robin, Ballard remarks understandingly: "He wanted it to where it couldn't run off" (p. 62). Analogously, Ballard murders people so that they can never run off and keep him company forever. Later on, Ballard observes affirmatively, "Why that boy's got good sense" (p. 87). It can, therefore, be argued that Billy mirrors the posthuman monstrosity of Ballard. Accordingly, one of the categories that Ballard undermines is human/beast and human/animal.

Another category Ballard problematises is male/female. Apart from animal-like and beastly features associated with Ballard, his gender performance is incrementally blurred when his longtime habit of "wearing the underclothes of his female victims" develops into "appearing in their outerwear as well" (p. 107). The category crisis feeding into Ballard's monstrosity and becoming posthuman is reasserted when he is described as a "gothic doll in illfit clothes, its carmine mouth floating detached and bright in the white landscape" (p. 107). Subsequently, when he confronts John Greer, Ballard is again "in frightwig and skirts" (p. 127). It will be additionally demonstrated that Ballard's category crises are also degenerative as he gradually moves through regressive stages of the posthuman: becoming-animal, monster, thing, (living) corpse, and, ultimately, apparition. In that sense, posthumanism is portrayed as a kind of primitivism in the novel. As Austin Lillywhite also notes, like posthumanism, the "primitivist worldview disrupts the traditional Western category of a fully bounded, autonomous, white humanity that is opposed to an inert, passive materiality" (2018, p. 114). Thus, the ulterior logic shared by both "hinges on undoing binaries of inner/outer, person/thing; the result is a crisis of subjectivity, brought on by the desire for… the rank of brute thingness" (Lillywhite, 2018, p. 114). When this primitivism is conceived of as degenerative regression, it becomes a "gothic" discourse (Hurley, 1996, p. 65). The cynical nature of the Gothic, as also reflected in McCarthy's novel, amplifies the desire of the foregoing primitivism for "brute thingness" (Lillywhite, 2018, p. 114) and divests its transgressive tenor of its positive potentialities, suggesting that when primitive impulses and modes of existence remain "unchecked," humans are apt to "perform acts of perversity than poetry" (Magistrale, 1996, p. 31). In this sense, the primitive regression of the protagonist from the paradigms of humanism into further entrapment in gross materiality and transgressive becoming—in accordance with the posthuman—recasts the process of becoming the liminal posthuman into a violent objectification of the subject, which is itself a murderous act. In addition to the foregoing category crises, Ballard's act of serial killing and his symbolic affinity with corpses is another behaviour linking him to posthuman Gothic monstrosity. In that sense, Ballard recalls Frankenstein's monster to some extent. According to Ashley Craig Lancaster, "McCarthy combines the tradition of the British Gothicism with the realism of American Gothicism to create an updated version of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*" (132). Both Ballard and Frankenstein's monster, Lancaster continues, are rejected companionship, ostracized by society, and subjected to a "system of social othering" (2008, p. 133), which fuels their process of becoming "degenerate" monsters (2008, p. 142). In particular, Ballard's social alienation progresses to the point where his communion with animals increasingly lapses into a community of corpses, which seems to echo his own subversively posthuman mode of existence. Ballard takes a step further than Frankenstein's monster and becomes a thoroughgoing necrophile in addition to being a serial killer. As pointed out by Punter, "Gothic fiction is erotic at root," and sexual perversion is often the corollary of the repressed "Eros," which "returns in the form of threat and violence" (1996b, p. 191). In Ballard's case, the deviance involves the corpse, which carries several implications. According to Erin E. Edwards, "the corpse marks the cessation of rationalist control over the body, the moment when the socially defined person is given over to biological forces, and the molar form of the human yields to the molecular processes of decomposition" (2018, p. 3). As a result, the corpse is bound up in "a retrospective unraveling of the exclusionary category of the humanist subject, even as it imagines what comes 'after' this traditionally defined human form" (Edwards, 2018, p. 3). At first blush, Ballard's exploitation of corpses may seem to reaffirm the liberal humanist subject's treatment of the body "as an object for control and mastery rather than

as an intrinsic part of the self" (Hayles, 1999, p. 5). This "Gothic commodification" characterizing Gothic monstrosity "exploits the disconnect between genuine human connection and the need to control every aspect of the human victim, particularly the body after death" (Coughlin, 2015, p. 143). Nonetheless, Ballard's underground monstrous dollhouse is a posthuman community intended for catering to his desperate need for companionship and integration. Ballard's collection of corpses, in Vereen Bell's terms, consist of "facsimile people" (1988, p. 61) assembled as compensation for Ballard's social alienation and symbolic or "psychic death" (Jarrett, 1997, p. 44). As Jarrett notes, Ballard's inhabitation of caves is itself "a form of self-entombment or life-in-death that mirrors the death-in-life of his corpses" (1997, p. 45). In other words, Ballard's ostensible control over corpses through Gothic commodification as a substitute for genuine human connection collapses into the subversion of the category of the humanist subject on account of his own identification with the corpse as a symbol of the loss of rationalist control over the body. Death seems to be the only medium through which Ballard can find a semblance of integration and companionship. He gradually tries to achieve integration by assembling a grotesque community of corpses, which corresponds to his own symbolic death. It does not stop there, however. Ballard's dream of "riding to his death" could be construed as "a form of suicide: his inarticulate wish to join his true family composed of his dead father [who had committed suicide] and collection of corpses" (Jarrett, 1997, p. 42). It is only through his actual death that Ballard receives an ironic semblance of social assimilation, which proves to be yet another form of exclusion. In other words, he is temporarily incorporated into society only as a posthuman Other, namely a monstrous corpse, to be "laid out on a slab and flayed, eviscerated, dissected" and after three months of class, "scraped from the table into a plastic bag and taken with *others of his kind* to a cemetery *outside* the city and here interred" (p. 145; italics added). Thus, the world of *Child of God* is a postmodern Gothic world where "the body is turned inside out—actually peeled open—as its organs are splayed, like negative photographic images, across the field of a dead, relational power" (Kroker, 1987, p. 185). The Cartesian self implodes into a "dangling" subject in a body that alternates between "the frenzy of the schizoid ego and the inertia of hermeticism" with its organs hanging out (Kroker, 1987, p. 185). Accordingly, rather than conclude with "a certain practical accommodation between the hero and the social world around him" (Swales, 2015, p. 34), Ballard's journey "terminate[s] in nothingness" (McCarthy, 1993, p. 138). Virtually none of the aspects involved in the identity formation of the typical protagonist in the Bildungsroman, which includes "the realization of the self, and, along with it, of various other aspects such as a sense of who one is, gender distinction, family and professional perspectives, social and interhuman status and role… communication and behaviour" (Golban 18) is achieved in the novel. As a result, the foiled entelechy of the humanist subject and his posthuman disintegration render the Bildungsroman phantasmatic in postmodern times.

It must also be noted that even the ironic closure afforded Ballard is precarious. On the surface, Ballard's degenerative journey may seem conclusive. However, as Cohen points out, the monster "turns immaterial and vanishes, to reappear someplace else" (1996, p. 4) and "each time to be read against contemporary social movements or a specific, determining event" (1996, p. 5). Similarly, toward the end of the novel, Ballard catches a glimpse of a boy on a church bus, who uncannily "looked like himself" (p. 140), suggesting that others like him are bound to emerge. Later on, when "the four young students who bent over him like those haruspices of old perhaps saw monsters worse to come in their configurations" (p. 145), again it is implied that postmodern monsters akin to Ballard will most likely reappear. Thus, the sense of closure characteristic of the

typical Bildungsroman is parodied in a synthesis of continuity—Ballard is dead and disposed of—and critical difference—other monsters will arise. The deep complicity between the Gothic and postmodernism in *Child of God* is predicated on the Gothic horror's correspondence to the postmodern concern with the dissolution of human subjectivity and its dire consequences. Gothic elements are, therefore, utilized so as to advance postmodern parody in a bid to make a critical statement about the condition of human subjectivity in postmodern times, while voicing the horrors that stem from its disintegration. Accordingly, although *Child of God* portrays the failure and dissolution of the humanist subjectivity at the core of the Bildungsroman through postmodern parody, the image of the posthuman subjectivity it depicts as its successor is by no means affirmatively positive. As Punter notes, the Gothic is "too tentative" and "hesitant" to categorically endorse a position (1996b, p. 191). *Child of God* takes posthumanism back to its primitive origins in monstrous becomings by representing the vengeful reemergence of "the structural others of the modern humanistic subject" (Braidotti, 2013, p. 37) in a postmodern Gothic context. In other words, by equating the posthuman with a monstrosity, the novel undercuts any self-congratulatory celebration of a chaotic, liminal, and uncategorizable mode of existence. The foregoing demarcates the point at which the Gothic and postmodernism depart from posthumanism in their insistence on the horrors of the faltering status of Man. Whereas posthumanism seeks to avoid the postmodern collapse into "the rhetoric of the crisis of Man" (Braidotti, 2013, p. 37) by salvaging a new alternative with a celebratory air following the dethronement of the discourse of humanism, the Gothic maps onto the "postmodern fear of the disintegration of the human subject" (Bolton, 2014, p. 2) while pointing "implicitly and constantly to the insupportability of the accepted alternatives" (Punter, 1996b, p. 191). Therefore, it can be concluded that the primary source of horror in *Child of God* as a postmodern Gothic novel resides in "the uncertainty of what we will become and what will be left of us after the change" or dissolution of the human subjectivity (Bolton, 2014, p. 3). The fusion of the Gothic and postmodernism in *Child of God* represents a controversial mode of writing along the lines of what Beville dubs "a literary monster" (2009, p. 16), which mirrors its own protagonist. Accordingly, as "a literary monster" that parodies the tradition of the Bildungsroman, *Child of God* voices the harrowing fears that engulf the situation of human subjectivity in postmodern times by engendering a "dark and mutant" posthuman monster (McCarthy, 1993, p. 118), who ultimately fails to achieve positive self-knowledge, self-realization, social integration, and companionship and succumbs, instead, to incomprehension, alienation, and indeterminacy.

Conclusion

Cormac McCarthy's *Child of God* tackles the crisis of Man and its haunting horrors in a postmodern world of disorienting alienation and decentred subjectivity. To achieve the foregoing, the novel fuses Gothic and postmodern elements into a synergy calibrated for the optimal representation of the horrid disintegration of a master narrative about humanity, namely humanism. Since one of the paradigmatic literary incarnations of the discourse of humanism is the Bildungsroman, it provides the novel with an apt target in the postmodern debate about the condition of human subjectivity. In particular, *Child of God* addresses the crisis of Man by establishing a specific line of communication with the Bildungsroman through postmodern parody in such a way as to both partake in and critique the tradition's humanist ideals. Thus, *Child of God* can be interpreted as a postmodern parody of the tradition of the Bildungsroman in accordance with Linda Hutcheon's definition of postmodern parody as "imitation characterized by ironic inversion" (2000, p. 6), which is itself a corollary of the

postmodern crisis of subjectivity. The target of this parodic reprise of the Bildungsroman is specifically its reliance on such humanist notions as self-acculturation, self-empowering reason, mastery, social acceptance, and harmony. Exploiting the synergic relationship between the Gothic and postmodernism, the novel relies on the Gothic and its indelible association with the primitive, the barbaric, the tabooed, monstrosity, and horror in order to consummate the parodic representation. Accordingly, the disturbing playfulness of the Gothic that complements postmodern parody disrupts the typical path of the Bildungsroman toward positive development and social incorporation. In particular, the setting and characterization are the two vital components that enact and mirror the theme and plot in the Bildungsroman. Similarly, the Gothic cogs in *Child of God*'s machine of postmodern parody operate primarily in the setting and the characterization of the protagonist, who follows a path toward posthuman subjectivity, which the novel equates with monstrosity. Above all, the Gothic degeneration of the setting crystallizes in Ballard's habitation shifts from a relatively civilized house to a cave, a cage, the dissection table of a medical school, a plastic bag, and ultimately a remote cemetery reserved for outcasts. Thus, in lieu of progressing towards a better condition of life and positive social integration, which are often mirrored in and facilitated by the setting, the Gothic setting of *Child of God* is characterized by subversive degeneration consonant with the physical and psychological degeneration of the protagonist. Similarly, the Gothic lineaments in characterization undercut the teleology of individuality that informs the Bildungsroman. Rather than approximate the ideal Man, the protagonist becomes a posthuman monster, who, as the harbinger of category crisis, threatens the very essence of human subjectivity. Ballard occupies the space between such binary oppositions as human/beast, male/female, and civilized/primitive. He seeks companionship and ventures to find it in a collection of posthuman beings, namely corpses, which reflect his own posthuman mode of existence. Thus, Ballard's life becomes increasingly crowded with animals and then corpses, rather than an accommodating community of people. Moving from real and toy animals to posthuman corpses, the non-human community escalates in a way that echoes Ballard's progressive alienation and dehumanization. Therefore, Ballard's category crises are also degenerative as he passes through regressive stages of the posthuman, ultimately becoming an apparition to rematerialise in new shapes. The upshot is that Dilthey's theorization of the Bildungsroman as personal emergence encompassing psychological maturation and social integration is disarticulated in the novel. Nevertheless, by equating the posthuman condition with monstrosity and Gothic primitivism, the novel eschews endorsement of posthumanism as the viable alternative to the crumbling discourse of humanism. Accordingly, *Child of God* accommodates a complementary relationship between the Gothic and postmodern parody in order to lend voice to the most harrowing fear plaguing the haunted postmodern subject, that is, the disintegration of the humanist subjectivity and its dire repercussions.

Notes

1 For more recent studies of the novel, particularly with respect to identity and subjectivity, see for instance, Michael Madsen's "The Uncanny Necrophile in Cormac McCarthy's 'Child of God;' or, How I Learned to Understand Lester Ballard and Start Worrying" (2011), in which he examines Lester as an instance of the uncanny whose liminal position between man and savage reflects the reader's "liminal state of uncomfortable familiarity" (p. 26). Or, Christopher Jenkins's "One Drive, Two Deaths

in Cormac McCarthy's *Child of God*" (2015), which situates the Freudian notions of Eros and Thanatos within what he dubs "the spiritual reality" of the novel, highlighting the spiritual death of the protagonist as a result of his moral degeneration (p. 97). Also, in "A Peculiar High Synthesis: Cormac McCarthy's *Child of God* and the Community-Created Other" (2022), Trevor Jackson traces Lester's actions and identity formation to the epistemological assumptions of modernity, contending that Lester's actions and ideas proceed from his modern social milieu.

2 For instance, "He passed a wind felled tulip poplar on the mountainside that held aloft in the grip of its roots two stones the size of field wagons, great tablets on which was writ only a tale of vanished seas with ancient shells in cameo and fishes etched in lime. Ballard among gothic tree boles, almost jaunty in the outsized clothing he wore, fording drifts of kneedeep snow" (p. 97). Or, "In the black smokehole overhead the remote and lidless stars of the Pleiades burned cold and absolute" (p. 101).

3 McCarthy, 1993 (originally published in 1973), p. 116.

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Additional information

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