“When You Stop Pretending That You Know”
Gnosis, Humility, and Christian Charity in Cormac McCarthy's
The Stonemason

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Abstract

Increasingly addressing the religious dimension of Cormac McCarthy’s work, critics have frequently rooted it in a Gnosticism which holds, first, that the world is a place of evil and suffering and, second, that salvation is attained through knowledge made available only to the elect. The Stonemason, however, seems intent on refuting just such a thesis. Focusing on Ben and his grandfather Papaw, a centenarian stonemason, the play presents Ben as seeking, through mastery of the mason’s secrets, to become custodian to knowledge that will unlock the mysteries not just of a trade but of the cosmos. Yet this Gnostic quest fosters in him a moral negligence that leads to the deaths of two family members. Indeed, Ben’s tragedy stems precisely from his Gnostic prizing of secret lore and indifference to the Christian lessons Papaw himself most values—lessons not in god-like knowledge but in the practice of faith, humility, and love.

Keywords

Cormac McCarthy – Gnosticism – Christianity – ethics

All rational beings ... possess two faculties, the power of knowing and the power of loving. To the first, to the intellect, God who made them is forever unknowable, but to the second, to love, he is completely knowable.

The Cloud of Unknowing
I have friends ... really bright guys who do really difficult work solving difficult problems, who say, “It’s really more important to be good than it is to be smart.” And I agree it is more important to be good than it is to be smart. That is all I can offer you.

CORMAC MCCARTHY, 2009 interview with JOHN JURGENSEN

Though first hailed by critics as the framer of relentlessly hopeless fictional worlds, Cormac McCarthy has increasingly been understood to be something of a spiritual seeker in his work. Vereen Bell, in his ground-breaking 1988 study, argued for the “prevailing gothic and nihilistic mood” of all McCarthy’s novels; indeed, Bell would go so far as to dub the author of 1968’s Outer Dark father to a tale “as brutally nihilistic as any serious novel written in this century” (1, 34). Such inaugurating claims have had their legacy in McCarthy scholarship with, for example, John Cant asserting twenty years after Bell, both that “McCarthy’s universe is without God” and that, from the perspective of his fiction, “it is unbelief that is admirable” (7, 30). Yet such a view has scarcely gone unchallenged. Thus, Manuel Broncano can justly call the question of McCarthy’s religious commitments “the most controversial issue in Cormac McCarthy studies” (1). Edwin Arnold is scarcely alone in discerning in McCarthy’s oeuvre “a profound belief in the need for moral order, a conviction that is essentially religious” (“Naming” 46). Indeed, it is increasingly the norm for critics both to address the spiritual dimension of his characters’ peregrinations and to delineate the various philosophical and theological traditions from which this dimension derives.1

1 Like Arnold, Steven Frye contends that, while McCarthy places his characters in precisely realized historical moments, they engage this history “only in the context of the deepest philosophical and religious questions” (“Histories” 4). Similarly, Matthew Potts maintains that McCarthy’s fictional world, while typically brutal, is “everywhere inflected by religion” (1). While James Dorson’s focus on the “convergence between religion and style in McCarthy’s work” remains, like Frye’s and Potts’s work, agnostic on the question of the author’s own religious affirmations (121), others have been more decisive in identifying an authorial allegiance in these spiritual matters. Thus, for Nicholas Monk, McCarthy endorses a spirituality rooted in “the power of landscape to reconnect humanity to worlds beyond the quotidian,” especially the quotidian construed in Enlightenment terms (13). Alternately, Michael Crews holds
If it has, then, become customary to find scholars following Frye and situating McCarthy in terms of such varied traditions as Platonism and existential Christianity, it is fair to say that the religious framework most frequently ascribed to McCarthy is that which Frye himself deems the most pervasive in his corpus, namely that of "ancient Gnosticism" ("Histories" 5). Identified with a variety of sects emerging alongside orthodox Christianity, Gnosticism teaches, first, "that the manifest world is a place of evil and suffering" where humans sojourn as aliens (Mundik, "Illusion" 13) and, second, that salvation from their spiritual exile is to be attained through a redeeming "knowledge ... which has been made available only to the elect" (Rudolph 55). First touted by Leo Daugherty in 1992 as constituting the very heart of 1985's Blood Meridian, Gnosticism has subsequently been presented as key to virtually the whole of McCarthy's catalogue. Thus, critics have in essence accommodated Bell's thesis within a broader spiritual perspective which ultimately rebuts the claim of nihilism. Reading the material world as a botched creation and therefore a place of meaningless suffering, Gnosticism's anticosmic outlook accords well with Bell's portrait of McCarthy's typical narrative perspective. However, by insisting on a "divine spark" in humankind capable of rescue through esoteric knowledge, Gnosticism also allows for the discussion of how these texts seem so often to yearn after, and point to, transcendence (Rudolph 57).

This synthesis, however, strikes me as an uneasy one, both as it elides more manifest Christian content in McCarthy's work and as it points away from what Arnold quite rightly identifies as the fiction's persistent moral questioning. In its contempt for the prison-house of creation, Gnosticism offers a vilification of the natural, worldly, and quotidian which is arguably quite alien to McCarthy's

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work. What’s more, in its framing a path to salvation by way of secret knowledge rather than by way of faith and moral practice, it puts gnosis ahead of ethos in a way that the McCarthy of my second epigraph seems reluctant to do. Indeed, McCarthy’s first play, 1994’s *The Stonemason*—dubbed by Crews “a McCarthy *summa theologica*”⁴—seems at pains to rebuke just such a displacement of moral doing by mere knowing. The story of the Telfairs, an African-American family in 1970s Louisville, *The Stonemason* centers on the bond between thirty-two-year-old Ben and his grandfather, Edward “Papaw” Telfair, “a stonemason for ninety years” and a faithful Christian who reads daily, “[c]onstantly,” from but one text: “The King James version of the bible” (McCarthy, *The Stonemason* 8, 93). In this relationship, Ben plays the role of eager acolyte, seeking to learn from Papaw before his passing those secrets of the mason’s art forgotten by a world of concrete construction. Ben is devoted to him largely in hopes of acquiring “the old man’s core of wisdom,” of himself becoming custodian to a lore that will unlock the mysteries not just of a trade but of the cosmos (Hall 190). Thus, Ben is embarked on a very Gnostic quest, seeking to be saved less by virtue or by the grace of Papaw’s God than by an esoteric knowledge that will set him apart from his fallen, everyday world.

Yet while Ben is moved by an accurate estimate of Papaw’s value as role-model, this seeking after secret craft leads to a moral negligence and presumption that implicates Ben in the deaths of both his father and his nephew. Chris Walsh suggests that Ben’s various failures result from his idealizing in Papaw “a now unworkable and invalid mythology,” but if his devotion to Papaw does indeed lead Ben to a dereliction of other duties of care, this is not because Papaw’s wisdom is obsolete or unworthy (“History” 64). Rather, it becomes clear by the play’s end that Ben has fatally erred not in identifying his grandfather as teacher but in seeking to know his trade rather than to follow his example. In other words, despite Erik Hage’s claim that the play offers a “critique on zealotry and strict ecclesiastical forms” (153), the tragedy of Ben Telfair is that he is indifferent to the very Christian lessons Papaw has to impart—lessons not in the divine mysteries Ben locates in the mason’s craft but in the practice of faith, humility, patience, and love. These virtues, far from depending on esoterica or pursuing distinction, are about quotidian labors on the part of, and on behalf

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⁴ 218. Crews is not alone in this judgment. Wade Hall, writing in 1995, saw this play competing only with *The Crossing* for the title of McCarthy’s “most overtly, directly philosophical and theological” work (189). This claim is largely echoed by Mary Brewer, who sees *The Stonemason* as resembling McCarthy’s later play, *The Sunset Limited*, in taking seriously the Christian commitments of its African-American characters (40), and by Arnold, who calls it, as of 1995, “McCarthy’s most clearly religious work” (“McCarthy’s *Stonemason*” 128).
of, everyday people. But if they represent an abandonment of the search for elite knowledge that motivates Ben through much of the play, they nonetheless, McCarthy’s text makes plain, lead to a shared life and transcendence, even, as my first epigraph suggests, to God Himself. In the end, as Brewer notes, Ben “re-pledges himself to living according to his grandfather’s moral philosophy,” but it is only when he gives up the gnostic search for saving knowledge in favor of a more Christian path of faith and charity that he begins to know himself and others more truly and to live in hope of salvation (50).

Now, criticism has not altogether lacked for voices dissenting from diagnoses of McCarthy’s Gnosticism. Potts in particular has argued for the centrality to the novels of a Christian understanding of sacrament, one which complicates any simple identification of McCarthy’s vision with a Gnostic antipathy toward the physical world (2); indeed, on Potts’s account, 1979’s Suttree offers a clear “critique of the spiritual rejection or replacement of material reality” (87). Nonetheless, West is correct when he observes that McCarthy scholars have repeatedly remarked the “Gnostic themes apparent in practically every work” (132). But it is necessary to elaborate a bit further on just what these themes are if we are to gauge the extent to which The Stonemason offers, as I contend, a Christian corrective to them. The term Gnosticism does not, as Kurt Rudolph cautions, denote a monolithic creed or single ecclesiastical entity; as he puts it, “there is no gnostic ‘church’” but a plurality of sects and teachers (213). Indeed, Karen King goes further still, arguing that the diversity of texts establishes that there is “no such thing as Gnosticism”; rather this-ism “exists” only as a notional religion invented after the fact by historians accepting at face value Christian polemicists’ characterization of excluded Christianities (2). Nonetheless, scholars of religion and of literature alike have long deployed this label meaningfully to speak to a set of teachings and scriptures of late antiquity at odds with emergent orthodox Christianity. Gnosticism, for Rudolph, first emerges as a syncretistic child of increasingly cosmopolitan cities of the Hellenistic Middle East; he thus reads its various systems of belief in terms of “Hellenistic dress over an Oriental-Jewish body” (291). With the work of such Gnostic

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5 Both Lydia Cooper and Arnold, for example, argue forcefully against the position that McCarthy’s fiction endorses the kind of anticosmic position which is so definitive of Gnostic thought. Instead of a rejection of an imperfect material reality, Cooper discerns in McCarthy’s Suttree a more medieval celebration of flawed and earthly beings: “Suttree is not interested in parsing the hideous from the holy, but in finding the holy within the hideous” (“McCarthy, Tennessee” 49). Similarly, Arnold’s reading of The Crossing sees that text as endorsing an antithesis of Gnostic dualism; for Arnold, this novel instead insists “that we acknowledge and engage our oneness with the natural, atomic, and finally cosmic world” (“McCarthy and the Sacred” 217).
teachers as Valentinus and Basilides long lost, its core tenets were for centuries transmitted by antagonists, by such figures as Irenaeus who, in Against Heresies, sought to rebut the blasphemous teachings of these “Gnostics, falsely so-called” (486). Yet a 1945 discovery at Nag Hammadi, Egypt, unearthed thirteen volumes comprising some fifty-one discrete Gnostic texts, fully forty-one of which were new to scholars, thus radically expanding the Gnostic library and historians’ appreciation for the range of Gnostic thought (Rudolph 44). Nonetheless, the 1966 Messina Congress, convened in response to the Nag Hammadi find, offered a definition of what all these gnosticisms shared, one that emphasized a narrative of a divine spark in the form of humanity’s spiritual essence imprisoned in a material world of fate, suffering, and death, and needing to be awakened to knowledge of its divinity in order to be saved (King 169).

Above all, then, Gnosticism, as long and commonly understood, propounds a strict dualism, one which “subjects everything visible or belonging to the world to criticism and rejection” (Rudolph 33). Often this dualism relies upon an intricate theogony which posits the existence of an imperfect supernatural being, the Demiurge, as the actual “creator of all animal and material substances” (Irenaeus 15). Handiwork not of the true God but of an imperfect even malevolent being, Creation, for the Gnostics, is “the fruit of a defect” and so governed by “fear, grief, and perplexity” (Irenaeus 59, 15). Insofar as human beings are possessed of the divine spark imparted by the absolute Godhead, they are exiles in this cosmos, divorced from their true home and given over to an ignorance, suffering, and mortality at odds with their true nature. In this schema, material creation itself looms as the primary antagonist. As Rudolph states, “The identification of ‘evil’ and ‘matter’ [is] a fundamental conception” for Gnostic thought (60). A consequence of this is a profound antipathy not simply to the natural world but to human flesh itself; as Mundik writes, “The Gnostics regarded all bodies, even those of the living, as corpses designed to trap the pneuma, or spirit.”6 If that spirit is truly to live again, it must disentan-

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6 “Right and Godmade” 17. This profoundly anti-corporeal anthropology led also to disagreements with orthodox Christian understanding on the matter of the Incarnation. One result of Gnostic anticosmism, then, was a teaching concerning the Christ particularly denounced by Church Fathers: namely, Docetism, the doctrine that, too perfect to suffer imprisonment in the demiurge’s unholy Creation, “Christ appeared only ‘in semblance’ (dokēsei) as a man or in the flesh” (Rudolph 157). On such an account, the Son of the True God was saved from undergoing Passion and Crucifixion and did not inaugurate the Resurrection of the body promised to those who believed in him. This was a teaching patristic writers were anxious to refute as heresy. Indeed, Docetism may well be the target of St. Paul’s admonition against denials of the Resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15:12–17. Certainly, as early as the second century,
gle itself from the Demiurge's hellish domain and return to its true home, the strictly spiritual realm of the true God.

Thus, importantly, “Gnosis is a religion of redemption” (Rudolph 113). As grim a picture as it paints of our situation, it is centered above all on charting the spirit's path to salvation. This path, as the tradition's name indicates, is one of knowledge transmission. Thus, while insisting that “[c]ontrary examples of almost every supposedly essential element of Gnosticism abound,” even King concedes that Gnostic texts tend to agree in “portray[ing] the plight of humanity in terms of ignorance that must be enlightened with true teaching” (192, 27). Such enlightenment occurs through the sharing of secret knowledge between illuminated teacher and elect protégé, knowledge specifically of the misbegotten nature of this world, the human being's true identity as spirit, and that spirit's proper home with the Absolute (non-Creator) God. To be redeemed, then, is to be saved from the flesh and returned to the heavens. But it is only by having been initiated into the knowledge of this economy of salvation that we are made assured of such redemption. This soteriology thus involves two salient features. First, it traffics in secrecy, initiation, and election; it is a saving good news for the few and not a public preaching for all the nations. As Rudolph puts it, “The redeeming knowledge which the redeemer imparts is an esoteric possession for the elect” (148). More importantly, this knowledge is itself that which redeems. The Gnostic is saved not by the Cross, by the grace of God, or by faith, hope, and love, but by possession of knowledge of her own spiritual nature. As Irenaeus writes, his opponents “maintain that those who have attained to perfect knowledge must of necessity be regenerated” and that the “spiritual man is redeemed by means of knowledge” alone (62, 63). The result is a very different salvation than that imagined by creedal Christianity: one predicated not on the Crucifixion and Resurrection but on secret teachings of Christ, not on the nature of our conduct in but only on our egress from the world, not on sin and mercy but on ignorance and instruction. Gnosticism is faith in the power of elite knowledge to undo our cosmic manacles. It shifts the question of redemption from a language of ethics to one of epistemology and defines salvation as simple flight from the world. In Rudolph’s words, “gnostic redemp-

ORTHODOX WRITERS WERE STRENUOUSLY COUNTERING SUCH DENIALS OF THE INCARNATION. FOR IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH, THEN, CHRIST'S "PASSION WAS NO UNREAL ILLUSION AS SOME SCEPTICS AVER WHO ARE ALL UNREALITY THEMSELVES" (RADICE 101), WHILE FOR POLYCARP, TO DENY THE REAL EMBODIMENT OF CHRIST "IS TO BE ANTICHRIST" (121). INDEED, EVEN IN THE FOURTH CENTURY, ATHANASIUS OF ALEXANDRIA WOULD FIND OCCASION TO DECLARE THE CHURCH'S BODY ONE "NOT FOREIGN TO OUR OWN," "A REAL AND NOT ILLUSORY BODY" (57, 68), INDICATING THE EXTENT TO WHICH, AS RUDOLPH PUTS IT, "GNOSIS FOLLOWED THE CHURCH LIKE A SHADOW" (368).
tion is a deliverance from the world and the body, not as in Christianity from sin and guilt.”

While by play’s end McCarthy’s Ben Telfair is hungry for the latter redemption, *The Stonemason* opens with his pursuing something closer to the former. Above all, he begins with a desire for gnosis, for the secret and imperilled craft possessed by his master mason grandfather. Ben’s relationship with Papaw is by far the most important in his life, eclipsing bonds with his own parents or even with his wife, Maven. And if, as Brian Evenson maintains, McCarthy’s work consistently asks, “What remains to connect individuals to one another?” then Ben’s answer is thirst for the kind of knowledge Papaw represents (55). In the play’s opening speech, Ben expresses his devotion to his grandfather, claiming Papaw as a model and aspiration: “I always wanted to be like him. Even as a child” (6). This desire to emulate the old man is born of fondness—Ben states plainly, “I have loved him all my life and love him now” (8)—but the play’s first monologue has not yet reached its midpoint before Ben’s language shifts, becoming less a paean to Edward Telfair the man and more a rhapsody on his trade, on the unique value of stonemasonry itself. It is fair to say with Walsh that Papaw holds a “guru-like status” for Ben, as he is custo-
dian to a lore Ben is keen to master and with which he associates a good deal more than a simple livelihood (“History” 64). Stonemasonry represents for Ben a kind of spiritual enlightenment and initiation into the ranks of the elect, of the masons who have guarded their wisdom through millennia. Arnold contends that McCarthy’s play presents this trade which Ben is so eager to ply “as an order based on spiritual mystery, arcane lore passed to the chosen.” Certainly this is the way Ben conceives of it, casting himself, a young father who has abandoned graduate school to attend on an uneducated laborer, in the role of a seeker after gnosis.

Walsh is not much mistaken, then, in claiming that, for Ben, “salvation lies in masonry” (In the Wake 298). Indeed, Ben speaks of and propounds “the gospel of the true mason,” indicating how this craft figures as something more than a set of techniques for working with unhewn stone (Stonemason 10). Certainly, the antiquity of the trade speaks to him and helps constitute its value in his eyes. Ben proclaims proudly of Papaw’s vocation, “His craft is the oldest there is. Among man’s gifts it is older than fire” (32). Its persistence constitutes a marvel in Ben’s eyes, testament to a transmission of vital knowledge taking place outside any school, academy, or institution, occurring instead through the kind of unremarked mentorship he seeks with Papaw: “We were taught. Generation by generation. For ten thousand years” (26). There is thus an unbroken line of initiated masters and practitioners, keepers of this immemorial wisdom, reaching back to the birth of civilization. This most foundational and venerable of human sciences is deserving of esteem, in Ben’s view, but also of maintenance, of a survival that only the preservation of this tradition of elect custodians can ensure. Occupying a post-war reality in which “the introduction of portland cement [has] made it possible to build with stone and yet know nothing of masonry,” Ben recognizes that the craft, no longer necessary, might be altogether forgotten, the secret knowledge of the few obliterated by a technology deployable by any (9). Hence the urgency of his work with, and disquisitions on, his grandfather. Understanding Papaw to be “the final steward” of this essential knowledge, Ben is determined to become his heir, the next necessary custodian

8 “McCarthy’s Stonemason” 129. Other critics have been quick to acknowledge the spiritual significance granted this trade in The Stonemason. In his early response to the published play, Hall treats it “as a metaphor for the way humans relate to and live in the world” (189). Similarly, Federico Bellini sees Papaw’s trade as representing “a worldview, a set of values, and an attitude towards life” (3). More specifically, Crews holds that “McCarthy employs masonry as the key metaphor for a life of spiritual uprightness” (227). Yet while such descriptions may well capture Ben’s estimation of stonemasonry’s value, the play itself, I argue, ultimately locates such wisdom and uprightness not in the secrets of craft but in the humble Christian life.
of the mason’s teachings, before they are irrevocably lost (32). Indeed, the matter is so urgent that, in response to Maven’s worries over the risks Papaw runs working with Ben, this devoted grandson says, “It’s just a chance I’ll have to take” (37).

If, however, Luce is right to say that, “[f]or McCarthy, it is the spiritual status of the characters, as opposed to their psychological experience, that is most at stake,” it is similarly plain that there is something more at stake in Ben’s quest to save Papaw’s knowledge from the grave than a museological commitment to the preservation of antiquities (ix). As his own talk of gospels would suggest, Ben explicitly credits the secret teachings of the mason with nothing short of cosmological insight, a wisdom having as much to do with the foundations of the universe as the framing of houses. The scorn he expresses for contemporary builders in stone indicates the degree to which he allies the knowledge he seeks with an elect status, but it also underscores the extent to which this election is determined by the elevated knowledge in which the stonemason deals. For Ben, to share in the mason’s immemorial teaching is to tap into, and to make use of, ultimate truth: “[T]rue masonry is not held together by cement but by gravity. That is to say, by the warp of the world. By the stuff of creation itself” (9–10). It is by virtue of this peerless insight that the mason is able to take on the Promethean role Ben both describes and seems to covet. Tapping into the bedrock truths of creation, the original masons were, for him, empowered in their work to serve and preserve the most basic markers of our humanity; on Ben’s account, “the foundation and the hearth” that the mason’s art makes possible “are the soul of human society” (66). Thus, if the mason is for Ben “a custodian of sorts,” what he husbands is not simply a set of skills but a true reckoning of the cosmos, one which works to undergird civilization itself (10). It is just such a mantle of responsibility and distinction that Ben is eager to take up.

That such a role involves a hierophantic elevation of its occupant is made only plainer once Ben begins to speak of the spiritual, and not simply social, dimensions of the mason’s teachings. For Ben Telfair’s mason—seeing truly into the warp of the world, working gravity to forge the beginnings of civilization, preserving quietly the knowledge that has made these beginnings possible—becomes, in the end, as much priest as workman, as much co-Creator as builder. For in working with a proper understanding of the cosmos, Ben’s stonemason works nothing less than God’s own will: “The keystone that locks the arch is pressed in place by the thumb of God” (10). If this suggests that Providence itself guides the mason’s work, it seems equally true for Ben that the mason emulates and completes God’s own. The mason’s building follows and extends divine design: “A wall is made in the same way the world is made” (10). Now, such talk, with its rooting of masonry in that “stuff of creation” so reviled
by the Gnostics as “the realm of darkness,” might seem to indicate that Ben’s sought-after wisdom is in fact at odds with Gnostic demonization of the Demiurge and his infernal Creation (Luce 71). Ben’s desire to read the truth hidden in the earth’s bones, to devote his life to the mastering of their laws, and to serve as apprentice to the Creator himself all suggest a celebration of that from which ancient gnosis teaches we must rather seek to disentangle ourselves.

Yet the ultimate aim of such co-creative activity suggests otherwise. Ben does not revel in the beauties of Creation; his soliloquies feature no paeans to a natural world of specific landscapes or fragile living creatures. The world Ben encounters has the value that it has for him only as a curriculum, only insofar as it contains the secrets that stonemasons safeguard and as those secrets lead beyond the mundane and toward divine agency. For just as Ben identifies becoming custodian to the mason’s gospel with an initiation into a line of sage stewards, so does he see the work of worldly building as conferring otherworldly powers. First, the mason as builder is, through his pursuit of a craft sustained by esoteric knowledge, offered immortality. Just as his handiwork stands through the centuries, bearing the unmistakable imprint of his hand, so is he himself made an enduring monument, “forever joined” to his work (Stonemason 8). Moreover, if the knowledge Papaw possesses allows the mason to participate in God’s eternity, so does it, for Ben, allow its custodian to play redeemer, savior of this essential knowledge itself, of the properly human world it safeguards, and of the next apprentice to be initiated into the stonemason’s elect brotherhood. Ben’s avowed mission in learning from Papaw is clear on just this point: “[T]hat the craft of stonemasonry should be allowed to vanish from this world is just not negotiable for me. Somewhere there is someone who wants to know. Nor will I have to seek him out” (91).

Thus, the gospel Ben preaches for most of the play is centered on the redeeming power of knowledge, a knowledge preserved by a brotherhood that represents that “elite of mankind” the Gnostics saw themselves as being and capable of freeing its possessor for communion with God (Rudolph 266). Finally, it is, like Gnostic teaching, a wisdom to be kept secret, fit only for the few. Ben speaks admiringly of the secrecy of the trade: “The old masons would quit work if you stopped to watch them” (26). Their knowledge was for the kind of redemptive teaching Ben imagines above, not for just anyone to assimilate or distort. The craft was something, in Papaw’s remembered words, to be “kept … close to our hearts” (33). Now, if its esoteric character marks the craft’s clearest kinship with the Gnosticism so often attributed to McCarthy’s work, it is also, I argue, the first clue that Ben’s definition of Papaw’s teachings diverges from that of The Stonemason itself. For while Walsh emphasizes the degree to which Ben “seems to speak directly for McCarthy,” the problematic construction of the
play works to highlight just the opposite. The opening stage directions explain how the character of Ben Telfair is to be split between a speaker of monologues from a lectern at stage left and “a double” who acts out his part in the dramatic scenes played out at stage right (5). Ben thus offers interpretations of characters and events that the play also enacts for us, but McCarthy cautions that “we must resist the temptation to see the drama as something being presented by the speaker at his lectern” (6). Ben is not, in other words, the author of what the scenes disclose, and the past they make present “will not at all times support” his construal of events (6). What this construction is designed to permit, therefore, is a measuring of Ben’s reading of things, not least of the nature of Papaw’s wisdom, against the words and deeds of characters in these scenes. In this way, “[t]he audience may perhaps be also a jury” (6), passing judgment on just that gospel Ben seeks to wring from his grandfather’s life. Thus, for all that Ben’s monologues may at times dominate, they serve only to offer his interpretations of the past, “without necessarily reflecting the worldview of the main text” (Cooper, No More Heroes 114).

What this means is that Ben’s fixation upon craft as Papaw’s greatest gift, and more specifically his esteem for secret knowledge over other paths to salvation, need not express the values of the play itself. As noted, like the Gnostics who presented themselves as custodians to apostolic wisdom kept secret “because all are not capable of receiving it” (Irenaeus 8), Ben too takes the obscurity of the mason’s craft as proof of its value and of his own exalted calling. “And the secrecy,” he marvels, looking back on the practices of medieval guilds: “Always the secrecy” (66). Such secrecy is essential, in Ben’s view, in order to bar the unworthy from so consequential a stewardship as the mason’s vocation entails. Yet the keeping of secrets he takes as the very metric of worth is revealed by the play to be, far from the Gnostics’ path to redemption, utterly ruinous. That

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9 In the Wake 296. That The Stonemason is marked by lapses in stagecraft is scarcely disputed. Even Hall, who defends the text as “a valuable part of the body of McCarthy’s work,” concedes it is flawed as a stageable drama (191). Peter Josyph, himself a sometime playwright, is less forgiving, dismissing it as an abject failure (113), undermined by the busyness of its scene-shifting and the clumsiness of its Ben-at-the-podium conceit (117). In this assessment, he seconds that of the company first charged with producing The Stonemason. The Arena Stage of Washington, D.C., was slated, with the help of a Kennedy Center grant, to mount a production in 1992 but encountered difficulties with the splitting of Ben (Arnold, “McCarthy’s Stonemason” 122). In the words of director Laurence Maslon, “[T]his was not a play meant for the professional theatre” (qtd. in Arnold, “McCarthy’s Stonemason” 122). Though dramaturgy was not the sole factor in play, Maslon’s verdict was nonetheless borne out by Arena’s abandonment of the play and return of the Kennedy Center funds (118). For a full account of this aborted first production, see Arnold’s “Cormac McCarthy’s The Stonemason: The Unmaking of a Play.”
the Telfair household is fragile precisely because it is founded on such secret-keeping is repeatedly made plain. In the wake of the disappearance of Ben’s nephew Soldier, for example, we learn of the precedent set by a runaway Uncle Dyson, gone twenty years, his disgrace so unspoken that Ben’s sister Carlotta reports having learned of his existence only as a teen. Worried for her troubled son, she indictsthe Telfair taste for silence and circumspection: “Everybody in this family thinks if you dont mention something then it doesnt exist” (70).

While the harm done by this particular secret is left unelaborated, others are of clearly greater consequence. Again, Carlotta seems keenest to dispel needless mystery in hopes of freeing the family from shame and dysfunction. Helping her mother babysit while Ben and Maven are out for the evening, Carlotta redirects Mama’s complaints regarding her daughter-in-law’s absence to condemnations of men “gone all hours of the day and night” (45). The fierceness with which her mother quashes this talk suggests that she and Carlotta are speaking of something other than Ben’s over-work. Indeed, as becomes clear after Big Ben’s suicide, when Ben visits his father’s mistress Mary Weaver, this talk of male delinquency speaks to another silence maintained by the Telfair clan to its cost. Indeed, Big Ben’s secrets extend beyond this affair to the shadowy enterprises that see him coming to Ben for loan money. These secrets, guarded to the grave, lead to desperation in the face of consequences worse than insolvency: “Aint a matter of foreclosure” (77). The fruits of subterfuge here are not simply mortgages and thousands owed to his son, but utter self-destruction and the loss of the family home. Yet the most poisonous of the play’s unspoken is that guarded by Ben himself. As becomes clear after his father's death, Ben has long since located Soldier and, appalled by his life, has not simply kept this from the family but paid Soldier to make no contact with them. In doing so, Ben seeks, he claims, only to be “merciful” to Carlotta, keeping a sad knowledge from one unready to be burdened by it (119). Yet however elect Ben takes himself to be, his silence proves no less deadly than his father’s: Soldier uses his uncle’s hush money to over-dose alone in “[a] cheap hotel room” (114), and, soon after, an outraged Carlotta takes her final leave from her brother.

This last point helps indicate how Ben’s tale, for all his seeking after Papaw’s wisdom, becomes marked both by folly and by tragedy. For Hage, Ben’s error is his “placing faith in stonemasonry above all else,” an error he in fact learns from the grandfather he idolizes (152). But it is rather the case, as Bellini has argued, that Ben’s own teaching and conduct represent “a misunderstanding” of Papaw’s craft (4). Indeed, I would go further than Bellini here. Ben’s error lies not, as some would have it, in his taking Papaw as his guide but in his believing that what is most to be learned from him is his trade, rather than the example
of his simple Christian life. In other words, Ben is right to see Papaw as the moral heart of McCarthy’s text; he errs, however, by seizing, in Gnostic fashion, upon his knowledge and not his virtues. This disjunction is underscored from the play’s opening scene. While Ben, at his podium, introduces his love for Papaw as a right valuing of his “rare” excellence as a mason, Papaw himself is situated stage right, seated alone, prayerfully reading from his dog-eared Bible (8, 11). From the start, then, the play communicates that the Papaw Ben values may not be the man Papaw most strives to be and to model. Indeed, the bulk of the dialogue Papaw delivers, as opposed to what we receive ventriloquized by lectern-Ben, is devoted to moral lessons and not the tricks of his trade—lessons, moreover, explicitly rooted in that Christian faith his daily Bible reading itself exemplifies.

Thus, while Ben may not have ears to hear it, the gospel Papaw is most eager to share is that of the Good Shepherd rather than the true mason. As he responds to Ben’s speculations as to whether Mayan masons mixed human blood in their mortar, “the only blood you’ll ever need is the blood of your redeemer” (66). Nor is such redirection of Ben’s curiosity, his hankering after trade secrets, towards Christian faith unique. When telling his grandson of his

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10 While the character of Papaw is the sole element of *The Stonemason* Josyph singles out for praise (132), this figure has fared less well at the hands of other readers. Walsh, for example, dismisses his teachings as “antiquated” and “even naïve” (“History” 65). J. Douglas Canfield, focusing on the drama’s Oedipal tensions, bemoans the manner in which the play itself seems to side with Papaw, and so with a faith in God and tradition that is “ultimately escapist, nostalgic for a pre-capitalist patriarchy where workers are not alienated” (16). Cant offers a similar analysis but sees McCarthy critiquing what Canfield reads as celebrated; thus for him, the play questions Ben’s devotion to Papaw and offers “a powerful portrayal of the family as the site of destructive patriarchal mythology” (126).

11 Much like the status of McCarthy’s spiritual interests generally, the question of McCarthy’s stance on the Judeo-Christian tradition has been much controverted. Even critics who agree with Crews that McCarthy’s work reveals a “fundamentally religious orientation” balk at the suggestion that such an orientation might point to orthodox Christianity (159). Thus, Luce sees his work’s spiritual exploration nonetheless mounting, especially in *Suttree* (1979), a powerful repudiation of “the hell of church doctrine” (267), and Monk reads McCarthy as repeatedly critiquing the Christian tradition for its denigration of nature and promulgation of the notion of human lordship over creation (175). For Dorson, it is clear that, when it comes to Judeo-Christianity, it is “the heterodox offshoots of this tradition,” including Gnosticism, that “interest him the most” (125). Along these lines, Josyph’s reading of *The Road*, for example, discerns “a kind of Christian existentialism” in McCarthy’s final novel (142). Nonetheless, Brewer, writing of *The Stonemason*, detects “a distinct lack of ambivalence” in the play’s treatment of characters’ faith in a Christian God (42), and Brian Giezma argues that, whatever anticlericalism might turn up in the work, McCarthy’s reliance on liturgical and sacramental imagery, as well as his persistent grappling with the mystery of evil, betray “an unshakably Catholic worldview” (222).
life as a mason, Papaw emphasizes matters having less to do with the knowledge of the elect and more to do with universal, biblical teachings. At work by age twelve, “it wasn’t long,” he tells Ben, “fore I learned that a lot of what the good book said was ever bit as true as it was claimed” (48). The fruit of his working life that he is eager to pass on has little, then, to do with the craftsman’s secrets. Indeed, Ben marvels that the coming obsolescence of the mason’s trade “seems not to bother” Papaw at all (26). Instead, Papaw’s thoughts and words are, throughout, focused on what he has learned about how to deal with his God and his fellow men, on what he has learned to do and aspire to as a moral being. Significantly, this knowledge is far from elusive or secret; it is no elite preserve. What is most to be taught, for Papaw, is not simply a matter of being and doing over knowing but something already widely known, proclaimed for two thousand years and embedded, on Papaw’s account, in every human heart. When Ben asks about the justice of masons doing unpaid-for work, Papaw articulates a readiness to trust in Providence, in a divine justice whose reality our own capacity for judgments of fairness proclaims: “They’s a ledger kept that the pages don’t never get old nor crumbly … If it don’t balance then they ain’t no right in this world and if they ain’t then where did I hear of it at? Where did you?” (29).

Significantly, this is an appeal and an exhortation to faith, not knowledge—faith in God’s creation and stewardship rather than the mason’s own. This is something not to be guarded but proclaimed, something that need not be sought out, for it is easily known by all who would acknowledge it. But for those who will not, no alternate secret teaching, no mere knowing can take its place. As he tells Ben in response to questions on ownership, “Where men don’t have right intentions the law caint supply em” (30). In other words, mere knowledge is no moral surety; the craft itself cannot save masons from the despoliation of their handiwork. What his faith in his Redeemer rather than in his trade teaches Papaw, then, is the necessary supremacy of ethos over gnosis, a hierarchy which points to one important lesson his livelihood has offered him. As Bellini remarks, the notion of craftsmanship “blurs the boundaries between thinking and doing” (3), and even Ben comes to see that his grandfather’s trade can only be “learned in the doing” (McCarthy, Stonemason 64). In similar fashion, the rigors of his profession have taught Papaw the value of work, of struggling to do better and not presuming mastery through cognitive assimilation of rules. Thus, clearly speaking of more than the progress of a mason’s skills, Papaw tells Ben, “A man that will work they’s always hope for him. He can always change his ways” (27). Just as knowledge of sound laws is no guarantee of justice among men who refuse to obey them, so honest effort offers hope of redemption, even where learning is lacking.
Yet Papaw does not fetishize work as Ben does. Unlike his grandson, he is under no illusion that the mason's handiwork promises immortality: “[T]hat man up there aint goin to let nothin stand forever noway” (30). From his trust in, and submission to, Providence, Papaw understands work not as his road to salvation as godhead, but as his duty to conduct himself, in his relations to his neighbors and his God, in accordance with those virtues his Savior himself demands. The lesson he has to offer that Ben's Gnostic obsessions lead him too long to ignore is that of a life of faith in God lived out in the moral practice of humility, patience, and above all love. The first of these, indicated by his trust in the Lord, is also revealed by the fact that, in his ninety years as a mason, Papaw has spent more than eighty as a journeyman, not a master (96). As Ben comes belatedly to appreciate, mastery, in his grandfather's life, is the prize of the humble: “The journeyman becomes a master when he masters the journeyman's trade. He becomes a master when he ceases to wish to be one” (96). This abandonment of presumption is clearly, for Papaw, rooted in a faith Ben admits he struggles with—“I know nothing of God,” he confesses (97)—and bears as fruit a defining patience Ben concedes “was hard for me to learn” (96). But the work Papaw most exemplifies is that of charity lived out as forbearance, concern, and the safeguarding not of secret lore but of others' well-being. Trusting in God's justice and seeking the other's good, Papaw, early in his working life, “made it a study to put up with foolishness and not to be made party to it,” even when this entailed considerable sacrifice (49). Thus, when discussing the murder of his Uncle Selman at the hands of a white man, Papaw, though still moved by the memory, refuses to satisfy Ben's characteristic desire to know the killer's name. Noting that “[h]e has children livin in this town. Children and grandchildren,” Papaw ends this conversation with “I guess I'd rather not to say it” (52). The sole remaining injured party, Papaw puts the good of a murderer's descendants and the moral well-being of his grandson ahead of human notions of justice or Ben's hunger for old secrets.

Yet Ben is drawn less by Papaw's manifest moral example than by the certainty that his grandfather “knew things that other people did not” (11). Indeed, Ben's confidence not in Papaw's own faith or the virtues that flow from it but in privileged knowledge, bars him from emulating what the old man most truly values, least of all humility. As Ben remarks, “Because the world is made of stone the mason is prey to a great conceit,” the conviction that he grasps and molds the cosmic matrix itself (31). Papaw is immune to any such temptation, but Ben's own characterization of the hierophantic power of the stonemason indicates that he is not. Thus, in pursuing the mason's secret knowledge, he has presumed an elect role for himself, one marked by his managerial pre-eminence within the Telfair household. As Canfield rightly notes, though he
is eager to learn at the feet of the grandfather, Ben consistently works to usurp his father's role as “head of the household” (14). Despite his nephew’s protest, “You aint my daddy” (21), Ben is eager to replace Soldier’s absent father: trying to draw Soldier out regarding his challenges at school, taking the lead on search efforts when Soldier goes missing, promising Carlotta her son will be safe. On a lighter note, he plays paterfamilias in subjecting his sister’s suitor to teasing interrogation—“You can stop me any time you want”—when he comes to pick her up for an evening out (87). Most pointedly, Ben assumes the mantle of Telfair patriarch in his role as his father’s creditor. Having already loaned Big Ben $11,000, Ben is once again called upon to save a father cast as prodigal son (81). With Big Ben warning, “I’m goin to lose everthing I got,” Ben reluctantly agrees to do what he can, while indicating this will be less than the full $6,000 requested (78).

Now, in all of this—his looking out for a wayward teen, his attempts to save his father from ruin, even the loving attention he pays Papaw—Ben might well be taken as following the old man’s example. Indeed, Josyph argues that Ben’s ultimate profession of guilt fails to convince for the simple reason that he has done no wrong. Yet while Ben’s various seigneurial gestures may resemble the kind of charity Papaw embodies, what they more clearly reveal is his certainty that he knows best and is entitled to judge for those around him; in this way, all his custodial pretensions ultimately expose Ben’s failure properly to love and to safeguard his family. Both Carlotta and her son detect this failure in him, charging him with an over-inflated sense of what he knows and what he can or should control. Indeed, when Ben promises Carlotta no harm will come to her boy, she replies, “You cant promise. You think you can fix everything. You cant” (60). Four years later, still trying to fix things by paying his nephew to stay away, Ben strikes Soldier, too, as an absurdly self-confident, self-serving figure: “I see you aint changed. Still know everthing” (116). Ben’s faith in his own rightness thus fuels a sense of righteousness, a readiness to decide for others that ends up, as these warnings presage, not just in unrealized ends but in disastrous failures of loving.

In fact, even in his dealings with Papaw, Ben’s confidence in his knowledge and rectitude encourages moral recklessness. Though his mother forbids him

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12 It is fair to observe that this remains a minority opinion. For Walsh, Ben is instead properly indicted for having fallen prey to the mason’s conceit, the “ill-informed faith that he can control everything” (“History” 67), and Cant concurs that “Ben is unable to ‘save the others’ because he has believed the myth of the providential father” (131). Monk goes so far as to liken Ben to that quintessential McCarthy villain, Judge Holden himself, for sharing the latter’s “desire to control, manage, and master life” (73).
to take his grandfather out working in February weather and even his wife asks “don’t you think he’s a little old to be out in the freezing cold,” Ben will brook no delay in their work and his ongoing initiation into the stonemason’s brotherhood (36). If his devotion to the craft thus eclipses his concern for Papaw, it likewise takes precedence over other duties of care. Taking every opportunity to work with his grandfather, over and above commitments to Big Ben, Ben is virtually “working three jobs,” with the result that, as Mama complains, his daughter is “not much better than a orphan” (44, 43). Yet neither Papaw nor daughter Melissa suffer greatly from Ben’s putting his progress in knowing ahead of love. The same cannot be said for Big Ben or young Soldier. Offering less than his father needs, Ben is a begrudging benefactor to a frantic Big Ben, happy to pay him just enough to have his shameful failures go away. Likewise, having located a Soldier he judges to be a killer, Ben spends years paying this broken man, too, to keep his distance, a gesture that involves a cold repudiation of this nephew and a cruel withholding from Carlotta of the news that her boy is alive. In both cases, the cost of Ben’s presumption is mortally high: Big Ben, ensnared by financial difficulties, shoots himself, while Soldier, shown repeatedly his unworthiness of love and kin, uses Ben’s money to buy his fatal score.

Prizing his secret knowledge, and the right to decide for others that he thinks it confers, over his grandfather’s faith, Ben fails tragically to cultivate the virtues of humility, forbearance, and Christian charity that faith enjoins. But this very failure involves Ben ultimately in a humbling recognition not just of his sins but of his error in seeking to become God through intellect, rather than approaching God in love. If it is true, as Arnold holds, that “in McCarthy’s highly moralistic world[,] sins must be named and owned before they can be forgiven” (“Naming” 54), then The Stonemason’s final act sees Ben making the first steps towards that “exoneration” that the play’s opening stage directions have informed us he seeks (McCarthy, Stonemason 6). These steps he takes initially through admissions of ignorance, not assertions of perfect knowledge. Thus, in the wake of his father’s suicide, he reflects, “I don’t know what it means that things exist and then exist no more” (104). Death’s mystery here baffles the esoteric learning by which he sought to master even mortality. But if this knowledge of what he cannot know represents a valuable surrender of his characteristic presumption, other unknowns convict him of culpable failures of love. As becomes apparent in his visit with Mary Weaver, Ben has come hoping to learn something of a man he has spent a life with but taken as little notice of as possible. “You talk like he died fore you was born,” she accuses (108), and Ben’s measure of his own guilt comes through not just in his realization that he was obligated to give his father everything (105) but in his miserable confession, “I don’t know anything about him” (108).
The humbling blows of loss and sin thus expose the bankruptcy of the knowledge he has sought and point to duties far greater than seeking to know and to control. As Ben admits, “I lost my way. I’d thought by my labors to stand outside the true bend of gravity which is the world’s pain” (111). No longer confident that the mason’s lore will permit him to master gravity and even death, Ben here sees himself as subject to the ineluctable force of human suffering. But having begun to see his own tale through the lens his grandfather’s life most valuably affords, Ben now takes his participation in this universal economy of grief as the occasion not for anticosmic despair but for a new education in moral doing: “What I need most is to learn charity. That most of all” (131). Hence the climactic dream that Ben recounts just before Soldier’s last scenes, a dream which indicates the gravity of his dereliction with respect to his nephew and demonstrates the priority of Christian virtues over elite knowledges. Ben imagines himself at his life’s end, approaching the throne of God, clutching to him, as his justification, his “job-book … in which [are] logged the hours and the days and the years” he has devoted to the trade (112). Yet this God, true to the faith exemplified by Papaw himself, is uninterested in what this book might tell. He looks not to what Ben has mastered but to those whom he has lovingly served and borne up. Thus Ben, addressing his own folly, describes God “ask[ing] as you stand there alone with your book—perhaps not even unkindly—this single question: Where are the others?” (112–113). Ben’s route to heaven, then, and *The Stonemason’s* own response to life’s mysteries lie not in Gnostic devotion to secrets that promise disentanglement from the common lot. Rather, as Ben’s humbling discovery of his own sins makes plain, the truer path is allied with those Christian virtues Papaw openly proclaimed in the curriculum of his life.

In the end, then, Ben’s tale demonstrates how, for McCarthy, any philosophy “that atrophies the difficult and complicated ties of love and responsibility is incomplete” (Crews 219). More than this, though, it articulates a suspicion of Ben’s faith in the saving power of knowledge so profound as to constitute not simply a rebuke to the hubris of this tragic protagonist but a negative response to the Gnostic thesis so many have seen as central to McCarthy’s work. Ben approaches wisdom in admissions of ignorance, in his submission before mysteries that are not to be mastered. Such humble acceptance leads first to a faith in something other than his own power: “I know nothing of God. But I know that something knows … Something knows and will tell you. It will tell you when you stop pretending you know” (97). On *The Stonemason’s* account, what we will be told when we rein in our pretense to omniscience is not some secret destined for the few but the over-riding duty of charity that makes mock of pride and election. As Ben realizes, just before he concludes the play in prayer,
“[W]e are all the elect, each one of us, and we are embarked upon a journey to something unimaginable” (132). By way of such a conclusion, *The Stonemason* speaks explicitly to the Gnostic tradition only to refute it and to champion instead a more Christian spirituality of faith, hope, and love, of serving and believing over knowing. And if Arnold was at all justified in predicting that “this play may someday be seen as the moral touchstone to his work,” then this conclusion may well prove instructive for more than this drama itself (“McCarthy’s Stonemason” 129).

### Works Cited


