‘The Light is all around you, cept you don’t see nothing but shadow’: narratives of religion and race in The Stonemason and the Sunset Limited.

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“The light is all around you, cept you dont see nothin but shadow.” Narratives of Religion and Race in *The Stonemason* and *The Sunset Limited*

Mary Brewer

Cormac McCarthy makes copious references to God and Christianity throughout his novels and plays, and a key concern of McCarthy scholarship involves an exploration of the role and meaning of the sacred in the fictional worlds he creates. However, there is a remarkable and intriguing difference between how McCarthy represents the idea of God and religious faith in most of his novels as compared to his dramatic writing. In this essay, I focus on the significance of religion in *The Stonemason* (1994) and *The Sunset Limited* (2006). Specifically, my aim is to analyze how the verbal signs of religion, race, masculinity and American national identity intersect in the texts. I explore how the role of religion in the plays functions to tell a different story about the American self, one that radically diverges from the dominant cultural narrative by virtue of decentering white masculinity.

My initial focus here is on some of the main critical interpretations of what religion means in McCarthy’s work, beginning with the philosophically skeptical view. Vereen Bell reads the Appalachian novels in particular as embodying a “prevailing gothic and nihilistic mood” (1), in which the traditional idea of meaning and doctrine is made “obsolete” (2). A related view put forward by John Rothfork, and one based in postmodernist theory, suggests that McCarthy’s narratives posit God to be “simply another story we tell to each other, or to our children, for consolation” (209), while William Quirk links McCarthy’s position on religion to the Absurdist world view that characterizes Samuel Beckett’s prose and theater (32). If read in Absurdist terms, McCarthy’s writing, while placing value on stoic persistence in the face of human suffering, refutes the idea that human life or cultural practices should be reverenced.
Another critical strand focuses on McCarthy’s strategic uses of religion—that is, how religion functions as a mode through which to critique American history, politics, and society. Tim Parrish suggests that McCarthy’s main interest lies in exploring the effect of American civil religion on society and the lives of individuals. Citing Harold Bloom, he notes the overwhelming presence of religion in American life, which serves to unite all Christian denominations into a single religious brand that reflects and reinforces the belief that every American is one with God (67). For Parrish, a key focus of McCarthy’s literary production is demonstrating how the belief that God is on America’s side is the nation’s most dangerous and destructive myth. In this reading, McCarthy’s writing neither supports nor refutes the existence of a transcendent being: what he shows are the “bloody consequences that result when characters are baptized into the peculiarly American faith” (74). Linda Townley Woodson discusses the representation of religion in the Border Trilogy in terms of the relation between the word and the real as conceived by Nietzsche (203-04). Hostile to normative systems of religion, Nietzsche perceives such moral law as an invention, and one that favors the political interests of the strong over the weak.¹

Among the critical approaches considered here, the most affirmative is exemplified by Edwin T. Arnold. Arnold explores McCarthy’s work in theological terms, and is concerned with how it represents the nature of God and humanity’s relation to God. He describes McCarthy as a “mystical writer”—a spiritualist who venerates life in all its forms, who believes in a source of being and order deeper than that manifested physically and who acknowledges the inevitability of death not as absurdity or tragedy but as a meaningful transition from one plane of existence to another. Even McCarthy’s darkest writings, he suggests, are endowed always with the possibility of grace and even redemption (“Parable,” 46). My intention is not to argue for the correctness of one of these critical strands over the other. Given McCarthy’s diverse corpus, his narratives’ perspectives on the divine may be
said to suggest, not always comfortably or coherently, both a belief in a metaphysical entity as generally conceived in Christian terms, and the revelation of the misuses of American civil religion that has characterized so much of the nation’s political and social history. My argument here is intended to better demonstrate where and how in McCarthy’s plays the images of God and religion diverge from his fictional schemas.

In his novels, McCarthy’s exploration of the individual’s association with or dissociation from the sacred involves at the same time an examination of the values and meanings that cluster around the idealized image of the national self, which remains the prosperous, straight, male WASP figure. The experiences of his male fictional characters, most of whom occupy a tangential relation to an idealized American masculinity, foreground how dominant cultural values and practices do not represent a humane order; hence, characters, even those who seek some form of spirituality such as Suttree, reject, challenge, or determinedly transgress traditional religious doctrine, along with the “American way of life” that is ostensibly rooted in Christian values. The plays also explore constructions of masculinity, and within the discursive context of an Americanized self; yet The Sunset Limited and The Stonemason express a spiritual worldview that accords more with Arnold’s conception of McCarthy as a deeply moral writer who is fundamentally concerned with the spiritual aspects of human existence.

The Sunset Limited, a one-act play, presents two diametrically opposed philosophical views through dialogue between characters called simply Black and White. Black is a born-again Christian, who believes that God led him to the platform where White was intending to commit suicide by jumping in front of the Sunset Limited train. White is a jaded college professor, totally disconnected from any sense of spirituality. The action of the play involves a battle of words between the men: Black draws on Christian theology to argue that life and
human connections are sacred, while White counters with unadulterated cynicism about the value of religion, human life and community.

_The Stonemason_ tells the story of an African-American family from the perspective of one of its sons, Ben Telfair. Comprising five acts divided into scenes, the play’s conventional structure is interrupted by a series of monologues delivered by Ben. While the staged drama occurs realistically, Ben’s direct addresses are issued from behind a podium. McCarthy proposes a complicated theatrical device in which the audience witnesses simultaneously two Bens, who operate in discrete time frames. At the podium, Ben comments on the past actions performed by the stage Ben and other family characters, but which the spectators witness as present actions in performance.² Ben’s position at the podium endows him with a sense of authority, which is reinforced by the greater knowledge he possesses about people and events.

McCarthy refers to Ben’s monologues as his _chautauqua_, a reference to an American cultural phenomenon that emerged in the late 19th century. Charlotte Canning describes the original Chautauqua Institution, located on Lake Chautauqua in western New York, as a venue for something similar to a camp meeting, but not in the familiar evangelical sense. Rather, the chautauqua combined a form of religious revivalism with popular entertainment: it was a camp meeting that “would devote itself to Bible study, teacher-training classes, musical entertainments, lectures, and recreation as well as devotional exercises” (6). As Arnold recognizes, _The Stonemason_ is one of McCarthy’s most religious works, as it is overtly framed by biblical references (153). That Ben includes many of these biblical allusions in his _chautauqua_ suggests that his words are intended to offer something of spiritual enlightenment for the audience, not simply enjoyment. I do not mean to suggest that McCarthy’s plays are in any way didactic; however, his drama leads one toward ethical judgements about how people may best live and organize their society, as indeed do some of his novels. For example, Steven Shaviro notes, _Blood Meridian_ exposes and challenges the
values and behaviour associated with ideas of America’s Manifest Destiny, and how the myth that America is God’s chosen nation has frequently led to unbridled atrocities.

The debate about the critical standpoint that McCarthy takes on God and morality has focused most closely on *The Road* (2006). Erik J. Wielenberg reads the novel as a meditation on morality and the relationship between the meaning of human life and God, but one that is by nature secular: “While the novel is rife with religious imagery and ideas,” it suggests that “morality does not depend upon God for its existence” (1). Allen Josephs offers an alternative analysis. Recognizing instances where the novel takes an ambivalent stance on God’s existence, he nevertheless argues that on balance there is more textual evidence than not to support the case for God, “or more specifically a Christ-like figure in the boy” (137).

In contrast to *The Road*, the debate about God and morality that occurs in *The Stonemason* and *The Sunset Limited* reveals a distinct lack of ambivalence concerning the question of God’s existence on the part of some key characters. Although Black might question the notion of original sin and Ben does not always succeed at living an ethical life, neither man ever doubts the existence of a divine being against the will of whom each evaluates his own behavior. For Black and Ben, as well as Papaw in *The Stonemason*, there is no question that God exists. Moreover, these men also assert a particular set of values drawn from Judeo-Christian literature as a blueprint for a way of life that is in keeping with a divine and progressive will for humanity, and they posit a cause-and-effect relationship between the transgression of these values and greater suffering on a personal and collective scale.

Nonetheless, both plays question what kind of values encompass, or rather should constitute, *genuine* religious feeling and practice. Neither Black nor Ben identifies as Christian in any normative denominational sense. Black speaks of himself as an “outlaw” for not accepting the Christian Bible as literal truth (66); Ben’s love for Papaw could be read at times as tipping over into idolatry. Even if the moral language and system of conventional
Christianity is called into question, however, the drama asserts that there remains a need for people to experience a sense of the sacred. *The Stonemason* and *The Sunset Limited* leave open the possibility that some version of Judeo-Christianity may provide this access. Josephs’ interpretation of *The Road* raises the intriguing possibility that the novel presents McCarthy’s version of Christian existentialism, which is also an apt framework within which to explore the role of religion in McCarthy’s plays.

Most notably associated with the thinking of Søren Kierkegaard, Christian existentialism posits the absolute paradox as the individual’s “attempt to discover something that thought cannot think” (153). God surpasses our understanding or reason, and faith, “the highest passion in a human being” (105), must not be conceived as “a form of knowledge” (154). Kierkegaard contends that since the time of Jesus, Christianity has gradually morphed into a “caricature” (327) of itself. Authentic Christianity privileges Jesus’ central message, which is love. The maximum attainment for an individual is to be grounded in God—to enjoy a God-relationship that Kierkegaard refers to as a “happy-love” (320). The revelation of this God-love confers an ethical requirement to love others, and in so doing, one may attain an aspect of the divine.

Kierkegaard’s idea of Christian faith accords with Black’s in so far as being a truly spiritual person is not dependent upon regurgitating dogma; for this reason, Black can assert that it is not necessary to read the Christian Bible or even know what is in it to be saved (67). One needs only faith, a faith based not on the intellect or reason that White privileges, but on the suspension of reason in favor of a belief in something higher than reason—the kind of faith that we see Ben and Papaw practice when they choose to work in a way passed down “Generation by generation. For ten thousand years” (26) over more expedient and economical modern methods. Conversely, according to Kierkegaard, when a person chooses a path
counter to God’s will, s/he falls into sin, which, as evidenced by White, Big Ben and Soldier, is experienced as anxiety and desolation.

Consider also that religious references in the novels are delivered more often via indirect discourse or reported speech. Rothfork observes how “the many professions of faith in The Crossing are not Billy’s, for instance. They are reported to him by the hermit in the abandoned church (138-58), by an old blind man (281-94), and by a Gypsy (402-14)”; this reportage allows a degree of uncertainty to enter into the reader’s reception of these narratives. In contrast, the primary mode of discourse for professions of faith in the plays is direct speech, which, within the body of McCarthy’s writing, usually signifies authorial respect for a character and his/her opinion. When Black makes statements such as “I can see the light, good light, true light” (35), or he (meaning Jesus) talks to me (13), the reader/audience is not encouraged to identify with White’s view of his beliefs as delusional or pathetic. Instead, we are invited to play a vicarious part in this transcendent story through witnessing Black’s engagement with the sacred. The structure of both plays supports the paradoxical idea that the imagined world of the drama offers us an authentic accounting of God and faith. As Black puts it: “It’s a true story. I don’t know no other kind” (44).

There is a sense of stability attached to the spiritual self, nominally Judeo-Christian, which is not attendant on the representation of other aspects of identity in the plays. Black’s statement that there “aint no jews, aint no whites, aint no niggers. People of color. Aint none of that” denies any innate or meaningful difference between races and ethnicities. Yet, he adds that “At the deep bottom of the mine where the gold is … There’s just the pure ore. That forever thing” (95). White assumes that here Black is again referring to Jesus. In fact, Black intimates that Jesus is but one label that people may place on the sacred. In his own life, Black privileges Jesus as the incarnation of love and the model for the practice of love among humankind, but what he refers to as his “heresies” allow that Jesus is merely one
syntactic unit in a sequence of possible figures representing the divine. The “ore”—the gold of human existence—is spiritual communion. The part of the self that constitutes love for the other bears an intrinsic reality or truth in the play that appears to transcend all other aspects of the self; unlike blackness, whiteness, or masculinity, all discursive constructs, the sacred remains an essential component of the self—a kind of essence that appears to exist beyond the realm of identity.

The representation of racial identity and its relation to the divine in *The Stonemason* is more ambiguous. Papaw’s story of old-time religion supports the traditional theology of the universe as immanent in God, but he scoffs at the notion that if he were to reach heaven, when he got there, he would be white.

God didn’t make the colored man colored just to see how he’d look. He made everybody the color He wanted em to be and He meant for them to stay that way (47).

Here, race, as least its phenotype, is not protean, but an irreducible sign of God’s creative will. At the same time, though, Ben demonstrates awareness of how the social status attached to race is informed by power relations. He characterizes the Christian *Old Testament* as a “handbook for revolutionaries” and the “Semitic God” as a god of the “common man” (65); in his understanding, Judeo-Christianity represents a means to resist and/or transcend the cultural boundaries of race, which artificially separate people for purposes of exploitation in terms of class as well as race. Thus the play denotes race as both natural and cultural apparatus.

The fluid nature of race in *The Stonemason* and *The Sunset Limited* facilitates their counter-narratives of American masculinity. Drawing upon Judith Butler’s theory of gender as performance, Adam Parkes asserts that McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* “recasts the male self in fluid forms” (106); with reference to the kid’s identity, he argues that “it should not be
considered as biologically predetermined…but as something constituted over time through the performance of a series of actions….“ (105). He goes on to establish how this performativé fluidity of masculinity calls into question the dominant concept of American national identity by virtue of raising questions about its sexual and racial coordinates (106). In other words, once the category of gender becomes open to the possibility of re-inscription, so also do its related discursive constructs within which the idealized figure of the American male self is constituted. Similarly, by according to race some degree of mutability in meaning, albeit with inconsistencies, the plays disrupt the conventional sets of meaning attached to American manhood.

In *The Stonemason*, blackness becomes associated with genuine spiritual values through the characters of Ben and Papaw, thereby prompting a reversal of the white/black binary—or, rather, with the meanings generally associated with these two categories. Ben’s chautauqua forms an important case in point. Andrew C. Rieser documents the racial exclusiveness of the historical Chautauqua movement, arguing that it created a comfortably familiar world in which the “‘other’—impoverished coal workers or black sharecroppers, for instance, rarely made an appearance” (2).

While Chautauqua embraced participatory democracy, it left undemocratic traditions within and without it untouched. From its inception, Chautauqua threw open its doors to a diversity of white Protestant voices…. But its vaunted tolerance faltered outside the boundaries of ecumenical Protestantism. … And while Chautauquans were no more racist than their contemporaries, they unwittingly used their racial status to preserve social privileges denied to black Americans (6).

Against this historical background, Ben’s chautauqua represents an instance of the resistant black voice co-opting a dominant mode of communication, and thereby disrupting the
historical racialization of this religious practice. Ben’s delivery of a Judeo-Christian message challenges that racism, especially the history of presenting black Christian practice infused with elements of folk culture as inferior to a presumed authentic white Christianity.⁷

To suggest that The Stonemason exemplifies a progressive racial politics runs counter to the play’s initial reception in its pre-production phase at Washington D.C.’s Arena Theater, when objections to its representation of blackness led to cancellation.⁸ Admittedly, as Peter Josyph makes clear, Soldier and his peers lack psychological depth (127-28), and the Telfair women, like many of McCarthy’s depictions of the feminine, occupy a subordinate role in the narrative. Still, The Stonemason’s representation of black masculinity and faith, as personified by Ben and Papaw, defies the degraded images that historically have typified dominant discourse about blackness and black religious practice. African-American religion has been viewed as a form of superstition, an idea which was used to reinforce the racist belief that black people possess only primitive culture compared to white civilization. Gary Ciuba reminds us how the Christian Bible was used to expound “farfetched explanations for slavery” and black oppression, with blacks identified as Cain’s accursed children (Loc 852); conversely in The Stonemason, and The Sunset Limited, McCarthy draws upon the tradition exemplified in many slave spirituals and preaching whereby African-Americans were identified as the true people of God, rendering their white masters as something other than God’s elect. Lawrence W. Levine records how many slaves believed that their owners would be denied salvation and that the most persistent single image in slave songs is that of African-Americans as the chosen people: “de people dat is born of God” (34; 33).

The Sunset Limited notably tests the concept of white masculinity as a stable essence, specifically the white American man’s status as God’s chosen. Except for reference to the men’s physiognomy, McCarthy disrupts the normative linguistic associations of blackness and whiteness. While the social function of race as metaphor means that it is historically
contingent, nonetheless there is a long tradition in Western culture and traditional Christianity of a white/black moral dualism. Richard Dyer explains that white is considered beautiful because it is the color of virtue. He writes that since the Renaissance the connotations of white as symbol of values such as purity, spirituality, transcendence, cleanliness, simplicity, and chastity have become so commonplace as to be presented as inevitable, universal and natural (72-3). In the play, however, the character White takes on the values that conventionally shape stereotypical conceptions of blackness, such as anger, hopelessness, and pessimism, while Black represents the desirable values usually accorded to whiteness in dominant discourse: above all, he is decent, dependable, and honest, devoted to living his life according to a moral code that he associates with Christ as redeemer, qualities that are usually used to link white American masculinity to the idea of divinity. This strategic reversal may account for McCarthy’s apparent divergence from his usual complexity as a writer when he chooses the schema of having characters called Black and White.9

In a conversation about personal religious experience with Garry Wallace, McCarthy is described as feeling “sorry” for Wallace, who was unable to grasp the concept of spiritual experience, with which “people all over the world, in every religion, were familiar.” Their encounter ends with McCarthy’s conclusion that people’s “inability to see spiritual truth is the greater mystery” (138). In terms of McCarthy’s literary output, though, the lack of ability to discern the truth does not apply to his black dramatic protagonists as much as it does to the majority of his leading white fictional characters, the son in *The Road* offering a possible exception if one reads the novel as a Christian parable.10

The characters’ ability to perceive spiritual truth seems related to their marginal status in American society due to their race. McCarthy signals how as black men Ben, Papaw, and Black occupy the place of the racial “other” in America. Ben and Papaw’s alterity is demonstrated by references to slavery and Jim Crow, whereas Black’s observations about the
jail house filled with “niggers,” an illusion to what Michelle Alexander terms the “new Jim Crow,”¹¹ shows how he too is excluded from the dominant socio-political order. In McCarthy’s drama, however, Papaw, Ben, and Black are transformed from the position of “other” to the idealized American man, and then to one in which they function as vehicles of privileged knowledge of God and morality.

Ben’s gospel of the true mason best exemplifies this:

> God has laid the stones in the earth for men to use and he has laid them in their bedding planes to show the mason how his work must go. A wall is made the same way the world is made. A house. A temple. This gospel must accommodate every inquiry. The structure of the world is such as to favor the prosperity of men. Without this belief, nothing is possible. What we are at arms against are those philosophies that claim the fortuitous in men’s inventions. For we invent nothing but what God has put to hand (10).

Ben’s vocation as a stonemason serves as the play’s central metaphor. The traditional building processes of stonemasonry used by Papaw and learned by Ben, as Wade Hall recognizes, serve as a “metaphor for the way humans relate to and live in the world” (189), but, more important, it tells us how God intends people to live in the world.

The above quotation presents the image of a creator God, one who continues to be active in world history and in individual human lives. Moreover, God is conceived of as a benevolent deity, or at least one inclined toward benignity, as understood by those who engage with the mystery of faith. Ben experiences a personal relationship with the divine, as does Black, whose intimate connection to a living God is underscored when he asserts: “I don’t make a move without Jesus. When I get up in the mornin I just try to get ahold of his belt” (107). The link between the men and this creator God is most significant for how it effects their relation to community. Lydia R. Cooper suggests that McCarthy’s writing
supports a "theology of empathy" (Loc 3474): one’s recognition of the bond between all living things. To a lesser degree, the emphasis placed upon empathy and the recognition of inter-being is true as well for some of McCarthy’s fictional characters, most notably Suttree, Billy Parham and John Grady Cole; however, their benevolent behavior is not founded on a feeling that they are brothers in faith, as Black understands his duty toward White, nor on a belief that they will be held to account for their actions and judged by an authority figure outside of time and space, as Ben and Papaw conclude.

McCarthy’s theology of empathy in the plays is rooted not only, as Cooper argues, in “the capacity of individuals to recognize their own moral obligation to the world around them” (Loc 3491), but also in how the world around them represents a divinely shaped order that for Ben, Papaw, and Black is encapsulated in love for God and one’s neighbour, as taught in Judeo-Christianity. Consider Papaw’s explanation for why he was not inclined to seek retribution for the death of his Uncle Selman (49-52). Instead, he “turned the other cheek”: “He has children livin in this town. Children and grandchildren. Great grandchildren” (52). Papaw’s refusal, even now, to tell Ben the name of the killer because of his concerns for the peace and welfare of the community is valorized as a militant-style Christian vision rather than passivity. For similar reasons, Papaw disagrees with the “crowbar lien” placed on a man’s home who could not pay for its construction.

They’s a ledger kept that the pages dont never get old nor crumbly nor the ink dont never fade. If it dont balance then they aint no right in this world…. Only way it wont is you start retribution on you own. You start retribution on you own you’ll be on you own. That man up there aint goin to help you. (29)

These scenes place Papaw in the same relation to Ben as Jesus occupies to his disciple in the Gospel of Matthew. Asked which is the greatest commandment in the Law, Jesus replies:
“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the greatest commandment. And the second is like it “Love your neighbor as yourself.” All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments. (Matthew 22:36-40)

Black also stands as a Christ-like figure in relation to White. Like Jesus, “I own nothing,” he says (30). By pulling White out of the train’s path, he is shown to be a literal fisher of men, and through his ministry in prison and among the drug addicts in the ghetto where he chooses to live, Black imitates the deeds of Jesus, who also chose to spend his time among society’s outcasts: prostitutes and tax collectors. Of course, Black is not the first African-American character to be cast as resembling Jesus, nor is such a representation necessarily a sign of a progressive racial politics; Stowe’s Uncle Tom is the classic character from American literature portrayed as the good, docile Christian black. In contrast, Black’s devotion to saving a white man—a commonplace scenario in Tom literature and film—resembles more the progressive reading of Stowe’s character as an example of the radical power of Christian charity. Further, Black does not display other key characteristics of the regressive Tom character, being in no way a figure of mockery, for example.12

Black’s attempt to save White may be understood in a conventional evangelical sense, and yet, as I argue above, it is important to remember those moments when he makes clear that salvation does not come from blind faith in religious prescriptions. Although a copy of the Christian Bible remains on prominent display throughout the men’s discussion, Black asserts that “whatever truth is wrote in these pages is wrote in the human heart too” (68). The Sunset Limited, like The Stonemason, parallels C.G. Jung’s view of religion as fulfilling an essential human need.13 For Jung, the search for God was a necessary action on the journey toward completing the Self (13). In particular, Black’s conception of the divine corresponds to Jung’s experience of realizing the will of God, which Jung contrasts to his father’s lifeless
encounter with organized religion. Black knows “the immediate living God who stands, omnipotent and free, above His Bible and His Church” (Jung 56-7), and this is the foundation of his ministry for “the livin,” which entails serving as “your brother’s keeper” (77).

As Cooper points out, despite White’s educational accomplishments, which ironically make the world “personal” for him, the ultra-individualist White misunderstands empathy as a means toward “communal misery wherein one finds salvation by consorting among the loathsome” (Loc. 3474-3475). Among the numerous causes of White’s suicidal alienation, foremost is the fact that, as he says: “I don’t like people” (91). Dianne C. Luce highlights White’s reluctance to answer Black’s questions (17), an inability to communicate with others that mirrors his failure to connect with the divine; the same sense of alienation drives Ben’s father, Big Ben, to commit suicide, as well as his nephew Soldier, whose drug use ends up killing him.

White can only identify with others in abstract terms; he evinces revulsion to the crimes of The Holocaust, but he refuses his mother’s request to visit his father who is dying from cancer and he “ain’t got even one friend” (28). His egocentrism is evidenced when he tells Black: “You must know these people are not worth saving. Even if they could be saved” (40). Consequently, his claims to be moved by larger crimes against humanity ring hollow. Unlike White, McCarthy’s black protagonists strive to realize spiritual truths and are thus more open to redemption and salvation. Their abilities to connect with what is transcendent also enable them to connect with their “brother”—the possibility of salvation residing in a correspondence between the two. Black phrases it this way: “There aint no way for Jesus ever to be man without ever man bein Jesus” (95).

This co-relation is apparent also in Ben’s dream about the day of judgement, in which God asks him only one question: “Where are the others? … Because we cannot save ourselves unless we save all ourselves” (113). This is not to say that McCarthy’s dramatic
theology of empathy renders its African-American protagonists immune to the suffering that forms part of human existence, but it does mean they are able to make greater sense of what happens to them. Furthermore, Ben, Papaw and Black gain emotional sustenance and resilience from their acts of communication with the sacred—a position that is rarely granted to McCarthy’s white characters, literary or dramatic.

In keeping with Jungian philosophy, Ben, Papaw and Black conceive the key to the social injustice and personal unhappiness that pervades American society to be the perversion of spiritual truth for so-called progressive, material ends (Jung, 263-5). The Stonemason and The Sunset Limited evince a deep distrust in the material realm, especially culture in so far as it derives solely from the limits of human knowledge and understanding. Ben gives up the study of psychology, believing that the answers to life’s problems cannot be found in human theories or structures; his wife studies the law, but Papaw delimits its value, arguing that “where men dont have right intentions law caint help them” (30). Both men’s conservatism leads them to warn that “books are dangerous” (39). This is a provocative comment considering McCarthy’s prolific and highly-learned literary output; one wonders if he occasionally turns to drama because he finds theatrical representation less slippery in meaning than literary discourse.

The danger of human knowledge is also taken up as a theme in the exchanges between Black and White. A principal cause of White’s unhappiness is his over-investment in things: “I believe in things. “Lots of things. Cultural things…Books and music and art” (24). Philip Brandes’ review of the play in the L.A. Times concludes that White’s existential crisis demonstrates above all else the mistaken conviction that “higher learning, art and culture” have transcendent power: that knowledge can somehow “redeem evil.” If knowledge cannot guarantee human progress, then what remains is God’s grace and compassion, the route to which is expressed by Black’s metaphor of commuting:
You got to get in the right line. Buy the right ticket. Stay on the platform with your fellow commuter (133).

How then do we read the ending of *The Sunset Limited*? White leaves the apartment, unconvinced by Black’s argument, and presumably still intent on killing himself, while Black laments not having come up with the right words that might have saved him, body and soul. Significantly, the open question concerning White’s fate at the end allows for the possibility, however remote, that he will not return to the station platform. Black’s future, in contrast, is not open to conjecture. Luce contends that “Black has lost his gambit to help this special case, but he has not decisively lost his faith in God and his own mission” (20). He makes clear that he will “be there in the mornin’” just in case White should return to the station (142). He remains confident that if he holds faith with God he may one day be provided with the words to help one of his “brothers,” if not White; stage directions have Black raise his head toward the Heavens and ask, “Is that okay? Is that okay?” (143). Luce refers to what follows as “the mysterious silence of God” (20). This silent but palpable presence of the divine finally endorses Black’s ticket to salvation, as well as the affirmative role accorded throughout the rest of the play to faith and the spiritual value of loving kindness.

Chris Walsh suggests that at the end of *The Stonemason* Ben loses faith in Papaw’s philosophy; he argues that stonemasonry is shown to fail as an “explanatory agency,” to be something that is “no longer workable or valid” (68). *Pace* Walsh, I hold that Ben reaffirms his trust in the veracity of stonemasonry and its theological framework, just as Black ultimately reiterates his faith. Ben never stops missing Papaw’s moral guidance. After Papaw’s funeral, he retells his perspective on good, evil and the mysterious sacred:

I know that evil exists. I think it is not selective but only opportunistic. I don’t know where the spirit resides. I think in all things rather than none. But it is because of him that I am no longer reduced by these mysteries… (96)
Later his thoughts of Papaw are realized in a vision. McCarthy’s stage directions state: “Papaw materializes out of the fog upstage just at the edge of the headstones” (132). Ben responds to this image: “I knew that he would guide me all my days” (133), and thus, in the play’s final scene, even after the death by overdose of his nephew Soldier and the suicide of his father, Ben re-pledges himself to live according to his grandfather’s moral philosophy.

In the background of McCarthy’s novels, Bell identifies a “residual yearning for ontological certainty,” a nostalgic view that is ultimately subordinated to the idea that absolute certainty is a form of “unfreedom” and that the search for first principles, essences, is a “dangerous one and reifying as imposed social orders” (8). The plays, in contrast, posit this yearning for certainty as both a rational and necessary trajectory toward a place of greater personal and potentially collective freedom. The conclusions to both plays support their black protagonists’ convictions that the part of the self that is attuned to the sacred is the most reliable route to “a direct apprehension of reality”—McCarthy’s explanation of “mystical experience” (Wallace, 138).

In *The Haunted Stage*, Marvin Carlson maintains that “Drama, more than any other literary form, seems to be associated in all cultures with the retelling again and again of stories that bear a particular religious, social or political significance for their public. There clearly seems to be something in the nature of dramatic presentation that makes it a particularly attractive repository for the storage and mechanism for the continued recirculation of cultural memory” (8). In both form and content, McCarthy demonstrates in his dramas how, in an American context, few stories carry more importance than those told and re-told about religion and race. By subverting normative constructions of masculinity and race, the plays establish a vision of the good society that stands in contrast to the contemporary one governed by the most visible form of American civil religion, which José Casanova marks as a fusion of “Protestant fundamentalism and the Republican Party [that]
has re-established the nineteenth-century postmillennial Evangelical Protestant vision that America is a city on a Hill” (271). The way in which McCarthy constructs black masculinity and its relation to the divine reconfigures mainstream American history and cultural practices, and most importantly their civil religious co-text, as a white patriarchal perversion of the sacred that damages self and society; thus, the dramas place the African-American man in possession of the field of authentic spirituality, and reveal the limits of white patriarchal discourse for potential individual and collective development.

Works Cited


Notes

1 Woodson also cites Nietzsche, as well as Foucault’s concept of the “will to truth,” in “Deceiving the Will to Truth: The Semiotic Foundation of All the Pretty Horses” (1995).

2 We are told that events are recounted by Ben as “they reside in his memory” (6). This reference to the subjectivity of history does not mean that Ben’s version of events is untrustworthy, however; McCarthy’s stage directions note that Ben’s direct address to the audience serves to “give distance to the events and to place them in a completed past.” Therefore, what Ben tells us comes with the benefit of hindsight and reflection.

3 I am grateful to Stacey Peebles for pointing out the significance of this aspect of their relationship.

4 Philosophical Fragments (1884)

5 Fear and Trembling (1843)

6 My Work as an Author (1851)

7 For further details, see Donald G. Mathews “The Trumpet Sounds within-a My Soul,” pp. 136-84.

8 Originally of interest to the Arena’s producers because it features a black family, which also seems to have counted in its favor with the Kennedy Center when awarding funding, difficulties arose in pre-production when the fact that it was written by a white author became known. Some Arena staff complained that McCarthy offered reductive representations of black life, and therefore, the play did not meet the theater’s commitment to diversity. Ultimately, this controversy led to the play being dropped by the Arena, which also returned its funding. The play’s troubled production history is discussed at greater length by Arnold (141-54).
In addition to their dissociation from the spiritual, McCarthy’s leading fictional characters share a racial identity, through which they are connected to the dominant group in America. Lester Ballard in *Child of God* (1973) and Culla Holme in *Outer Dark* (1968) may be impoverished and alienated from their society, but each possesses at least the privilege that attaches to whiteness in Southern culture. In *Blood Meridian* (1985), “the kid” is intimately involved in the process of American expansion and the concomitant destruction of the racial “other,” and although the mercenaries do include non-whites, the novel offers no more than momentary reversals of the flow of racial power (e.g. when the black Jackson beheads the white Jackson).

According to Alexander, more black men are incarcerated in contemporary society than were enslaved in 1850.

For further detail on the Tom figure, see Bogle.

Ann Belford Ulanov explains how Jung theorizes religion to be of central importance to a healthy society just as it is to a healthy individual; that is, the individual’s subjective quest for God corresponds to a collective undertaking. According to Jung, both the individual and society possess a “religious instinct”: “Our instinct for religion consists in our being endowed with and conscious of relation to deity,” while our connection to God “keeps us from being swept away into mass movements.” It offers a point of reference outside family, class conventions, cultural mores, even the long reach into our private lives of totalitarian governments. When we feel seen and known by God, however we may express this, we can find the power to stand against the pressures of collectivities for the sake of truth, soul, faith” (322).

For Jung, modern civilization’s discontent could be located in its privileging of the material, what he termed “the deceptive sweetenings of existence” (264).