

*A Child of God Much like Yourself: Cormac McCarthy's Posthuman Serial Killer*

All the world's a stage/ And all the men and women merely players (*As You Like It*).

### **Literary Art in the Social System: Observing the Blind Spots**

The novel, like any work of art, is performing a systemic function. It reveals a blind spot in the system's cognitive operation (Wolfe 223). As Cary Wolfe points out it is performing a "paradox unique to art" that is "observing the unobservable" (224). The work of art, in this case a novel, makes the world visible within our world, and "symboliz[es] the reentry of the world into the world because it appears—just like the world—incapable of emendation" (Luhmann qtd. in Wolfe, 227). The novel, functioning in the medium of language, enters the communications system through the second order observation of its meaning (233). As Ira Livingston points out in *Between Science and Literature: an Introduction to Autopoiesis*, the novel is the reproduction of a system not as something occurring "against the background of the same" but instead a form of "resemblance (or resonance or pattern)" that "can be situated against a background of sameness *and* difference" (Livingston 13). The artistic mimesis of a social world resonates with us because of what Ira Livingston would call "living thinglikeness." It so resembles and yet differs from the world it represents that it makes us able to observe the unobservable, to see the blind spots in a social system that is making the distinctions about whether something living is a person or a thing. Thus, if all the world is a stage, conversely every stage, every novel—every narrative—is also a world, or at least a narrative representation of a world.

The representation of the social system in Cormac McCarthy's *Child of God*, is a good illustration of some of the concerns and themes in posthumanist theory. In posthumanism, we have a systemic drawing of a social boundary, where, according to Niklas Luhmann, difference between persons and objects must always be constituted first, and for this to occur, participation

in communication becomes indispensable (Luhmann 181). Communication depends on the distinction of what is accepted as utterance by a responder. As Luhmann makes clear:

The distinction between persons and things or subjects and objects condenses from this primary distinction [between utterance and information]. Only with the mastery of this semantic is it possible to arrive at the idea of an analogy between one's own and foreign minds. As long as mastery is not attained (or at least not with today's precision), then the boundaries of the social communication system will be drawn differently than they are today. They might include plants and animals, the deceased, ghosts, and gods and might exclude more distant humans, depending on the extent to which socialization can suggest possibilities of communication to the mind. (181)

That the boundaries could be drawn differently is exactly the concern of those who theorize about narrative and systems, and also the concern which *Child of God* exposes as McCarthy explores the communicative event which attributes monsterhood to a man.

Though the fabula of McCarthy's novel is fairly straightforward—boy meets girl, boy kills girl, boy has sex with girl's corpse—the structure of the narrative is relatively complex for a short novel. I choose to read the complexity through a network theory lens, as a sort of Latourian ant following the threads and allowing the reading that the author has structured to lead to a conclusion. Reading itself is a communicative event and as such requires, in social systemic terms, both an utterance, such as the text, and an understanding or interpretation of that utterance. There is no straightforward transmission of ideas, but, as Luhmann points out, there is a synthesis involving a threefold selection of information, utterance, and either understanding or misunderstanding ((mis)understanding) (160). Meaning arises from the distinctions on all sides

of the medium. In other words, for a narrative to become a part of the social system, the communicative event must also involve a reader to select for understanding or misunderstanding. This is also why there is more than one reading available to critics, because there are distinctions to be made by all readers. A second order observer, such as a literary critic, makes distinctions in the narrative representation of a system in order to identify relations and the relations lead to the discovery of structures in the story world. She follows the clues spread throughout the text to tie together meaning structures.

Very often, as good modernists, critics begin by identifying an overlying structure (a ‘feminist’ reading, for example) because we are taught to put things in a frame to begin with and then “compare, explain, and generalize” (RTS 149). However, Latour’s ANT tells us that the actors within the narrative are already doing those things before we get there as readers. In their actions and associations they are framing the narrative they occupy already and making their own comparisons, explanations, and generalizations ready for us to observe. Therefore, we could make a thoroughly non-modern<sup>1</sup> reading in which a character is being influenced and acted on by anything in the system without some sort of metaphysical or other overarching explanation requiring an assumption of rationality on the part of any of the actors. If one approaches a text in this manner, one can examine the ways that the narrative connections are made and where they lead.

Making such a choice is to follow Latour’s prescription in *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor Network Theory*. He is writing to sociologists, but his advice applies just as well to literary critics. He writes that “we have to behave like good ants and to be as moronic, as literalist, as positivist, as relativist as possible” (170). In other words, we should pick a place

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<sup>1</sup> Bruno Latour does not see society as being ‘postmodern’ but sees the narrative deconstruction of the modern nature/society divide as a ‘non-modern’ event.

to start and then examine the relationships and connections that arise from that point. A novel can be examined as the narrative representation of a social system for the various actors, intermediaries, and relationships which make up its assembly. An ANT reading of a text is, in some ways, an act of humility on the part of the critic, who as a reader is observing a structure already inhabited by actors and their relations. Latour warns sociologists and critics that they should not start with a frame that already assumes what is going on in the culture that they are observing; he tells them “don’t be too intelligent...[j]ust follow the trails myopically. Ant you have selected to be, ANT you must remain” (RTS 176). So the ant begins at the beginning, with the first appearance of Lester.

From this beginning, we know that Lester Ballard is a difficult man. His personality and his anger are apparent. He appears at the opening to his barn to watch the auction of his land, and “he is small, unclean, unshaven. He moves in the dry chaff among the dust and slats of sunlight with a constrained truculence. Saxon and Celtic bloods. A child of God much like yourself perhaps” (4). There is a subtle refusal of him that is not apparent until many pages later. The connection comes from one line in the long description of Lester. He is standing in the forebay of his barn looking out and “[b]ehind him there is a rope hanging from the loft” (4). This rope is the one that Lester’s father used to hang himself. One of the unnamed narrators remembering Lester says, “They say he never was right after his daddy killed himself... We went up there and walking the barn and I seen his feet hangin. . . He stood there and watched, never said nothin. He was about nine or ten years old at the time...” His interpretation of Lester’s behavior is that the boy did not care, and in fact he recalls Lester coming for help and that he “told it like you’d tell it was rainin out” (21). In order to make the connection, the reader has to follow the trail from the rope to its context. In the story told of Ballard’s death, no account is

taken of a child in shock, even though the man telling the story is still clearly, if humorously, shocked by it himself: “The old man’s eyes was run out on stems like a crawfish and his tongue blacker’n a chow dog’s. I wisht if a man wanted to hang hisself he’d do it with poison or somethin so folks wouldn’t have to see such a thing as that” (21). Lester, according to the narrative, is a man in his late twenties. He has slept in the place where his father died, apparently for many years. His apparent need to feel close to his father and to be in the one place he feels at home is not an acceptable utterance to the community and they do not receive it. Instead, the depersonalization of his shock is a rewriting of his relationship with his father to make Lester seem uncaring and desocializes him in relation to the community. At this point he begins to be assigned a designation; he is ‘not right.’ The designation is more than a name and a description. Lester begins to be forced outside the community socially and physically. The social systems rejection of his communicative utterance of grief is brutally realized in this opening scene as he throws a tantrum and is laid out with an ax. He goes on to live in an abandoned house on a neighbor’s property, and then, after the house accidentally burns down, he literally goes underground into the caves underneath Sevier county.

Bruce Clarke points out in *Posthuman Metamorphosis: Narrative and Systems* that posthumanism has a number of definitions, but “the common effect...is to relativize the human by coupling it to some other order of being” (3). Of course, this can have the positive effect of making the connection between humans and that order of being something that decentralizes and desacralizes the human in relation to nature, but that carries with it, in a social system, the danger that we have often seen of attributing some humans as something “less” and designating them outside the social system. We have seen this in our own national history, as McCarthy so archly illustrates with the narrative of Sheriff Fate and that of the whitecaps of Sevier County.

One of what I think of as documentary narratives describes Lester's reprobate family, particularly the story of his grandfather Leland Ballard, who apparently was a White Cap, as was his brother. The White Caps, a group similar in purpose and tactics to the Ku Klux Klan, were the center of a violent period of the real history of Sevier County. White yeoman farmers used the anonymity of the White Caps to control and suppress prosperous black men and landowners with intimidation, lynching, and other acts of brutality. They were finally wiped out by the efforts of Deputy Tom Davis in the early twentieth century. According to the narrator telling this story, Lester is the worst of the Ballards, because "[y]ou can trace em back to Adam if you want and goddamn if he didn't outstrip em all" (81). Lester is now linked in some metaphorical sense with what is not only the most violent episode in Sevier County, but also the episode most strongly disavowed by the descendants of the White Caps. This rejection of history also takes place through narrative, linking Lester's story with that of Sheriff Fate, who is fascinated with the period in history.

Sheriff Fate identifies himself with his hero, Deputy Tom Davis and loves to talk with the local judge about the old days and the violence of the White Caps. When the county undergoes a big flood, the sheriff's narrative presents him as the typical southern sheriff, almost an Andy Griffith character. He gets out in a boat and goes through the town doing his job. When a woman in the town says that she "never knew such a place for meanness," Sheriff Fate remembers that it used to be worse (164). Fate and Judge Wade tell Fate's deputy all about the White Caps, but deny any actual involvement in their own history. The judge talks about a famous murder in 1899 that led to the end of the White Caps, and he says "there was a Bob Wade implicated in it that I'm proud to report is no kin of mine" (167). He has sanitized his family name, just as the sheriff is sanitizing the violence in the town. As the judge reports, "[p]eople don't like to talk

about it to this day” (168). The story of the White Caps is reminder of a time when a whole group of people was reinscribed as being outside the social system simply for the color of their skin. Lester’s fate, like that of the blacks under the White Cap regime, is ordained partially by the circumscribing of his options. Fate tells him at one point, “Mr. Ballard... You are either going to have to find some other way to live or some other place in the world to do it in” (a veiled threat that echoes the ones made to blacks resistant to the social limitations placed on them) (123). Unfortunately, as for many of the black residents of the south before the Civil Rights movement, neither of those options is truly available to a poor and unschooled Lester Ballard. Following the link between the real Sevier County and the fictionalized one reveals a strong and very real societal blind spot about narrative. The novel functions to reveal the manner in which stories told within a social system both inform and form the social system. I read the relationship between the stories, the way that utterance is accepted or rejected, and the interpretation of communicative events to represent the way that social communication systems draw boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, or in Luhmannian terms, how they draw the distinction between person and thing. The story of Lester Ballard, and of Sevier County White Caps, is a story of the shifting attribution of personhood through the use of narrative, revealed through the various levels of narration.

The folklore about Lester assigns him a place where he is something other than the other people in the community, a thing more than a person, but the extradiegetic narrator of Lester’s life allows the reader to see Lester at moments of tenderness and loneliness that resonate and that allow us to “to arrive at the idea of an analogy between [our] own and [Lester’s] foreign [mind]” (Luhmann 181). In addition we can see in Lester’s narrative how his assignation to the outside makes it impossible for him to have the home and family that he seeks. His story not only

includes the desire to be close to his father, but a constant drive to surround himself with a semblance of family. As a child he goes to a carnival where he shows off his skills with a rifle, and wins a shooting game three times before he is banned. In those three wins, he gathers “two bears, a tiger, and a small audience” (64). His little collection of stuffed animals follows him until they are lost in the big flood years later. When he eats the corn he gathers, as a grown man, “the two bears and the tiger watch from the wall, their plastic eyes shining in the firelight and their red flannel tongues out” (67). This assemblage is as close as he gets to home.

Lester is so written out of the social network in his neighborhood, that he does not even find a girlfriend from his near neighbor’s daughters who are also described in less than human terms. The nine girls are named from a medical dictionary; Urethra, Cerebella, and Hernia Sue are among the choices (26). The narrator tells us that “like cats in heat [they] attracted surrounding swains to their midden until the old man used to go out at night and fire a shotgun at random, just to clear the air” (26). The men they go out with, have cars of a sort: “...degenerate cars, a dissolute carousel of rotting sedans and niggerized convertibles with bluedot taillamps and chrome horns and foxtails and giant dice or dashboard demons of spurious fur. All patched up out of parts and lowslung and bumping over the ruts” (27). Lester’s first “girlfriend,” is courtesy of one of these cobbled together cars. She and her boyfriend were poisoned by carbon monoxide on a country road. Using the boyfriend’s no longer needed money he buys a nice dress and underwear for the girl. Then he poses her at the window and looks at her in various domestic tableaux. She is his partner in playing house, much like the stuffed animals. When the house burn, he sits among the ashes, his “eyes dark and huge and vacant” like a lost child (107). Lester’s domesticity is thwarted and he moves further out of the social milieu. As we follow his

path, ant-like, through the novel, we see that he is still that lost orphan child and that he is led to kill by an increasingly desperate inability to meet his needs, which soon become pathological.

As he is reinscribed as murderer, his break with the social system is complete. He takes to the caves, where “the walls with their softlooking convolutions, slavered over as they were with wet and bloodred mud, had an organic look to them, like the innards of some great beast” (135). In this womb-like environment, Lester arranges his victims “on ledges or pallets of stone” where they “lay like saints” (135). He offers them a place of honor and respect that he did not get in the community. Because the bodies are not found until 1965 (the year that Lester dies from pneumonia), Lester is not charged with any crimes. Instead he is incarcerated in a mental hospital in Knoxville. When he dies, he becomes, quite literally, a body without organs as his body is given to medical students, and “he was laid out on a slab and flayed, eviscerated, dissected. . . 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” (194). Lester Ballard has been completely metamorphosed from person into monster through the narrative distinctions made by the social system.

The posthumanist move in *Child of God* mirrors the posthumanist move in systems theory, which does not result from ‘decentering’ the human. Instead, it acknowledges that the human was never centered in the first place. Paradoxically, by focusing on Lester Ballard, who is described in perfect high-humanist language as a child of God, the novel allows us to see that the narratives used in society perform this function at all levels. McCarthy’s use of a human being as beast/monster reveals that in the non-modern constitution/construction of society the distinction human/non-human no longer has an ontological weight, because, as Luhmann posits, being is simply a choice of observation. Make another distinction and ‘being’ and ‘non-being’ shift

positions (Luhmann 123). Latour's concept of actors helps make the observational distinction clearer, since, depending on the distinction made by the second order observer, a thing may be either object or subject. *Child of God* reveals blind spots about the making of these distinctions by making Lester a subject (or as Latour would have it, a matter of concern) even as the narrative world which he occupies constructs him as an object. This conjoining of resonance and resistance opens up posthuman possibilities not only in the novel, but within the wider social system where the novel is part of the autopoietic becoming performed by language.

Ira Livingston points out that separation and opposition between fact and fiction is a part of the modern project. He follows the etymology of both words, which derive from Latin roots meaning to do or to make (43). Fiction then is as faithful a representation of the world as an empirical, *factual*, representation. As such, literary works can help engage ideas and explore them through what Livingston terms "an ongoing sea change in the relations among ways of knowing and engaging the world, in the *discursive ecology*" (1). The literary universe not only plays out a social system within its boundaries, but also brings in the reader as an observer in relationship with the text. In relationship the reader can enter the narrative world, observe the relationships between characters, events, and the narrative structures and draw out meaning from the text. The literary mimesis offers a space where a reader can divine a theory (or theories) about the way the social system works or could work and the way that borders are established and crossed. Literature, as a form of the self-reference and autopoiesis of the system, then reenters the system and becomes a performative making of the system. Textual narratives are epistemological experiments, imagining the world as it would be if the boundaries were indeed different, or if we did not have the 'mastery' that Luhmann posits as a tenet of modernity.

Communication in a social system includes the stories that the community tells about itself and where it sets its boundary values. In *Child of God*, a Latourian reading reveals interactions between the levels of narration that in turn reveal a representation of a social system that has set certain things outside the boundary values of the community through narrative reinscription. In addition to Lester's story, the story of the White Caps and their role in Sevier County delivers a narrative of distinction that is both factual and fictional, nicely illustrating the functional interzone between the two and reminding the reader/observer that social systems have always made these distinctions about what constitutes personhood. For a reader, this reveals language's paradoxical ability to describe *and* form the world, removing the distance implied by observation between observer and observed and fully entwining both as performative operations within the system. The novel's epistemological experiment lies in its exploration of the ways a social system cognizes what is socialized within that system and how social distinctions are set and metamorphose through narrative.

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