

Subjectivity and (non)belonging: Cormac McCarthy and the Psychotic Phenomenon in *Child of God*

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Abstract

This paper aims to challenge and rethink the concept of belonging in terms of the subject's relation to language and body. Child of God is Cormac McCarthy's celebrated book which has attracted critical attention since its publication in 1973. The novel is about Lester Ballard's growing madness which frustrates any attempt at defining subjectivity within the boundaries of language and body. Relying on the Lacanian theory of the Real and the Derridean notion of cryptology, this paper explores the psychotic phenomenon in Child of God, a phenomenon that deconstructs the concept of belonging. In this novel, McCarthy's main character is remarkable in the sense that he undermines the logocentric assumptions in the authority of the concept of belonging. Ballard embodies the failure to become a subject, leading to psychosis. Thus, this paper tackles two major aspects of the psychotic phenomenon. The first part deals with Ballard's psychotic discourse which is outside language, outside the Symbolic, belonging to the order of hallucinations and delusions. Ballard is someone who is inhabited, traumatized and invaded by language. His speech does not belong to him because it is the speech of all those voices incorporated within him. It is precisely this idea which lays the ground for the second part of this paper. Ballard's body corresponds to the Derridean crypt, a body that is totally foreign to him and, thus, it is understood in terms of the Lacanian Real. At the root of this paper is the objective of undermining the idea of the subject's linguistic and corporeal belonging long-held by Western metaphysics by arguing that Ballard's subjectivity is ultimately spectral and consequently, it exceeds the dialectics of body and language.

Keywords: Belonging - subjectivity - body - language - psychosis - the Real - the Symbolic – deconstruction.

Introduction:

The Platonic *Agathon*, the Cartesian *Cogito*, the Hegelian *Aufhebung*, the Heideggerian *Dasein* and even the Saussurean Structuralism have maintained throughout history the subject's corporeal sovereignty and linguistic mastery. Under these pronouncements, the subject is certain and in full control of his body and of the linguistic tool he uses to express himself. Certain phenomena like sexuality, madness, dreams, and hallucination have been repressed and excluded as savagery or a mere superstition that does not belong to the realm of *Logos*. The world has to wait decades for certain thinkers whose sweeping discoveries deconstruct and problematize the naïve understanding of the subject. Against the guardians of transcendentalism and logocentrism, thinkers grouped under the umbrella term "post-structuralism" raise the old vexed questions about the issue of corporeal and linguistic belonging. Such problematic issues that beset the contemporary subject are echoed in the literary space in which writers become a rich source for these theoretical groundings.

My effort in this paper is to consider the question most neglected, that of the psychotic phenomenon and its undermining of the corporeal and linguistic belonging of the subject. In drawing on Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan's rich legacies, I attempt to elucidate Cormac McCarthy's dramatization of the phenomenon of psychosis as embodied by his (anti)protagonist Lester Ballard in *Child of God*. McCarthy emerges as Derrida and Lacan's literary analog, bringing to the fore the excluded and the outcast in his dark narratives which elucidate as much as they obscure. In what follows, I attempt to understand the psychotic discourse in terms of Lacan's the Real, a discourse that bears no grounding in the symbolic order. In a similar vein, I draw upon Derrida's cryptonymy to rethink the question of corporeal belonging. This paper, in no way, claims to give a comprehensive account of the problem of psychosis, yet I hope to cancel the logocentric assumptions of the subject's linguistic and corporeal belonging through the conjunction of literature and theory.

- **Derrida vis-à-vis Lacan: Deconstruction Meets Psychoanalysis:**

There are moments in Lacan's body of works that correspond to the Derridean logic of deconstruction. Thus, a study interweaving both thinkers holds promise. It is to be noted that Lacan's thinking about the subject and language is embraced by Derrida and Derrideans as well. Even though Derrida and Lacan are brought together under the term "poststructuralism", a Lacanian/ Derridean interchange is very scarce. This scarcity is explained mainly by a misunderstanding of Deconstruction as a mere textual analysis, a mere interest in the anarchic play of signifiers.

Lacan and Derrida meet in their understanding of the subject against the assumptions of Western metaphysics. Lacan's logic is not transcendental or logocentric, but rather a logic that exceeds the limits and confinement of any system or structure. On the definition of the structure, Lacan argues against the totalizing impulse that it is a "set" and not "a totality". He adds that this set may "have an open relation, which we call a relation of supplementarity" (183). In a similar gesture as Derrida's attack on the "structurality of the structure," Lacan argues that "...the signifier is a sign which refers to another sign, which is as such structured to signify the absence of another sign..." (167). In the same seminar, Lacan adds elsewhere that "...the relationship between the signifier and

the signified is far from being, as they say in set theory, one-to-one” (119). The Real is Lacan’s conceptualization of a realm that is not confined to the determinations of being versus non-being, but rather to that which is “unrealizable” (qtd. in Hurst 6). The Lacanian Real and the Derridean notion of “différance” which is the cornerstone of his theory of cryptonymy embody the discourses of rupture and inconsistencies, paradox, the play of signifiers and both think of the subject not as a unity, a Cartesian Ego, but as a split subject made up of irreconcilable differences. Andrea Hurst comments on this idea pointing out that both thinkers “make way for a third style of thinking supported by another ‘logic’ that exceeds the binary” (12). It is to be noted that both discourses are far from being nihilistic or anarchic. Both thinkers do not annihilate the system or structure of the subject but rather suspend them. This resistance to close up the question of the subject turns up to be the very condition of the survival of any system.

Even though both thinkers acknowledge their indebtedness to Hegelian dialectical thinking, both reject his synthesizing tendencies of all differences under the order of the same which, for both of them, constitutes an act of violence and injustice. Both maintain the impossibility of any system to encompass the All (Hurst 323). The Lacanian Real is thought of as the impossible and the unrealizable. The Derridean crypt signals both presence and absence. Against the dialectical logic, both aim at preserving “an irremediable excess, remainder or supplement in any system” (Hurst 323). Thus, Derrida and Lacan open the order of the same to that irreducible other which destabilizes and contaminates the subject.

Another common point bringing both thinkers is that they both operate within the same framework, that of the Freudian revolutionary psychoanalytic discoveries about the unconscious. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud paves the way to the Derridean aporetic logic of hauntology, explaining the disturbing effect of the return of the dead which corresponds to Derrida’s ghost theory (Davis 15). Freudian psychoanalysis recognizes the contaminating work of the ghost figure which resides in the unconscious and shakes, therefore, the very foundations of the master of *Logos*. Lacan, on the other hand, rescues Freudian originality from the distortions of ego psychology by laying down the contradictions inherent in his writings. Lacan’s return to Freud brings psychoanalysis closer to philosophy and linguistics. On the legacy of Freud, Hurst argues that “[t]he brothers [Lacan and Derrida] both kill and rescue father Freud by reinventing him” (373).

- ***Child of God and Psychosis:***
- **The psychotic: Who is s/he?**

The psychotic is an extreme case of melancholia. s/he is a traumatic subject who suffers a lack of reconciliation with a lost object/ person and this loss gets stronger that it takes hold of her/his life which becomes “centred around compensation for the injury suffered and the claim it entails” (Lacan 12). Lacan describes him/ her as a “nasty person, an intolerable one, a bad-humored type, proud, mistrustful, irritable, and who over-estimated him/ herself” (4). The psychotic goes beyond the limits of order and law and falls into unbounded and irrational transgressions. A general portrait locates the psychotic as someone whose father figure is absent (dead) or problematic (bad relation). His/ her relation with the mother is an extreme one: either the mother is absent or s/he develops a strong unnatural relation with her. In both cases, s/he develops in his/ her own unconscious a sadistic attitude towards women including sexual abuse and torture. Surprisingly enough, the psychotic has the ability to integrate within society and conceals the psychotic structure

lurking beneath his psyche. According to Lacan, psychosis is triggered by internal or external causes (8). Once s/he goes through a traumatic event or a crisis, the psychotic comes to confront his/ her state as a psychotic and thus the psychotic structure surfaces. This self-recognition engenders a loss of control over his psyche manifested in uncontrollable destruction and self-destruction.

- **Lester Ballard and the Psychotic Question:**

Child of God is McCarthy's disturbing work about Ballard's growing madness and regression to a nomadic and finally psychotic state. Ballard embodies the Lacanian outline of the psychotic phenomenon and the failure of subjectivity. Ballard is outside the realm of morality and law, beyond the standards of sanity and normalcy. His shocking characterization frustrates any attempt to define him within the norms of subjectivity. Bereft of his parents and his land, excluded by and from his community, he regresses to the mountains, the woods and the caves to degenerate into a life of animality and criminality. Throughout the novel, the reader encounters multiple passages figuring out Ballard's random and irrational violence towards people, animals and objects alike. A growing hatred and sadism lead to the breakdown of any possible communication with almost everyone he encounters. His behavior is irrational and inexplicable. For instance, he runs the risk of escaping from the police officers only to show up later and surrender to the local authorities. The first part of the novel confirms his ability to hide his psychotic structure. We learn that he goes to visit a friend (the dump keeper); he goes shopping and even to the church. Eric Hage argues that at the beginning, Ballard is not presented as a psychotic, but rather as "a hopeless outcast and weirdo" (57). McCarthy himself writes that he is "[a] child of God much like yourself perhaps" (6) confirming his disguising competence.

Loss is very strong to trigger the psychotic structure to the surface, especially since Ballard lacks the means (psychological and cultural) to make a reconciliation with any form of loss. Ballard's loss of his land and his house exacerbates his outcast state (McCarthy 10). With the loss of his properties, a part of his soul and his reason comes to be lost which could not be brought back again. Later as the story unfolds, we learn that he is an orphan. His mother is absent which leaves him in a continuous yearning for love and recognition (McCarthy 23). Without the mother figure to ground his psyche, Ballard develops a sadistic feeling and a desire to avenge all women. He would insult any woman he encounters, abusing his victim women, pouring in their ears a hell of curses and insults. His undecidability on the subject of women, both desiring and grudging them, killing them only to have sexual intercourse with them, is symptomatic of his psychotic perplexity. Another and even more crucial event that sends Ballard into the abyss of psychosis is the suicide of his father and his witnessing his corpse being hung. The narrator comments that Ballard "never was right after his daddy killed himself" (22). McCarthy provides an uncanny, shocking and disgusting image of the father's corpse which Ballard comes to confront. The degree of Ballard's shock relegates him to a silence typical of the silence of the disaster, as he witnesses but "never said nothing" (22). It is to be noted that Ballard's symptomatic fixation on certain objects (guns, corpses, pictures) is explained by his primordial fixation on his father's corpse which is frozen and incorporated in his unconscious.

- ***Child of God and the (non)belonging to the Symbolic:***
- **Psychosis and the Foreclosure of the-Name-of-the-Father:**

The-Name-of-the-Father is essential to understand the phenomenon of psychosis. The name of the Father stands metaphorically to the primordial signifier which anchors the chain of signifiers and regulates the structure of the symbolic order. The psychotic is someone who has never experienced castration due to the absence of the father figure and hence he never enters successfully the symbolic. Lacan describes this (non)relation with castration in terms of “an abyss,” “a temporal subversion,” and “a rupture in experience,” and argues that the psychotic is one who “has rejected all means of access to castration...all access to the register of the symbolic function” (131). Foreclosure of the-Name-of-the-Father in the case of the psychosis means that this primordial signifier, responsible for neutralizing and regulating the signifiers of the symbolic is barred and crossed out. Without the castration agent as the key signifier in the symbolic universe, which is here not a mere reference to a person, but rather has a cultural and a religious significance (Grubrich-Smitis 9), the child is unanchored in language and in reality, experiencing the world around him as an excess of ever-fleeting signifiers.

- **The Real: The Order of Hallucination:**

Lacan thinks of the Real as a realm of undifferentiated signifiers, cut loose from any symbolic anchor, that which cannot be apprehended, assimilated or grasped. “Indeed, the Real exists and resists, but is not a totality” (Ragland-Sullivan 190). In this case, the Real is what challenges and deconstructs the totality and the authority of the symbolic order by opening it to that wholly other (the unconscious). Therefore, the psychotic, being on the side of the Real is lost in an oceanic wholeness of signifiers that bear no grammatical structures in so far as they lack the key signifier (the-Name-of-the-Father). Whereas the symbolic is understood as made up of differentiation, elements gaining value (meaning) by “being opposed to another,” the Real is a realm of continuity and undifferentiation (Lacan 9). The psychotic’s relation to the world is characterized by “a hole, a rupture, a rent, a gap, with respect to external reality.” (Lacan 45). Since signifiers are not reduced to any signified, meaning for the psychotic remains enigmatic, undecipherable and never present. In this sense, the psychotic’s discourse does not relate to any meaning. He experiences the signifier as an excess of meaning and thus no meaning at all.

Ballard’s discourse does not belong to the symbolic; rather it belongs to another realm, the order of hallucination, both verbal and auditory. Ballard is basically a delusional, unworldly being who constructs a world around him and gets even certain of its reality. “[H]is whole world has been transformed into a phantasmagoria of shadows of fleeting-impoverished men” (Lacan 79). Hallucination is a manifestation of the Real, of a perverted relation with the world and its signifiers. Lorenzo Chiesa embarks on this idea arguing that due to the foreclosure of the-Name-of-the-Father, the perception of everyday reality is replaced by auditory hallucinations (109).

McCarthy’s style is characterized by accumulating sentences and phrases linking them with the conjunction “and”, though no relation is felt, echoes Ballard’s verbatim. Ballard fails to get the meaning of the world around him. At times, he comes to see the world without being able to decipher it. He sees without seeing, gazing at people and objects as though they belong to a realm

unknown to him. In an interesting scene, Ballard goes to the smith to fix his axe and after watching the procedures, the smith asks him whether he “could do it now from watching?” to which Ballard answers “do what” (71). Elsewhere, he goes to the church but the priest’s words are “a biblical babbling to him” and he turns instead to gaze at “the notices on the board at the back of the church” (31). His unworldly being is also manifested through his lack of any sense of the real-time. He lives in a time cut loose from any chronological reference: a creature outside time and thus outside the world.

Lacan points out that common symptoms include “insomnia, a flight of ideas, the appearance of more and more disturbing themes in his thoughts” (25). Ballard’s sleeping moments are interrupted each time by states of insomnia that McCarthy calls “some premonition of ill fate” (98). This restless insomnia is symptomatic of his delusional state, of being confused between reality and dreams. He would imagine people coming and going in search of him. He is taken by an overwhelming feeling of being spied upon or watched over: “Once he heard voices somewhere behind him and once he thought he saw a light” (178). Excluded from his community, Ballard plays a God-like role, making up his own community of the dead bodies of his victims, arranging them in his cave and talking to them as though they were alive. His speech is an endless repetition of curses and slang phrases, excluded from the norms and standards of the symbolic. Curses are not only geared towards others but towards himself as well which unveils his schizophrenic and masochistic attitudes. At times, his discourse sinks into an irrational hysteric laughter, an absurd laughter at the face of non-meaning, an unexplainable laughter at the petrifying face of the medusa.

- **Cryptonomy and the Corporeal (non)belonging:**

In his seminar on the psychoses, Lacan points out to the theme of the double already stated in Freud’s writings. Since the psychotic suffers an irredeemable fragmentation of identity, he comes to see himself as another. He would, for instance, talk of himself in terms of a totally foreign other. He would as well talk of the dead as though they were alive (Lacan 97). This split in his psyche is fostered by absorbing (but not assimilating) the infinite images of everything around him. These images maintain their autonomy within him and thus “continue to harm him” (Lacan 98). The “I” becomes a signifier infinitely divided, supplemented, deferred and ultimately lost in the oceanic invasion of the Real. This failure to see the body as a separate entity from others makes the body a tomb where everything and everyone are incorporated. Lacan refers to this maddening state of drifting from the real world to the delusional world of ghostly others as “the twilight of the world” (107). It is this thinking of the psychotic body as a tomb that corresponds to Derrida’s concept of the crypt, the body inhabited by the irreducible wholly other.

Relying on the works of Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok in the field of psychoanalysis, Derrida develops his notion of the crypt which is related to his interest in the ghost figure and its haunting effects. The crypt is the body becoming a shell in which the dead survives in the unconscious of the living. The return of the dead due to the work of incorporation turns the subject into a bearer of the other, a lodging of the other at the very heart of the subject (Davis 78). O’connor describes the cryptic place as “a sepulcher in which the self houses its dead as dead, a thing kept alive, that goes on living as dead” (np). Despite the crypt’s lack of substance and its residence beyond language or presence, Derrida tries to articulate a definition of the crypt as the All and the Nothing, typical of all Deconstruction concepts. The crypt in the Derridean sense is:

an artificial unconscious in the self, an interior enclave, partitions, hidden passages, zigzags, occult and difficult traffic, two closed doors, an internal labyrinth endlessly echoing, a singular discourse crossing so many languages and yet somewhere inside all that noise, a deadly silence, a blackout” (Derrida XLIV).

The psychotic speaks in terms of cryptonyms which correspond to Lacan’s speech of hallucination. Cryptophoria is a speech not symbolized, bereft of meaning or any function. Derrida describes cryptonyms as “a collection of words, a verbarium, with no apparent aim to carry any form of knowledge or conviction” (VIII).

McCarthy’s novel is narrated from a third-person point of view which testifies to the main character’s barred subjectivity, his inability to call the self in terms of the “I”. This barred subjectivity results from incorporating the dead others within his psyche. Long after his father’s suicide, Ballard would imagine “his father on the road coming home whistling” (162). This instance proves that his father is kept alive in Ballard’s unconscious. Incorporation is not only of his father’s ghost. He also populates his internal world with his female victims to a point of blurring gender distinctions. As his crimes escalate, Ballard’s body becomes a grotesque one due to wearing the clothes of his female victims. McCarthy writes: “He’d long been wearing the underclothes of his female victims...” (132). This obliteration of a clear-cut gender distinction is further indicated by Ballard’s denial of his own name (108). His name, just like all other signifiers, does not refer or mean anything to him. McCarthy’s description of his main character is remarkable as it points out to the corpse-like and grotesque figure with “eyeballs moving” just like “[a] gothic doll” (132). Many characters in the novel would refer to him as “it” or “a thing”. The dumpkeeper’s daughter insults him saying “you ain’t a man, you’re just a crazy thing” (111).

Child of God is a text about a haunted subject and it tries to articulate the theme of doubling and hauntology through style. Ballard’s story is narrated from different perspectives, echoing the voices that haunt him. His schizophrenic state sends him to a hell of a myriad of voices talking to him at the same time and yet without saying anything. McCarthy describes this ghostly delusion as “a ghost chorus among old ruins” (7). An interesting passage at the beginning of the novel shows Ballard “lay[ing] there listening” (17) though it was dark and no voice or sound to listen to. This is a manifestation of him talking to himself: “...Ballard would wonder about aimlessly in the woods talking to himself” (132). His torturing state of being torn in the cacophony of voices becomes more and more unbearable to the point of “[l]aying with his fingers plugged in the bores of his ears” in order to shut those voices (24).

The psychotic is divided against the world and against himself, sees himself as many and thus as none, living in the middle of nowhere and no one. His speech does not belong to him but to all those voices speaking within and through him as though psychotics were “speaking machines” (Lacan 41). The psychotic’s discourse bears witness to the trauma of his own unconscious. Freud reminds us that what is spoken through the psychotic is the unconscious. Lacan confirms “...the unconscious is something that speaks within the subject, beyond the subject, and even when the subject doesn’t know it, and that says more about him than he believes” (41). Since the psychotic’s discourse is empty, beyond meaning, his testimony is “an open testimony” (Lacan 132), a speech that says everything and yet nothing.

Conclusion:

This study calls the concept of belonging in order to challenge it and not endorse it. Indeed, no study could tell everything about the polyvalent phenomenon of the psychosis or its *modus operandi*. The McCarthyian universe is populated by subjects who claim no mastery either of their bodies or of their speeches. For them, there is no heaven or earth, but an underground journey into the dark recesses of the human psyche. *Child of God* is a novel in which the main character escapes the dialectics of body and language and hence it lends itself to a psychoanalytical interrogation under the Lacanian insights and the Derridean tenets. Against the philosophical assertions of *telos*, *logos*, *cogito* and *ousia*, the crypt and the Real mark an impossibility of being as a unity or a coherent structure. Both concepts mark an irredeemable paradox, an alterity that is kept in its otherness, a state that Derrida calls “an undecidable irresolution” (xxii) which prevents the other from being reduced in the order of the same. Ballard’s subjectivity is ultimately spectral and consequently, it exceeds any dialectical attempt. Belonging to either body or language is a claim that has to be reconsidered under Lacan’s the Real, Derrida’s the crypt and McCarthy’s underground man.

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