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The Sanctity of Blood:
*Violence, redemption, and regeneration in the works of
Cormac McCarthy*

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Abbreviations

<i>BM</i>	<i>Blood Meridian</i>
<i>CoG</i>	<i>Child of God</i>
<i>OD</i>	<i>Outer Dark</i>
<i>NCOM</i>	<i>No Country for Old Men</i>
<i>S</i>	<i>Suttree</i>
<i>TR</i>	<i>The Road</i>

I.
Preamble:
The Destructive Element

“I have seen the consequences in the real world and they can be very grave indeed. They can be consequences of a gravity not excluding bloodshed. Not excluding death” (136).

—Cormac McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses*

Labelled the “illegitimate offspring of Zane Grey and Flannery O’Connor” (Pilkington 318), Cormac McCarthy began his writing career with his imagination firmly rooted in the traditions of the Southern gothic and the Southern grotesque (Frye 7). Bizarre, cruel, and marked by devastating violence, McCarthy’s forays into the damaged lives of his characters unearth a complexity of human aberration that is both stunning and extremely visceral. He does not shy from emotionally wrenching topics, thrusting his misfits and loners into a spiritual darkness infested with incest, necrophilia, and murder. He immerses his characters in what Joseph Conrad called the destructive element, wherein they “must be tested by the forces underpinning the world, be initiated into the wisdom of the dead and the ever-living” (Slotkin 28). There is no other writer in contemporary American fiction who has traced the fault-lines of sin and violence with a degree of intensity approaching the rawness exhibited by McCarthy’s quest for the true heart of darkness.

Born in Providence, Rhode Island, but having grown up in Knoxville, Tennessee, Cormac McCarthy is a true child of the South. There is something distinctly Faulknerian about the language and setting of his early works: *The*

Orchard Keeper (1965), *Outer Dark* (1968), *Child of God* (1973), *Suttree* (1979). A man of extraordinary vision and talent, McCarthy (not unlike Faulkner) writes intricately crafted prose that employs a wide array of archaic and obsolete words to great effect. Punctuation is kept to a bare minimum, complementing a highly idiosyncratic style that further relies on non-standard spelling, bilingualism (his Western novels brim with untranslated Spanish phrases and dialogue), and phonetically rendered dialect. His language is endowed with equal measures of beauty and barbarism, evoking a unique poesy of blood. Spare, somber, and stark, his writing echoes the brutality and harshness of his stories. As in poetry, form usually mirrors content: the high intensity of his style is in keeping with the level of violence McCarthy maintains in his works.

McCarthy's preoccupation with violence and the brutal fates of his characters recall the dark tragedies of Yoknapatawpha County that William Faulkner penned in the decades preceding McCarthy's nascence as a novelist. A "uniquely American" (Frye 1) practitioner of the written word, McCarthy tackles the classic American themes of bloodshed and redemption, re-focalizing them with a contemporary sensibility for and curiosity in the human abyss. In his fiction, rugged individualism descends into horror, invoking a frightening picture of the Great American Nightmare.

Against a backdrop of Southern melancholia and drama, McCarthy stages epic myths of violence and despair intensely localized in half-forgotten corners of America. Finely rendered and rich in folkloristic detail, the places in McCarthy's fiction are just as heartless and unforgiving as the lives of his characters. Referring to the unfortunates haunting McCarthy's pages, Kenneth Lincoln speaks of "a passel of misshapen monsters, villagers gone wrong, and pathological deviants—a miscellany of loners brought down mercilessly by time, circumstance, character, and fate." Far exceeding the somber visions of his predecessors, McCarthy's work yet strikes some parallels with "the barren heathscapes and tormented victims of Thomas Hardy or the rocky woodland paths and abused Puritans of Nathaniel Hawthorne" (*Canticles* 18).

Given its history of slavery and civil war, the South has always been marked by violence. The region has had a “reputation for violence” (Ciuba 3) since “the late eighteenth century” (Ayers 9 qtd. in Ciuba 3), so much so that Ciuba speaks of a “[c]ulture of [v]iolence” (*Desire* 1).¹ This cultural experience has had a profound influence on Southern writers, and it cannot be denied that Cormac McCarthy “shares an affinity with William Faulkner, Erskine Caldwell, Tennessee Williams, Flannery O’Connor, Carson McCullers, and Walker Percy, among many others” (Frye 13–14).

The influences of Southern fiction are indeed strong in McCarthy. The settings of his novels may change, but the characters remain true to their original mold of twisted individuality. After his first four books McCarthy turns westwards, deciding to explore the violent past of the Southwest and Mexico in *Blood Meridian* (1985), his epic tale of a gang of scalp-hunters led to their doom by a seemingly superhuman judge of “war and blood,” a dangerous man ruled by his sheer limitless “antipathy to any concept of human decency” (Frye 11). Kin to the tragic conceptions of Melville and Milton, the judge is a fervent advocate of violence. The bloody ways of the Old West fuel McCarthy’s thematic interests, and he remains in the border country with his next books: *The Border Trilogy*, consisting of *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), *The Crossing* (1996), and *The Cities of the Plain* (1998). McCarthy reconfigures the form of the frontier romance for it to

¹ Gary M. Ciuba makes the following observations on the data behind Southern violence: “Mortality figures from the 1850 census indicate that the South’s murder rate was seven times that of the North (Bruce 242n.). Early scholarly attempts to tally southern homicides confirm the propensity for violence. In 1880 H. V. Redfield, whose research in newspapers and official records pioneered the study of southern violence, found that southerners in the benchmark states of Texas, Kentucky, and South Carolina ‘kill one another at a rate about eighteen hundred per cent. greater than does the population of New England’ (13) [...] H. C. Brearly report[s] that from 1920 to 1924 the homicide rate in the South was slightly over two and a half times that for the rest of the country (681)” (*Culture* 4). Ciuba adds, “Recent work by Nisbett and Cohen indicates that the regional propensity for violence, noted by Redfield and Brearly, has persisted. For example, surveys of white male southerners show that they are more likely than their counterparts outside the region to favor violence to respond to insults, to discipline their children, to protect self and home, and to maintain civil order. These attitudes toward violence are supported by laws that are more likely in the South than elsewhere in the country to allow force in defending one’s self or property, to be lenient in prosecuting domestic violence, and to accept corporeal punishment (Nisbett and Cohen 26–37, 60–9)” (*Desire* 247n2).

serve as “a means to explore the human potential for violence, avarice, blindness, self-gratification, and depravity” (Frye 8, 10–11).

Following on the boot-heels of the Westerns, *No Country for Old Men* (2005) is set in Texas after the war in Vietnam. It suggests that the dictates of the Old West are still prevalent in a modern world of crime and drugs in which temptation lures an innocent man to his downfall. Faced with evil and violence, “old men” stand little or no chance at all.

The Road (2006), McCarthy’s most recent novel to date, marks his return to the southeastern United States, describing a man and a boy’s passage through a wasted and menacing post-apocalyptic America. Like the rest of his oeuvre, the novel remains faithful to McCarthy’s primary subject: “the violence present in the human heart” (Frye 10).

In his book *Understanding Cormac McCarthy*, Steven Frye cites “violence, human degradation, and both human and natural evil” as McCarthy’s “primary concerns” (Frye 5). It is a belief central to his fiction that violence is an ineradicable part of life. “Violence is a reality endemic to the world’s existence; depravity and avarice are central to human nature; and meaning, purpose, and value, if they are to be found, must be sought in darkness” (Frye 8). The darkness then is the catalyst, the impetus and revealing force behind his characters’ plumbing their destinies as they make their toilsome journeys through the world. “[T]he excessive violence that dominates [McCarthy’s] fiction is thus an essential element in his aesthetic” (Giles 18). In McCarthy’s universe, violence is a necessary function: it informs his characters, giving them the means both to express and to understand themselves; it is the roadmap that delineates their varied journeys, sometimes revealing, in broken lines, a course toward the possibility of redemption. Violence is what makes them complete. For the cost of living is high, and the only currency available to McCarthy’s characters is the blood of their own bodies and, if that will not suffice, the blood of others; human existence takes its toll, and men seek to be reimbursed. “There is no such thing as life without bloodshed” (Woodward), McCarthy claims in a frequently quoted

interview in the *New York Times*. As the judge explains in *Blood Meridian*, the lives of men are limitless in their possibilities, but they all end in calamity:

The truth about the world, [the judge] said, is that anything is possible. Had you not seen it all from birth and thereby bled it of its strangeness it would appear to you for what it is, a hat trick in a medicine show, a fevered dream, a trance bepopulate with chimeras having neither analogue nor precedent, an itinerant carnival, a migratory tentshow whose ultimate destination after many a pitch in many a mudded field is unspeakable and calamitous beyond reckoning.

The universe is no narrow thing and the order within it is not constrained by any latitude in its conception to repeat what exists in one part in any other part. Even in this world more things exist without our knowledge than with it and the order in creation which you see is that which you have put there, like a string in a maze, so that you shall not lose your way. For existence has its own order and that no man's mind can compass, that mind itself being but a fact among others. (*BM* 245)

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the violence depicted in *Outer Dark*, *Blood Meridian*, and *The Road*, and to determine whether there is operating in these works a larger scheme which utilizes McCarthy's "aesthetic" to install a structure of redemption and regeneration that allows his characters to transcend the trap of eternal savagery. Richard Slotkin, who wrote several pioneering works examining the myth of regeneration through violence, reaches back to the first colonists of the New World to pinpoint the moment when "the myth of regeneration through violence became the structuring metaphor of the American experience" (*Regeneration* 5). Before that, he notes, "[i]n the myths of Europe, the islands of the West had been fabled before the Age of Discovery as the place of the underworld or afterworld, the mystical kingdom of dreams, of death and dissolution, the maternal womb and tomb of the sea or the night (in which the sun would sink), the world below consciousness, the realm of Moira" (27). It seems only fitting then that McCarthy's books would be set in America, describing American destinies; indeed, it is his association of darkness and death with the American spectrum—the country's landscape, people, and history—that turns his stories into myths of nearly classical proportions.

McCarthy's works concern themselves with the notion that "even in death's dream kingdom there [is] hope for the renewal of life, for a day of resurrection for the fallen kings of men." McCarthy's heroes are men prisoned in the shadows of a darkened sun, and as in "the archetypal mythology of the heroic quest [...] it is the journey to the underworld that is the essential, necessary action. In this dark, hidden realm abide the forces that silently and inscrutably shape the destiny of men, nations, and the physical universe" (*Regeneration* 28). It is thus that violence lends shape and definition to the human clay. And it seems as if it could be no other way: human existence and violence are inextricably intertwined. Man is doomed to resort to violence:

Man has built up the rational world by his own efforts, but there remains within him an undercurrent of violence. Nature herself is violent, and however reasonable we may grow we may be mastered anew by a violence no longer that of nature but of a rational being who tries to obey but who succumbs to stirrings within himself that he cannot bring to heel. (Bataille 40)

The question this analysis will seek to answer is whether the propensity for violence found in McCarthy's characters also enables them ultimately to attain salvation; in other words, whether in his narratives of decaying hearts and dying worlds there lurks behind the gray pall of hopelessness a faint promise of hope. The following pages will place under close scrutiny three of McCarthy's most important works: *Outer Dark*, *Blood Meridian*, and *The Road*. Reaching from his second novel to his most recent by way of what is widely acknowledged to be his masterpiece, the selected texts epitomize McCarthy's entire career, spanning a wide range of themes and topics, all of which are united by violence. Separate chapters will be devoted to an in-depth discussion of each book, the focus being on the examination of the relationship of violence, redemption, and regeneration as it pertains to story and character in the works cited above.

II.
 —Garden of Evil—
Outer Dark (1968)

Set in the South sometime in the early twentieth century, Outer Dark tells the story of a sister, Rinthy, who bears her brother Culla's child. To flee his guilt, Culla tells his sister that the baby has died and abandons it in the woods. There an itinerant tinker finds it and decides to take it with him. When Rinthy discovers that the boy is not dead, Culla runs away from the home they share, setting off across the countryside in an aimless journey. He goes to the nearest town, looking for "[a]ny kind" (OD 40) of work, which is how he ends up chopping wood for the local squire. Meanwhile, Rinthy follows on the trail of the tinker, bent on reclaiming her child. Culla steals the squire's boots and the magistrate pursues him in a wagon, but before he can catch up with Culla he is brutally murdered by three men. Culla reaches the town of Cheatham, which is in uproar over the graves that have been dug up at the church. Whispers of "[g]rave thieves" (OD 87) make the rounds, and Culla soon finds himself pursued by an angry mob accusing him of grave-robbing. So does his odyssey begin: hunted and harried, Culla moves from place to place, a drifter working odd jobs. The three men seem to be on his trail, murdering whoever happens to cross their path. One night, Culla crosses a Styx-like river on a ferry, but the barge breaks free of its ropes in a strong wind and careens wildly downriver. When the ferry finally fetches up against the opposite shore, Culla encounters the three men for the first time. In their second and last encounter, after Culla has been wrongfully accused of driving a herd of hogs over a cliff, the three men, having already killed the tinker, kill Culla's child too. Culla resumes his wanderings, coming across a blind man who warns him of believing false prophets. His journey ends in a swamp of dead and rotting things.

I.

“from dark to dark” (OD 5)

The title of McCarthy’s second novel is misleading: dealing with incest, murder, and abandonment (in all senses of the word), *Outer Dark* really is concerned with the *inner dark* located at the core of its characters. The darkness of sin that plagues them is externalized by means of a harsh, crepuscular landscape and its savage shadow-dwellers. There is at work in the novel a fierce chiaroscuro of darkened landscape and souls steeped in hellfire. Like many of McCarthy’s books, *Outer Dark* makes clear use of the notion that “our inner life is always manifest in the world around us: our experience of the world is always a projection of our inner grace or darkness, and the world of ‘reality’ is largely subjective” (Luce 63).

The novel opens with a cryptic prologue, set in italics, that describes the appearance of three men, whom Boguta-Marchel calls “a band of fallen angels” (169). They have about them something of an unholy trinity, “the bearded one” and “the other two” (*OD* 3) co-existing in “consubstantial monstrosity,” forming a “grim triune” (*OD* 129) that moves across the land in a swath of violence and destruction seemingly devoid of all reason and causality. Throughout the book, the men are described in half-mythical terms, with the bearded one frequently being framed in satanic imagery—the most obvious of which is the description of his boots, which are “cracked and weatherblackened,” with one of them being “cleft from tongue to toe like a hoof” (*OD* 176).²

² Arnold points out that in McCarthy’s work “the type and state of a character’s shoes or boots often signifies the character’s moral condition” (“Moral Parables” 67). As an example, he gives a quote from *Suttree*, in which a recently saved man says, “Jesus never had no shoes” (*S* 123). The notion of a character’s footwear as an emblem of his soul is especially interesting in light of the bearded man’s forcing Culla to swap boots with him (*OD* 179). Taking Culla’s “jimdandy pair of boots” (*OD* 173) and giving him his ruined ones in exchange is akin to an act of soul-snatching: the bearded man takes the only thing Culla has in his possession that is whole; by making him wear his dilapidated, split boots, the bearded man puts his taint of evil on Culla, forcing another unholy communion on him. Luce observes that “in the exchange of boots, [the triune] foist on Culla the fetid garments of death” (*Reading* 90). This scene about boots, broken and whole, prefigures the differentiation between normal hogs and the rare “mulefoot” breed, which occurs later in the novel. For a discussion of the “mulefoot” hogs, see chapter V.

In many ways, the “grim triune” of *Outer Dark* might be considered a forerunner of the judge in *Blood Meridian*: the bearded one and his two acolytes can be read as a prototype of McCarthy’s later creation, a first formulation of the concepts and ideologies combined in the judge; or, if one examines the text in terms of the chronology inherent in McCarthy’s narratives, the events of *Outer Dark* occurring at least several decades after and farther to the east than those set forth in *Blood Meridian*, then the three men can also be read as the judge’s degenerate offspring. Their methods have become cruder, less “sanctified,” and their goals are less grand, their ambitions less lofty than the judge’s. Their rhetoric, too, has become simpler and less erudite. They are no great philosophers of war; they are merely killers. Of course, one can compare the murderous threesome to some force of mythological reckoning—vengeful demons, satanic regulators, or male Furies transplanted to a remote, rural area of Appalachia in the early days of the twentieth century—but the shock of the novel lies in the very real possibility that they might not be anything more evil than mere men of flesh and blood, with a craving for those very same substances, and cut from the same cloth as the men they murder. That seems to be the import of the book: evil incarnate, as represented by the gruesome trio, requires no biblical Satan; it lies ready and wakeful within every man.³ Just as with *Blood Meridian*, however, the

³ McCarthy’s preoccupation with violence seems to be founded on a belief that cruelty and perversion are part of human nature. “Incest, child abandonment, murder, and necrophilia have been human actions since the beginning” (Giles, *Spaces* 40). Violence is an essential quality of man, who, in the words of Judge Holden, is its “ultimate practitioner” (*BM* 248). In that sense, the grim triune of *Outer Dark* represents not so much an anomaly as a high concentration of that atavistic essence—violence—contained within every human heart. There is a crucial passage in *Child of God* which illustrates this point. When a sheriff’s deputy asks the old man if he believes people used to be “meaner” in the old days than they are at present, he replies with firm assuredness: “No [...] I don’t. I think people are the same from the day God first made one” (*CoG* 168). This sentiment is also borne out by one of the three epigraphs to *Blood Meridian*, which states that “a reexamination of a 300,000-year-old fossil skull found in the same region earlier shows evidence of having been scalped.” All this tells us is that people have been up to no good from the start, which casts an interesting light on the God that made them—is He a benevolent God? If one considers the world of *Outer Dark*, one cannot help but wonder. James R. Giles argues that in McCarthy, “God seems not so much absent as harsh and vindictive, as if looking down from an elevated space upon a desperately flawed humanity” (Giles, *Spaces* 24). Culla Holme is anything if not desperately flawed.

beauty of the book resides in the fact that there is no one valid interpretation.⁴ The novel's deft use of allegory ensures that meaning can always swing both ways: toward a grounded, secular reading or a more metaphysical one. The judge could be a Christian devil, a Gnostic archon, a Nietzschean *Übermensch*, or just a very bad man. The same is true for "the bearded" one and "the two others." McCarthy's carefully layered narratives make the compass needle of literary analysis spin wildly, inviting all directions to converge in one deceptive pathway.

It is impossible not to notice the biblical overtones marking the threesome's entrance into the world of the book. Boguta-Marchel paraphrases their appearance as follows: they descend from "a sun-lit hill into a valley of darkness—from 'spurious sanctity' into genuine 'shadow'" (Boguta-Marchel 169, citing *OD* 3). The imagery attending the band's inauguration to the novel's narrative could have been taken straight out of *Blood Meridian*:

They crested out on the bluff in the late afternoon sun with their shadows long on the sawgrass and burnt sedge, moving single file and slowly high above the river and with something of its own implacability, pausing and grouping for a moment and going on again strung out in silhouette against the sun and then dropping under the crest of the hill into a fold of blue shadow with light touching them about the head in spurious sanctity until they had gone on for such a time as saw the sun down altogether and they moved in shadow altogether which suited them very well. When they reached the river it was full dark and they made camp and a small fire across which their shapes moved in a nameless black ballet. (*OD* 3)

A similar passage can be found at the beginning of *Blood Meridian*: "A shadowed agony in the garden. Against the sun's declining figures moving in the slower dusk across a paper skyline. A lone dark husbandman pursuing mule and harrow down the rain blown bottomland toward night" (*BM* 4).

What is clear from the start of the novel is that it employs a similar *quality* of landscape and setting as is dominant in *Blood Meridian*. This is a country in which the sun is in irrevocable decline: shadows and darkness hold sway over the

⁴ Vereen M. Bell argues that "[o]ne strength of McCarthy's novels is that they resist the imposition of theses from the outside, especially conventional ones, and that they seem finally to call all theses into question" (Bell xiii).

land and its inhabitants—a forceful *outer dark* that enters the innermost recesses of the people.

The references to darkness and shadow in the opening passage of *Outer Dark* are overwhelming. The “grim triune” advances across the darkening land with unstoppable purpose, “implacable” like the river, walking “the sun down altogether” and “mov[ing] in shadow altogether which suit[s] them very well” (*OD* 4). They are men of darkness, and the crimes they will commit bespeak a predilection for night-work and deeds at home only in the lightless corners of the world.

Culla Holme likewise is a creature of darkness: thus is he introduced to the reader immediately after the prologue about the three men. Culla is shaken “awake from dark to dark, delivered out of the clamorous rabble under a black sun and into a night more dolorous.” He has been dreaming—a dream of darkness, the eclipse of the sun, sickness, and the promise of a cure, but in the end no cure comes, the gathered mob of lepers falling on Culla instead—and his sister returns him to the reality of the incestuous bed they share and “the nameless weight in her belly” (*OD* 5).

Culla Holme is the classic example of a man whose sins have followed him home—having forced incestuous relations on his sister and gotten her pregnant, his sleeping hours are filled with nightmares of a coming eclipse, “the hour [when] the sun [will] darken” (*OD* 5). This dream of the world’s darkening seems to coincide with the advent of the three men, who also make their first appearance in the book at a time when the light begins to fail and the night draws close. It is almost as if Culla’s incest has called these men forth, from whatever darksome regions they might have inhabited before. Culla’s dream heralds their coming—the light is gone, and the men are on their way. Something of cosmic importance has been set in motion.

Culla’s dream does something else as well: in it, the prophet promises that “all these souls [will] be cured of their afflictions before [the sun] appear[s]

again” (*OD* 5). A promise is made, but as is true for the coiner⁵ in the kid’s dream in *Blood Meridian*, “the night does not end” (*BM* 310), and the prophet’s words appear to have been a lie. However, the prophet does not say how long the eclipse will last, so therefore it is hard to assess the veracity of his predictions. What must be emphasized is that *Outer Dark* opens with Culla having a dream of salvation—he cannot escape his sins, however, and the other “pariahs,” recognizing his guilt even “in that pit of hopeless dark,” fall “upon him with howls of outrage” (*OD* 6).

II.

“there men will weep and gnash their teeth” (Matthew 25: 30)

There is strong evidence to suggest that the book’s title is taken from the Gospel of Matthew; there an “outer darkness” into which men will be cast is mentioned several times. Edwin T. Arnold cites William J. Schafer as having identified the source of the book’s title as the eighth chapter of Matthew (Arnold, “McCarthy’s Moral Parables” 46), in which Jesus rewards the faith of a centurion at Capernaum, curing the officer’s servant, who lies at his house “paralyzed [and] dreadfully tormented” (Matthew 8: 6). Jesus commends the centurion’s faith:

Assuredly, I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel! And I say to you that many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 8: 10-12)

Arnold interprets the bible passage as offering “two possibilities: the kingdom of heaven as well as the ‘outer darkness’ of hell” (“Moral Parables” 46). That would make Culla Holme a “son of the kingdom” cast into hell, doomed to seek repentance in a world that has only Dantesque nightmares to offer. The landscape through which he wanders seems to be a direct visualization of the turmoil raging within him—Arnold rightly describes Culla as a man “tormented [...] haunted by

⁵ See part III, chapter VII

his sin [...] [and] wish[ing] to be cured, forgiven” (“Moral Parables” 47). Luce elaborates on the connection between the inner and the outer worlds experienced by the book’s characters:

The ‘dream-roads’ in *Outer Dark*, like Dante’s visions of the inferno, purgatorio, and paradiso, are metaphors for states of being, of spirit: whether it be the frail and grief-stricken grace of Rinthy, the hounded guilt of and denial of Culla, or the aggrieved self-righteousness and malevolence of the tinker. (*Reading* 63)

At the story’s close Culla finds himself at a dead-end, spiritually as well as geographically: “Late in the day the road brought him into a swamp. And that was all. Before him stretched a spectral waste out of which reared only the naked trees in attitudes of agony and dimly hominoid like figures in a landscape of the damned” (*OD* 242). It is only fitting that he should have come there with darkness close at hand: *Outer Dark* is a novel committed fully to the twilight-places darkening into unanswerable night within the hearts of sinful men. There is none of the centurion’s faith in Culla Holme. He accepts his punishment with a doglike indifference and resignation, which Boguta-Marchel claims to discern in all his actions.

While Boguta-Marchel also points to the title as having its origins in Matthew, she perceives its provenance to lie in two parables that, although they employ the same signature phraseology, have only very little in common with the story of the centurion’s faith. In fact, faith has nothing to do with them. The men in those parables—one a guest at a wedding and the other a servant keeping watch over his master’s possessions in his absence—are punished for their failure to comply with simple rules and instructions. Theirs are crimes of indifference and negligence that exile the hapless malefactors to the harsh conditions of the “outer darkness.” Boguta-Marchel describes the parables as allegorical treatments of the Last Judgment, going on to say that “it is precisely this rejection of sluggish indifference and the insistence on conspicuous engagement that seem to constitute the major link between biblical allegory and the plot of McCarthy’s *Outer Dark*.” Like Hamlet, Culla Holme is an undecided man, plagued by an “inability to

undertake any decisive action or to assume responsibility.” As Boguta-Marchel points out, he does not kill his unnamed baby boy; he abandons him in the woods instead, shirking the “responsibility for his death” (Boguta-Marchel 164).

Holme is a scrimshanker of the highest order. Not only does he renounce the child he begot upon his sister, but when he realizes that Rinthy has found out the truth about the grave in the woods, that she knows it is empty, he flees from her, “bearing his clenched hands above him threatful, supplicant, to the mute and windy heavens” (*OD* 33).

Culla has clearly lost his way, a fact the squire, who pays him for cutting a fallen tree into stove-wood, drives home to him after Culla is done with the job. The squire feels called upon to expound the sanctity of the family: “I hope you’ve not got a family,” he says. “It’s a sacred thing, a family. A sacred obligation. Afore God [...] It ain’t no crime to be poor [...] That’s right. But shiftlessness is a sin, I would judge. Wouldn’t you?”

Holme knows what the squire is talking about. He is clearly affected by the squire’s words and he listens, “looking down, one hand crossed over the back of the other the way men stand in church” (*OD* 47). Culla has a family, albeit a dysfunctional one: the sister he has made the mother of his child. And he has abandoned both of them. He cannot now fail to realize that his actions have been in violation of a thing sacred before God. He has defiled the sanctity of the family; shirked the sacred obligation it presents. He is a shiftless sinner.

This notion of biblical sin is further illustrated by what the squire says in response to Culla’s admission of not having eaten any dinner because he was not offered any: “You never ast for none,” the squire says. “You never ast for nothin” (*OD* 45). This recalls advice Jesus gives in Matthew: “And whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive” (21: 22). But Culla does not believe—he has no faith, and therefore he cannot ask. As the bearded man tells Culla by the end of the book, “Never figured nothin, never had nothin, never was nothin” (*OD* 233). Without faith in some kind of reward, a man will never receive anything. That reward, the salvation (however small) it may bring, is inextricably

tied to faith, and a man will never find peace without it; never amount to anything; never escape the “outer darkness.”

Even when Culla attempts to persuade the bearded man to relinquish the child his efforts seem half-hearted, lacking the drive of a genuine request. Instead, he renounces the baby several times, saying, “It ain’t nothin to me” (*OD* 233). And one might regard the bearded man’s slitting the child’s throat as an attempt to test the extent of Culla’s caring for his son. Culla does not stop the bearded man. He just stands there and watches the knife pass across his son’s throat, watches the blood flow, “black blood pumping down [the child’s] naked belly” (*OD* 236). Culla does not do or say anything—he lacks both the “determination and [the] resolution” (Boguta-Marchel 164) to intervene. Not even when the mute “burie[s] his moaning face in [the child’s] throat” (*OD* 236) does Culla Home intercede for his son.

Boguta-Marchel makes a convincing argument for the nature of the accusatory bond that exists between the bearded man and Culla: she regards it as Culla’s “attitude of inertness and [his] lack of tenacity that the uncanny bearded leader of the dreamlike grim triune blames [him] for” (*Evil* 165). There is no doubt that in the novel’s outer dark, the bearded one and his two followers acquire a terrible air of retribution and final judgment—they are “[l]ike revenants that reoccur in lands laid waste with fever” (*OD* 231) and they have come to weigh man’s sins against him and to repay blood with blood. Steven Frye goes even further in his interpretation of the triune, ascribing a restorative power to them that has been raised in answer to Culla’s perversion and immorality:

In the “outer dark” [...] of Culla’s gothic world, all he sees are the refracted symbolic outlines of his own depravity, and the avatars of Satan, the triune, are ironically the figures destined to restore a provisional balance to a world he has set askew. In the end, they do so by brutally destroying the consequences of his sin. (Frye 36)

The brutal acts the three men commit are a counterforce that provides a dark sort of restitution for the chaos which Culla’s crimes have caused, and thus violence is answered with violence. Near the end of the book, when Culla encounters the trio

for the final time, the bearded man, having Culla's child with him, interrogates him on his relationship to his sister's son, and how the tinker (who at that point is either dead or dying, having been put in his "burial tree" (*OD* 238) by the three men) fits in. The scene closes with the bearded man's murder of Culla's child, and by then it is certain that the bearded man—"a figure of judgment" (Boguta-Marchel 165)—is the novel's equivalent of "the judge" from *Blood Meridian*, and he has come to sit in judgment of Culla Holme and his sins.

When Culla tells the bearded man to mind his own business—"It ain't nothin to you"—the man simply replies, "I'll be the judge of that" (*OD* 234). No further exemplification is needed: Culla has come face-to-face with a primitive Judge Holden.

III.

"ever legless fool and old blind mess" (OD 226)

Edwin T. Arnold raises a pertinent point when he notes that Culla is the only person the dark triumvirate does not kill after coming into contact with them. The conclusion Arnold draws is that in Culla's life "there is a purpose yet to be served," as his "destiny has not yet worked itself out" ("Moral Parables" 50). He quotes Dante and the Book of Revelation to frame Culla's character, describing him as one of the "neutrals" (qtd. in "Moral Parables" 51) Dante observes in the anteroom of Hell.⁶ "The heavens, that their beauty not be lessened, have cast them

⁶ In the epigraph of Canto III, Dante describes the "anteroom" and its inhabitants thus: "The ante-Inferno, where the shades of those who lived without praise and without blame now intermingle with the neutral angels." When Arnold refers to Culla as a "neutral," he does not intend to link him to Dante's "neutral angels" but to "those who were not rebels nor faithful to their God, but stood apart" (Canto III, 38–39). Culla's faithlessness to God is stated expressly by the first squire, when he talks about the sanctity of the family (see chapter II). Culla is definitely a man "without praise" but he is not entirely "without blame." Throughout the book, he is repeatedly blamed for the murders the dark trio commit and when the hogs run wild and stampede off the cliff, he is blamed for having incited or caused their madness—"This here feller [Culla] run em off, Billy said" (*OD* 221). The blame the bearded man puts on Culla is largely of an indirect nature; he is only inferring that Culla is to blame when, for example, he comments on the lot of his child: "They say people in hell ain't got names. But they had to be called somethin to get sent there. Didn't they." The implication the bearded man makes is that Culla is responsible for his child's having been sent into

out, nor will deep Hell receive them—even the wicked cannot glory in them,” Dante is told. “Those who are here can place no hope in death, and their blind life is so abject that they are envious of every other fate. The world will let no fame of theirs endure; both justice and compassion must disdain them; let us not talk of them, but look and pass” (Canto III, 40–42, 46–51).

The blindness Dante’s guide mentions is an important theme in *Outer Dark*. Culla certainly is one of the blind who cannot see despite their having two sound eyes—a phenomenon of which the bearded man apprises Culla when he asks about his son’s missing eye.⁷ Culla’s blindness refers to his broken moral compass as well as to his refusal to take responsibility for his sins—perhaps that is the reason he is also blamed for crimes he did not commit (i.e. the trio’s murders); burdened by some ironic justice, he will continue to be blamed for all evil that people encounter, until he confesses to them the evil that is within him, and which he has committed. Culla’s “blindness” seems then to be his inability to make a clean breast of his deeds; he perceives only the cruel features of the outer dark in which he is trapped, but not the way to salvation open to him.

And salvation is possible, even for a man like Culla, whose willful blindness makes him unable to discern the possible means of his redemption. “I guess a feller mires up so deep in sin after a while he don’t want to hear nothin about grace and salvation,” the preacher tells Culla while they walk toward the swineherds’ camp, where he is to be hanged for supposedly having run off the hogs. “Not even a feller about to be hung dead.” One of the swineherds has a simple explanation for the reverend, telling him that Culla is “too mean to be saved” (OD 225). The preacher then proceeds to tell the herdsmen the story of how once he saved a blind man who “wanted to curse God for his affliction.” The

Hell, a guilt he tries to evade by saying that the tinker might have named the child, thereby once more trying to lay the responsibility for his deeds on somebody else’s shoulders (OD 236).

Interestingly, Rinthy does not blame her brother for having fathered the child. As Arnold points out, “it is his denial of it that she holds against him” (“Moral Parables” 49).

⁷ “He ort to have two” (OD 232), Culla says when he sees his son’s “eyeless and angry red socket like a stokehole to a brain in flames” (OD 231-232). To this the bearded man replies: “Maybe he ort to have more’n that. Some folks has two and cain’t see” (OD 232). There is little doubt that Culla is one of those folks.

preacher's "jimdandy sermon" (*OD* 226) manages to unite the book's theme of blindness with the prospects of salvation, shining a light on the moral redemption Culla can achieve—if he ceases to shy away from his guilt:

This blind feller hollered out one time and said: Looky here at me, blind and all. I guess you reckon I ort to love Jesus.

Well neighbor, I says, I believe ye ort. He give ye eyes to see and then he tuck em away. And maybe you never was much of a christian to start with and he figgered this'd bring ye round. They's been more than one feller brought to the love of Jesus over the paths of affliction. And what better way than blind? In a world darksome as this'n I believe a blind man ort to be better sighted than most. I believe it's got a good deal to recommend it. The grace of God don't rest easy on a man. It can blind him easy as not. It can bend him and make him crooked. And who did Jesus love, friends? The lame the halt and the blind, that's who. Them is the ones scarred with God's mercy. Stricken with his love. Ever legless fool and old blind mess like you is a flower in the garden of God. Amen. (*OD* 226)

The preacher's sermon effectively delineates the novel's conceptual intricacies, providing almost a roadmap to the book's philosophy. Christopher Metress argues that "the way to God is through the 'dark night of the soul,' for God 'is a dark night to man in this life'" (St. John of the Cross qtd. in Metress 147). In a "darksome" world therefore, the way to salvation, "to the love of Jesus," must lead "over the paths of affliction," and it is the blind who, being "better sighted than most," stand the best chance of salvation. It seems that it is their very "affliction" that equips them with the means to find redemption; or perhaps the affliction is the means—the preacher's words seem to indicate that the trials and tribulations of an ordinary sinner such as Culla Holme are nothing more than a test he has to undergo. "The grace of God" does not come cheap; it requires hardships and sacrifice and suffering—before the resurrection must come the cross, and the penitent slouching toward salvation must endure pain and anguish, soldiering on in the knowledge that Jesus loves the cripples and the blind, and that therein lies his only hope. If Culla Holme can be said to do one thing, it is that he endures—stoically. He is accused, persecuted, humbled, and knocked about by frequent calamities and misfortune. And he does not give up. A man who had

resigned himself to his fate would have allowed the swineherds to hang him—just to be done with the mess his life had become. But Culla does not give up; he steps “past the preacher and the drover next [to] him” (*OD* 226) and jumps into the river, escaping from his self-ordained judges as the current bears him along, away from the lynchers. They stand against “the pale sky [...] [in] small, erect, simian shapes,” until they move on again, “with no order[,] rank[,] or valence to anything in the shapen world” (*OD* 227). The drovers and the preacher are lawless, they make their own rules and pronounce their own judgments; in assuming attitudes of anarchy and chaos, unregulated and devoid of any sensible hierarchy, they call to mind Dante’s rebel angels mentioned above, those neutral exiles from both heaven and hell, who, having no “valence,” have no home in the world either. They are trapped in the space between, and Culla’s escape from them is significant: it suggests that, while he is in some anteroom of Hell, some “outer darkness,” he is not part of that company of eternally doomed sinners. He may yet find a way out of Hell.

IV.

“[a] faintly smoking garden of the dead” (*OD* 242)

Outer Dark is a novel of journeys, of restless moving around; its characters are forever going places, in the hope (possibly ill-founded) that they will arrive at some destination more promising than their point of departure:

How far are ye goin?
 Just up the road. I’m travelin.
 Where to?
 Well. I mean I’m not goin to just one place in particular.
 [...] Maybe you’re goin to several places in particular then, she said.
 No mam. Not no special places. I’m a-huntin somebody. (*OD* 111)

The exchange occurs between Rinthy and an old woman who has an unabashed abhorrence of “snakes[,] hounds[,] and sorry women” (*OD* 110), and is just one of

many examples of the novel's two protagonists being questioned on the particulars of their wanderings. There is a certain amount of aimlessness to Rinthy and Culla's meanderings, compounded by an unrelenting process of displacement that turns a place into no place in particular—until the only places they are going are but “no special places.” In the end, their odyssey through the nightmare regions of *Outer Dark* divests them of their origins, taking from them any notion of home they might once have held.⁸ “If you ain't got nowheres to run from you must not have no place to run to,” says the farmer who catches Rinthy “roguin in [his] garden” (*OD* 101).

While Rinthy's journey, despite its challenges, is in its nature mostly tranquil and agreeable, almost bucolic at times, Culla's wanderings resemble a madman's headlong flight. The “demented pace” of his yearning for distance between himself and the incestuous home he shared with his sister begins after he has abandoned his child in the woods: “He surged from the water and began to run in the return direction and at a demented pace through the brush and swamp growth, falling, rising, going on again” (*OD* 17). This episode sets the tone for the later stage of Culla's vagabondage. James R. Giles notes that “the most severe judgment on Culla comes from within; he believes that he has so violated established rules of human behavior as to stand in judgment outside the possibility of forgiveness. Most of all, it is Culla who withholds forgiveness from Culla” (Giles, *Spaces* 24). Therefore it is not surprising that he finds no way out of the doom that he has laid on himself; it is a doom of homelessness and exile. Wherever he goes, Culla Holme will be an outcast and a hapless whipping boy. Comparing Culla to Hawthorne's Young Goodman Brown, James R. Giles argues that “Culla undertakes a journey in which physical space, psychological guilt, and spiritual despair merge so completely as to become indistinguishable” (*Spaces* 23). And whereas Culla's experiences do nothing to persuade him that he might find forgiveness for his sins somewhere, Rinthy is met with benevolence and

⁸ It is curious to note that the siblings' last name—Holme—bears an unmistakable similarity to “home” (the pronunciation of the words is indeed identical). Rinthy and Culla are like orphans, homeless and alone in a hostile world, fleeing their only home, and each other.

generosity, coming across people who give her food and shelter and also emotional comfort. The kindness she experiences at the hands of strangers is a sure sign that “god’s grace has not vanished from the world” (Giles, *Spaces* 31). By the end of her journey, when she comes to the glade where lie “the charred billets and chalk bones, the little calcined ribcage” (*OD* 237), which is all that is left of her “chap,” Rinthy has reached the only sort of deliverance available to her—“a frail agony of grace” that allows her to bed down amidst the “dust and [the] ashes” (*OD* 237), unaware that finally, after much trouble and heartache, she has reached the unmarked grave of her son. Ignorance is bliss, and “little sister [sleeps]” (*OD* 238) accordingly, temporarily at peace and safe from the cruelty of the world. There is significance in the fact that her story, begun in the darkness of night, her sleep rent by her nightmared brother’s screams, ends the same way; cradled in darkness, but with no bad dreams and no screaming. There is the hope that her brother’s night-demons, made corporeal and real by the sin he forced her to commit, will haunt her no longer.

Arnold suggests that “Rinthy” is an abbreviated version of “Corinthians.” “If so,” he argues, “it would indicate that her and Culla’s parents had some knowledge or awareness of the Bible which the children seem to have lost” (Arnold, “Moral Parables” 48). That there has been a fall from grace in the lives of Rinthy and Culla is evident: like an ironically reframed Adam and Eve they have sinned against their flesh, and “the penalty is the loss of their innocence” (Giles, “Romantic Naturalism” 96) and their expulsion from the garden of God; thus do they find themselves exiled to a “faintly smoking garden of the dead” (*OD* 242)—especially Culla, whose guilt has “transformed [him] into something closer to a Cain than an Adam figure” (Giles, *Spaces* 23).

The First Epistle to the Corinthians deals with “sexual immorality” but also with the power of love: “Love suffers long *and* is kind [...] thinks no evil [...] bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails [...] And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (13: 4–8, 13). These are teachings by which Rinthy seems to abide.

She is a gentle creature, and in her the child inspires no associations with guilt: “I wasn’t ashamed” (*OD* 156), she tells the doctor. Moreover, she does not condemn Culla for being her baby’s father; if there is any one thing for which she faults him it is his lying,⁹ his inability to countenance both the deed and the existence of the child itself (Arnold, “Moral Parables” 49). In keeping with her meek character, Rinthy does not even think about “law[ing]” her brother—after all, “[h]e’s family” (*OD* 113). In a world that is jaded and dark and seemingly beyond all hope, Rinthy’s presence is a redemptive force in itself; she meets adversity head-on, showing courage, strength, and an indomitable will to persevere. She is a mother in agony over the loss of her child, and in the novel’s “outer darkness” she becomes a universal mother, Eve once more, lamenting the miseries of the world.

Even Culla is not completely lost. His sins are manifold, and the road to even a small reclamation of his soul will be a grim and arduous one. The path he has chosen in life leads him to his just deserts; the roads he follows inevitably terminate in detours, dead ends, and false destinations, dark mirages that lure him to darker places of the heart where he finds only sorrow and boundless cruelty.

Twice Culla is drawn to the fire of the bearded man and his two familiars, mistaking the light for a promise of warmth and comfort, a place where he can have brief respite. But there is no such refuge to be had in the company of the dark men. With their malice and hate, they drive his steps onward, and Culla walks “soundless with his naked feet,” a “shambling” ghost, “gracelorn” and haunted, leaving behind him “the peaceful[,] mazy fields” (*OD* 241) as he descends, and “before him under the high afternoon sun his shadow be-wandered in a dark parody of his progress” (*OD* 242). He traverses a nightmare landscape, as if he had suddenly stepped into the post-apocalyptic setting of *The Road*, where everything is dead and burned:

The road went on through a shadeless burn and for miles there were only the charred shapes of trees in a dead land where nothing moved save

⁹ “He lied all the time” (*OD* 156), Rinthy says of her brother. Arnold argues that it might not just be Culla’s guilt but the *denial of his guilt* that is responsible for the murderous appearance of the triune (“Moral Parables” 49).

windy rifts of ash that rose dolorous and died again down the blackened corridors.

Late in the day the road brought him into a swamp. And that was all. Before him stretched a spectral waste out of which reared only the naked trees in attitudes of agony and dimly hominoid like figures in a landscape of the damned. A faintly smoking garden of the dead that tended away to the earth's curve. He tried his foot in the mire before him and it rose in a vulvate welt claggy and sucking. He stepped back. A stale wind blew from this desolation and the marsh reeds and black ferns among which he stood clashed softly like things chained. He wondered why a road should come to such a place. (*OD* 242)

The imagery is unmistakable: Culla is “in a landscape of the damned;” he is in Hell, or some kind of purgatory, and the fact that he marvels at why he has ended up there gives sufficient indication of his being utterly unrepentant—even after all that has happened, he still cannot fathom the gravity of his actions. He has a long way to go yet, and one receives the impression that he will have to walk the same road again and again, until he finally finds his way.

In *The Road*, one of the father's biggest fears is not so much that they will lose their way but that they will end up again at a place where the bad guys are hiding: “He'd no idea what direction they might have taken and his fear was that they might circle and return to the house. He tried to remember if he knew anything about that or if it were only a fable. In what direction did lost men veer” (*TR* 98). There is a similar threat of circularity to Culla's movements in *Outer Dark* as well, the only difference being that, contrary to the boy's father in *The Road*, Culla usually does end up in the company of the bad guys—unwittingly and without the will to remedy his lot. One suspects that, sooner or later, he will always come to the swamp at the end of the road—or at least until he finds a way to escape the outer darkness.

The reason for his having “come to such a place” is blatant enough. His entering the swamp is yet another act of penetration: his foot provokes an almost sexual response from the mud, which “[rises] in a vulvate welt[,] claggy and sucking.” It is interesting to note that Culla surrenders all agency to the mire—he merely inserts his foot, but it is the swamp that commits the lewdness, clutching

his foot in an obscene parody of intercourse; as always, Culla takes no responsibility for the reaction he elicits. However, this time he does not go through with it; one tentative footstep is enough. He leaves the act—the penetration—incomplete, and he “[steps] back.” There is a reversal here: a change of heart preceding a change of direction. Culla “[goes] back the way by which he came,” and maybe that going back marks the first steps toward his redemption.

V.

“hogs is hogs” (OD 216)

There remain two more passages that are crucial to an understanding of the book and therefore require discussion. The first is the stampede of the “mulefoot” hogs, which ends with one of the drovers—Billy’s brother Vernon—being swept over the cliff in “his great retinue of hogs” (*OD 216*). The scene is rich in allegory and metaphorical meaning, and in many ways it is the lynchpin of the question of guilt and evil, as it is presented in the book.

The approach of the hogs is heralded with near-biblical foreboding: “a faint murmurous droning portending multitudes, locusts, the advent of primitive armies” (*OD 213*). The hogs are “a weltering sea [...] that [comes] smoking over the dusty plain,” “harried,” “and here and there upright and cursing among them and laboring with poles the drovers, gaunt and fever-eyed with incredible rag costumes and wild hair” (*OD 213*). The menace inherent in the scene is palpable from the first description of the hogs that sees them unleashed on the land like some Old Testament visitation—the references to the plagues unstoppered in Revelations is no coincidence. The hogs *are* a plague—“the howling polychrome tide of [them] [...] glutt[ing] the valley from wall to wall” (*OD 214*)—and their masters, the drovers, are like devils. Exchange their poles for pitchforks and the picture is complete.

The episode takes on further meaning when Vernon tells Culla that the hogs are a rare breed of so-called “mulefoots”—“[m]ountain hog[s] from [the] north [...] [that have] a foot like a mule” (*OD* 214); or, in other words, their hoofs are not split, which the two men find endlessly confusing. “Seems like that don’t agree with the bible,” Vernon says. “About them hogs. Bein unclean on account of they got a split foot.” This apocryphal bit of bible knowledge (which Culla has never heard before) the drover attributes to a sermon he has once “heard [...] preached” by a “feller” “right smart about the subject” (*OD* 215).¹⁰

Priests do not fare well in *Outer Dark*: they are usually associated with falseness and low cunning. The preacher whom Culla encounters after the hogs’ stampede and who does his utmost to get him hanged for a crime he did not commit is a case in point. When he tells Culla not to “disperge the cloth,” Culla replies with, “Cloth’s ass” (*OD* 225). Culla’s relationship with religion is hard to gauge, as his contempt for preachers and self-styled “men of the cloth” is largely based on their invariable untrustworthiness. They are men of ill repute, and Culla’s disdain for false preachers and false prophets is not to be confused with a disdain for God. The bearded man, too, in his “tautly drawn and dusty suit of black” has the aspect of a “minister” (*OD* 129), although it is safe to assume that he would be the last man to dedicate his services to God. What this shows is that the sermon Vernon has heard the preacher give on the subject of hogs is comprised of unreliable information, which is especially true when Vernon says that, according to that “feller,” “the devil [has] a foot like a hog’s” (*OD* 215). This is important, as it calls into question the metaphorical application of the conundrum of the mulefoot hogs.

¹⁰ Culla seems to have no knowledge of the Bible whatsoever; he does not even know what a Jew is. Vernon has to explain it to him: “That’s one of them old-timey people from in the bible” (*OD* 215). However, in the case of the hogs and their being unclean on account of their split hoofs, Culla’s ignorance is justified. The preacher’s version of why hogs are unclean animals probably derives from Leviticus. There it is written that “[a]mong the animals, whatever divides the hoof, having cloven hooves *and* chewing the cud—that you may eat.” A swine is different: “though it divides the hoof, having cloven hooves, yet does not chew the cud, [it] *is* unclean to you” (11: 3, 7). This demonstrates how much Vernon has been deceived by the preacher whose sermon he attended. The issue is not the cloven hoof—if anything, a split hoof is an argument *against* an animal’s being unclean. It is because the swine does not “chew the cud” that it is listed among the unclean animals. It has nothing to do with the split hoof.

When Vernon wonders whether, “[a]ccording to the bible,” a mulefoot is a hog or not, he is raising metaphorically the question of whether all devilish men are devilish through and through. If Vernon’s preacher has equated hogs with the devil, then the question of whether a mulefoot is part of that species or not suddenly becomes important. The riddle makes Vernon “wonder some about the bible and about hogs too”—is a man with a certain mark upon him bad just because the bible says he is? And if he is visibly different from the other sinners, is he still a sinner? Holme finds the pragmatic answer to this puzzle: “[A] hog is a hog if he didn’t have nary feet a-tall” (*OD* 215). And what if hogs are not as devilish as the preacher said they were?

“Hogs is a mystery by theyselves,” Vernon concludes. Also, he cannot refrain from offering Culla a piece of advice: “And smart, don’t think they ain’t. Smart as the devil. And don’t be fooled by one that ain’t got nary clove foot cause he’s devilish too.” Culla seems resigned: “I guess hogs is hogs” (*OD* 215).

The drover’s advice seems reasonable enough. Even if a man appears innocent, do not trust him. Men cannot help being what they are, Culla seems to be saying. For him there are no gradations, no mitigating factors; he views the world in absolute terms, and whether a hoof is split or not does not make any difference to him. Vernon gives Culla pause by making him see that the issue is not so clear-cut: “[I]f he was to have feet you’d look for em to be hog’s feet. Like if ye had a hog didn’t have no head you’d know it for a hog anyways. But if ye seen one walkin around with a mule’s head on him ye might be puzzled” (*OD* 215). Is Culla a hog with a mule’s head? He might be; he has the sign of both the innocent and the devil. In McCarthy the line between innocence and guilt is blurred, and there are no clear boundaries.¹¹ The one often ends up being a logical extension of the other (which is logical in the sense that no alternative course could have been adopted by the character).

¹¹ Cf. the kid in *Blood Meridian*, who starts out with “eyes oddly innocent” (*BM* 4) and yet finds himself drawn ever deeper into a maelstrom of violence.

The scene of the stampede presents a similar difficulty of categorization. At the very least, however, McCarthy does link the hogs to Culla's incest, when he has Vernon tell how his little brother Billy plans on "get[ting] him[self] some poontang" once they have sold the hogs; Vernon concedes that by then his brother will have long become "partialled to shehogs." Vernon sounds as if he knows what he is talking about, and his intimation that the drovers use female hogs to relieve their sexual urges seems to be part of some strange covenant between him and Culla, which the former seals by "bar[ing] his orangecolored teeth at Holme in a grimace of lecherous idiocy."

The hogs are associated with sin and the devil, or maybe they just are to represent the corruption of innocence by a malign force. Together with the drovers they "seemed [...] to be in flight from some act of God, fire or flood, schisms in the earth's crust" (*OD* 216). Here McCarthy again borrows imagery from Revelations, to describe a scene of upheaval: moving in "an arc of dusty uproar," "the hogs [well] up in a clamorous and screeching flume," while the drovers take on satanic airs. Vernon "scrabble[s] away over the rocks like a thin gnome," while the din of the hogs—they scream as they go over the escarpment and fall—is met with "the howls and curses of the drovers that now upreared in the moil of flesh they tended and swept with dust ha[ve] begun to assume satanic looks with their staves and wild eyes as if they were no true swineherds but disciples of darkness got among these charges to herd them to their doom" (*OD* 218). This passage goes to a lot of trouble to equate the drovers to the grim triune—"disciples of darkness that herd their charges to their doom" is a very apt description of the bearded man and his two companions. The triune's retributive quality comes out in the drovers, when they "[watch] the herd pass with looks of indolent speculation, leaning upon their staves and nodding in mute agreement as if there were some old injustice being righted in this spectacle of headlong bedlam" (*OD* 218). Are the drovers the judges who have passed a righteous sentence on a herd of the devil's own? They appear to be here, which does not necessarily mean that they really are.

The scene's meaning is further complicated by the biblical precedence it refers to. In Mark 5: 8–13 Jesus performs an exorcism, driving a legion of “unclean spirits” out of a possessed man and into a herd of swine, which then runs “violently down the steep place into the sea,” where it drowns (Mark 5: 13).¹² The parable represents the purification of the countryside, the unclean spirits having been driven out along with the unclean animals.¹³ The story's moral is that if you have faith in God, then he will break the bonds of sin and deliver you from evil.¹⁴

The scene is a watershed moment in Culla's story: for one thing, it signals that the evil that has plagued the country Culla traversed has been ostracized and purged—if the parable from the bible is applied literally; the other thing the episode shows is that Culla has not found faith in God yet—otherwise the demon that possesses him would have fled into destruction along with the hogs. (If there were no “demon” or sin inside him, then perhaps he would have been able to claim his child by naming it during the final encounter with the triune; and perhaps then the road he followed would not have led him into a swamp of dead and dying things).

After the bearded man kills Culla's child, the triune disappears from his life, never to be heard from again. Its job is done, and it is in “later years” that Culla comes across the blind man, whose appearance marks the second key scene that needs to be examined here. The notion of Culla's being trapped in some endless purgatory of repetition—compelling him to make the same journeys and meetings repeatedly—is reinforced by the way the blind man is introduced: Culla “used to meet” him in those “later years,” but apparently he always “over[takes] him,” “go[ing] by” without greeting. But now something has changed, the cycle is broken, and “the blind man [...] stop[s] him with his greeting” (*OD* 239).

¹² The “sea” mentioned in the quoted bible passage is the Sea of Galilee, also known as the Lake of Gennesaret.

¹³ The parable of the exorcism of the “unclean spirits” itself is another parable for the expulsion of the Roman legions: Cf. Austin Cline, “Jesus Punishes the Swine with Demons (Mark 5: 10–20).”

¹⁴ For a more detailed interpretation of the parable of the swine in Mark, see Austin Cline, “Jesus Punishes the Swine with Demons (Mark 5: 10–20).”

The blind man stands in stark contrast to the rest of the novel's cast: he is neither bitter nor miserable; the opposite is true of him. He is "ragged and serene [...] tapping through the bright noon dust with his cane, his head erect in that air of wonder the blind wear" (*OD* 239). The exchange between Culla and the blind man shows that they have a history of prior meetings and chance encounters. "How you [sic]," Culla asks, to which the blind man replies, "Well as ever." The blind man's contentment and inner peace is strangely unsettling, coming as it does at the very end of a novel in which, until the appearance of the blind man, there has not been one single genuinely contented person.

The novel's "outer dark" serves to describe the landscape as well as the people. They mostly lead vile, stunted lives; except for the blind man, who really does reside at the further end of the spectrum employed in *Outer Dark*. He is blind, but he doesn't seem to care much about his fate. In fact, he behaves as if he could see just as well as Culla. That is the point, of course: Culla is metaphorically blind, whereas the blind man is metaphorically sighted. "[I]t's good to see the sun again ain't it," the blind man says. And then: "I know, ye [...] I've spoke afore with ye." But Culla, being metaphorically blind, which seems to affect his memory as well as his eyes, says, "You might of [...] I don't remember" (*OD* 239). The point of their having met before is emphasized several times throughout the scene:

I've passed ye on these roads afore.

They's lots of people on the roads these days, Holme said.

Yes, the blind man said. I pass em ever day. People goin up and down in the world like dogs.¹⁵ As if they wasn't a home nowheres. But I knowed I'd seen ye afore. (*OD* 240)

The blind man stands apart from the rest of the world's inhabitants. He is the observer, traveling the same roads as the others; but it is he who sees them, the crosses they bear. He is "at the Lord's work" but he is no preacher, because "[w]hat is they to preach? It's all plain enough. Word and flesh." The blind man doesn't "hold much with preaching" but he makes up for it by praying. "You

¹⁵ If there is any validity to an interpretation of the mulefoot hogs as a metaphor for humanity, then the word choice here is curious to note: "dogs" sounds almost like "hogs."

always get what you pray for?” Culla wants to know. For the blind man the case is simple: “Yes. I reckon. I wouldn’t pray for what wasn’t needful. Would you?” Culla has nothing to say to this, except, “I ain’t never prayed” (*OD* 240). The meeting with the blind man seems to suggest that now would be a good time for Culla to start. Yet he is still not ready for redemption. “Anything you need,” the blind man says, but Culla rejects his help: “I don’t need nothin” (*OD* 240).

The blind man’s sense of having a firm place in the world is further brought home to the reader when they discuss blindness:

Why don’t ye pray back your eyes?
 I believe it’d be a sin. Them old eyes can only show ye what’s done
 there anyways. If a blind man needed eyes he’d have eyes.
 Still I believe you’d like to see your way.
 What needs a man to see his way when he’s sent there anyhow?
 (*OD* 240–41)

The blind man clearly believes in fate, a benign providence that sees to the direction of a man’s journeys, whereas Culla simply cannot imagine being bereft of his eyes; he remains unaware of the fact that eyes alone do not make you see, as the scene of the blind man so aptly illustrates.

The encounter between Culla and the blind man closes with the man telling a story about a “healin preacher wanted to cure everybody.” The blind man went to the preacher, along with “a bunch of [others] [...] all cripple folks” (*OD* 241). The story mimics Culla’s dream at the beginning of the book. The blind man’s “cripple folks” are the same as Culla’s “delegation of human ruin who attended him with blind eyes upturned and puckered stumps and leprous sores” (*OD* 5). The blind man heard people say that “one old man [...] had thowed [sic] down his crutches” and that the preacher “could make the blind see” (*OD* 241), which is not unlike the prophet from Culla’s dream, who promised his “supplicants” that they “would [all] be cured of their afflictions” (*OD* 5).

In the blind man’s story one “feller” attending the revival “leapt up and hollered out that nobody knowed what was wrong with,” which caused the “preacher to go away.” The blind man feels the need to qualify his last statement:

“[T]hey’s darksome ways afoot in this world and it may be he weren’t no true preacher” (OD 241). Who is the “feller” that just started “hollering?” The ending of the blind man’s story is strongly reminiscent of the ending of Culla’s dream: By the time Rinthy woke him, he had been screaming in his sleep (OD 5). The blind man’s preacher seems to have been just as false and deceitful as Culla’s prophet. “I always did want to find that feller, the blind man [says]. And tell him. If somebody don’t tell him he never will have no rest” (OD 241). And there is the crux of the matter: Culla *is* that feller, and so far he has had no rest because he has been unable to *see*. His sin has yoked him to the falsity of the world, causing him to come in contact with the predators that stalk its “outer darkness.” “I’ll see ye,” Holme tells the blind man, and perhaps this also means that he *will* start seeing the error of his ways. The blind man’s answer seems to corroborate this reading: “It might be we’ll meet again sometime” (OD 241), he says, and perhaps he is talking about better times, better days for both of them, when there are fewer people going up and down the world’s roads like dogs, unhomed and blind.

After retracing his steps from the swampy dead-end, Holme meets the blind man one more time. He tries to remain unobserved, but as the blind man passes him he “smile[s] upon him his blind smile” (OD 242). Culla shows some compassion for the blind man, wondering where he was going and if he knew “how the road ended.” Tellingly, Culla thinks that “[s]omeone should tell a blind man before setting him out that way” (OD 242). However, it is uncertain whether for the blind man the road will end in the same desolate place (Arnold, “Moral Parables” 54). Arnold offers the following interpretation of the novel’s ending:

Just as Rinthy circles back to the secluded glade, so might Culla be returning to the “swampy forest,” the “dark wood” on the edge of hell, in which he first became lost after abandoning his child. His sin still unspoken, his guilt yet unnamed, the blind man’s message of salvation turned aside, Culla, wandering in his state of nothingness, seems fated to return again and again to the site of his sin. He will likely meet the blind man again; but he is just as likely to meet the three dark figures, or another preacher or prophet, or perhaps he will meet them all with each encounter. (Arnold, “Moral Parables” 54)

There is no denying that Culla is caught “in [a] state of nothingness,” but there is the hope that he will succeed in breaking free at some point. His latest encounter with the blind man already marks a change, because Culla stopped and spoke with him. The entire exchange between the two men indicates that Culla has finally arrived at a turning point. The next time he meets the blind man his circumstances might be very different.

III.
—Riders of the Apocalypse—
Blood Meridian (1985)

The novel's main protagonist is the quintessential man-with-no-name. Called only "the kid," he is born in Tennessee during the Leonids meteor shower of 1833. He runs away from his father's house at fourteen, commencing a life of wandering and violence. He first meets his nemesis, the nefarious Judge Holden, at a tent revival in Nacogdoches, Texas. There, the judge accuses the preacher of having had sexual congress with a child and a goat, and the revival ends in chaos and bloodshed. The kid continues his journey alone. One night, he takes shelter from a rising storm with a hermit, who shows the kid a prized possession—the dried heart of a man. After a violent escapade in a bar, the kid joins Captain White's band of U.S. Army irregulars on a filibustering mission. Shortly after crossing the border into Mexico, in one of the book's most memorable scenes, the majority of the men are killed by a party of Comanche warriors. The kid and another man, Sproule, survive the attack, but Sproule is badly wounded. He dies in Chihuahua, where the kid is arrested for filibustering. In jail, the kid meets the earless Toadvine, who convinces the authorities to let them join the state's newly mounted scalp-hunting expedition under John Joel Glanton. The Glanton gang encounters a family of traveling jugglers, and an old woman uses Tarot cards to tell some of the men's fortunes; the kid participates, but his fate alone is not revealed. The judge is part of the gang, and another member, the ex-priest Tobin, tells the kid how they discovered the judge sitting atop a boulder in the middle of the desert. Out of gunpowder and pursued by Apaches, the gang was in dire straits, but the judge led them to an extinct volcano, where he made gunpowder—his "devil's batter" (BM 132)—out of natural materials. What follows is "a butchery" (BM

134), the Glanton gang killing their Apache pursuers. A large part of the book is dedicated to detailing the gang's violent exploits: they slaughter friend and foe alike, killing indiscriminately to collect scalps. Pursued by General Elias, they hold a lottery to determine who will kill their wounded to facilitate their flight. The novel's violence culminates in the massacre at a ferry on the Colorado River near Yuma, Arizona. Enlisting the Yumas' help to wrest control of the ferry from its owner, the gang betrays the Indians, slaughtering them from ambush. Glanton and his men then control the ferry operation, extorting horrendous fees from travelers wanting to cross the river. In an act of reprisal for the gang's treachery, the Yumas mount an attack on the ferry, killing Glanton and most of the men. Carrying an arrow in his leg, the kid, together with Tobin and Toadvine, escapes through the desert. There, the survivors encounter the judge, who wants to buy the kid's gun. The kid refuses—both to shoot the judge, as Tobin urges, and to relinquish his weapon. The judge pursues Tobin and the kid through the desert, and they hide from him in a maze of animal bones. The kid has several opportunities to shoot the judge but he does not do it (his only attempt fails). In San Diego, the kid is arrested, and the judge visits him in jail, having told the authorities that the kid is to blame for the gang's crimes. The kid dreams of the judge and a mysterious man forging coins. When he is released from jail, there is no trace of either the judge or Tobin. He goes to Los Angeles, where he witnesses the execution of the last remaining members of the gang, Toadvine and David Brown. The kid resumes his solitary wanderings, and it is in 1878 that he has his final encounter with the judge. After killing a boy in self-defense, the kid—now referred to as “the man”—makes his way to Fort Griffin. There, in a saloon, he sees the judge, who tells him that he alone was “mutinous” (BM 299). When the kid goes to the outhouse and opens the door, the judge is inside and “gather[s] him in his arms against his immense and terrible flesh” (BM 333), presumably murdering the kid. Afterwards the judge is seen dancing naked in the saloon. The book closes with an epilogue describing a nameless man progressing across the prairie along the line of fence-post holes he is making in the ground with a two-handed implement.

I.

magnum opus

Blood Meridian is a difficult book; it certainly is McCarthy's most difficult book to date and, indeed, it may very well be one of the most difficult books ever written, occupying a shared pantheon with such greats of literary difficulty as Melville's *Moby-Dick* or Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, two works Harold Bloom cites as having provided a direct bloodline for the achievements evidenced by McCarthy's oeuvre.¹⁶ There is little doubt that *Blood Meridian* deserves to be called McCarthy's *magnum opus*. It is a major work, a milestone, virtually unparalleled by anything else in modern literature.¹⁷

According to Bloom, the book transcends the progenitorial influences of Melville and Faulkner, in a way surpassing them and reaching backwards to *their* sources, which are nothing less than the very foundations of the Western canon (Bloom, "Tragic Ecstasy" 80). The primogenitors that made such a work as *Blood Meridian* even possible, the book's first fathers, so to speak, could be of no greater eminence. One is Shakespeare, unrivaled in his dramatic art; the other that book of all books, being a complete compendium of all of human tragedy, despair, and passion, encompassing within its pages the full beginnings, as well as the absolute end, of all humanity: the King James Bible. McCarthy's ambitions in *Blood Meridian* are no less lofty; he has a similar narrative mode in mind, aiming for a *completeness* of human experience.

The book's difficulties then are manifold. One aspect of them is McCarthy's elaborately crafted, complex language, alluding to and freely borrowing from the sources mentioned above to create a style so absorbed in the book's mission of large-scale mythmaking it occasionally runs the risk of grandiloquence, becoming too much of an obliging vehicle for the majesty of

¹⁶ See Harold Bloom, *How to read and why*: "The fulfilled renown of *Moby-Dick* and *As I Lay Dying* is augmented by *Blood Meridian*, since Cormac McCarthy is the worthy disciple both of Melville and of Faulkner" (254).

¹⁷ Philip Connors claims that "for sheer dexterity and inventiveness with English prose there is no contemporary American novel that stands beside *Blood Meridian*."

McCarthy's vision and the epic breadth of his tale. Unrestrained eloquence, pitched to relentless heights, is easily confused with bombast and boisterous extravagance. In his review for the *New Yorker* James Wood, after first calling him a "colossally gifted writer," in the next line goes on to describe McCarthy as "one of the great hams of American prose, who delights in producing a histrionic rhetoric that brilliantly ventriloquizes the King James Bible, Shakespearean and Jacobean tragedy, Melville, Conrad, and Faulkner" ("Red Planet: The sanguinary sublime"). Amy Hungerford, in her Yale lectures on the novel, deplors its plotlessness, going so far as to call it "boring" and "repetitive," while at the same time arguing that the lack of sophistication manifest in the plot only serves to heighten the book's "sense of nightmarishness" ("The American Novel Since 1945"). Harold Bloom, on the other hand, sees no defects, calling *Blood Meridian* "the authentic American apocalyptic novel" (*How to read* 254) and "both an American and a universal tragedy of blood" (*How to read* 255). This variety of responses to McCarthy's creation prompts the question as to what *Blood Meridian* really is.

Is it historical fiction, Gnostic tragedy,¹⁸ or just a very violent Western? James R. Giles calls it an "anti-Western" (Giles, *Spaces* 16), while other scholars see it as a book on the war in Vietnam.¹⁹ The simple answer is that there is no simple answer: *Blood Meridian* is all of those things and none of them. It follows its own code, enveloped in its own brand of theology, cosmology, and philosophy.

¹⁸ See Leo Daugherty, "Gravers False and True: *Blood Meridian* as Gnostic Tragedy."

¹⁹ See Vince Brewton, "The Changing Landscape of Violence." There he argues the following: "*Blood Meridian* takes us further historically from our time than any of McCarthy's other novels while ironically carrying us closer to the heart of darkness that was the American experience in Vietnam." To illustrate his point, Brewton identifies a passage in the novel (Captain White's recruitment speech) in which, he claims, McCarthy "tips his hand" as to the novel's double meaning, further describing it as a "muted commentary [...] on various aspects of the Vietnam conflict" (70). He also cites a footnote to an essay by John Sepich, in which Sepich draws a comparison between Vietnam and *Blood Meridian*: "The literature of 'atrocities' in Vietnam seems consistent, in its language, with that of Glanton's 'atrocities'" (Sepich, "'What kind of indians was them?'" 140; qtd. in Brewton 65). Barclay Owens also discusses Vietnam, which he describes as the cultural template for the violence of *Blood Meridian* (21). The war in Vietnam changed the popular understanding of war in general and America as a nation at war in particular. It led to a reexamination of America and its wars; one conclusion drawn from that reappraisal was that the American frontier of the late nineteenth century was one of the most violent places at one of the most violent times in the nation's history (Owens 25, 27, 33).

Complex and often arbitrary in its meanings, *Blood Meridian* is a vast enigma, a Chinese box of layered experience: mythology, history, and violence combine to create a grand parable of the American West. The violence is the dark heart of the book: all-encompassing, it permeates the novel, the characters, the very landscape they traverse in a cruel passage of mass murder and mutilation, encountering every single atrocity conceivable to man. It is an almanac of violent deeds, a near-Biblical rendering of acts of blood and inescapable savagery. In many ways the violence is the book, informing it on all levels: the story as well as the characters. If nothing else, *Blood Meridian* at its core is a vastly ambiguous and ambitious meditation on violence.

The quality of the violence is what makes *Blood Meridian* a truly difficult book to read. Several critics found the violence an obstacle that first had to be overcome in order for them to be able to read the novel.²⁰ Such a reaction is far from surprising.

The violence, rendered in graphic detail (Vereen M. Bell calls McCarthy's style "photorealistic in its precision," xii), is relentless in the intensity of its descriptions. It imbues the book with a gruesome tension, which is further exacerbated by the frequency with which scenes of slaughter and bloodshed occur in the novel. Rarely a page goes by that does not feature some chronicle of murder or human cruelty. The effect this frequency of occurrence has on the reader is that the depictions of violence attain a certain monotony that numbs the initial reflex of disgust and abhorrence.

The violence in *Blood Meridian* often seems repetitive, which must be part of what Amy Hungerford means by her assessment of the plot as "boring." This repetitiveness, however, is a far cry from being adventitious; it is a mechanism, a controlled force that installs the reader in the world of *Blood Meridian*, where violence is an integral part of the workings of the universe described. It goes with the territory; but more than that, it is the ruling order of the world—that life-

²⁰ See, for example, Harold Bloom's *How to read and why* (255) and Amy Hungerford's Yale lectures.

destroying “Anareta” (*BM* 46)—, the law to which everything else is bound and subjugated.

The interminable repetition of the violence finally turns it into a ritual that is observed with relentless rigor. Incantatory and unceasing, the violence is not only both the background and the foreground of the story, but its very heart, pulsing raw and red and unrelenting. The violence *is* the story.

II.

genesis of blood (part one):

myth and manifest destiny

McCarthy wastes no time. The violence starts on page one, albeit still in a more passive form. McCarthy bids the reader “[s]ee the child” (*BM* 3), the novel’s nameless protagonist, who lives a grim life in squalor and destitution, presided over by a perpetually drunk father who quotes forgotten poets. McCarthy paints a scene of menace and tristesse, almost a fairy-tale picture of the neglected child left to its own devices in some “freezing” hovel, surrounded by “dark fields” and “darker woods beyond that harbor yet a few last wolves” (*BM* 3). Devoid of letters and of learning, the child is described as having brooding within in him “already a taste for mindless violence.” The real tragedy of the child, however, are the circumstances of his birth: coming into the world, he becomes “the creature who [will] carry [his own mother] off” (*BM* 3). Thus the kid begins life with his first blood-debt; in a curious way he fulfills the judge’s view of war and bloodshed as the primary regulating factors of the human condition²¹ long before he ever meets him in Nacogdoches. (And maybe it is this burden of “original sin” that indentures the kid to the path of violence on which he is destined to embark.)

The kid’s personal myth of violence unfolds in the next few introductory paragraphs that detail the kid’s early years—indeed, the years before “the child”

²¹. Cf. the judge’s speech on how “[w]ar is god” (*BM* 249).

became “the kid.” The child participates in the violence that rules his (or, rather, McCarthy’s) world, his initiation depicted in a dream-like, slightly surreal manner, while the text itself makes reference to that fact. He is like “a fairybook beast” that “comes down at night [...] to fight with the sailors” (*BM* 4). Here two worlds are brought into collision: the mythical aligned with the hard brutality of the Old West in an unmitigated antagonism. The otherworldly quality of the child’s experiences is augmented by his surroundings; walking the streets, he “hears tongues he has not heard before” (*BM* 4).

There is one more mention in the novel of “fairybook beasts,” preceding the outbreak of another act of violence:

Some of the Americans had wandered into the cold waters of the stream and were splashing about and they clambered dripping into the street and stood dark and smoking and apocalyptic in the dim lampfall. The night was cold and they shambled steaming through the cobbled town like fairybook beasts and it had begun to rain again. (*BM* 190)

The apocalypse that follows shortly afterwards is the shootout in the town of Jesús María precipitated by Glanton’s dishonoring the Mexican flag, having tied the “sacred bandera” (*BM* 193) to the tail of a mule and thus dragging it through the mud. (The lesson of this is merely that in *Blood Meridian* nothing is sacred; maybe not even the judge’s hallowed war and its attendant ritual of bloodletting.)

The significance of the repetition of the words “fairybook beasts” is the fact that the violence in *Blood Meridian* frequently occurs on a plane of heightened perception, where the acts of blood and savagery become elevated to a loftier realm of fable and myth and, more often than not, elemental allegory. This illustrates one of the functions the violence has in McCarthy’s anti-Western, his Vietnam war novel (*Brewton*), his Gnostic tragedy, his utterly unclassifiable book: bloodshed and murder are reconfigured into mythical deeds to create McCarthy’s own myth of the American West and its settlement; or, rather, it is a counter-myth he creates, to undermine and expose for a fake the popular illusion of benign conquest. After encountering the judge and Glanton’s killers, one is unable to draw any other conclusion. Kenneth Lincoln calls the judge a reminder that the

American West was a “holocaust of Manifest Destiny and white supremacy, the devil’s genocidal shibboleths” (*American Canticles* 87), and that is the upshot of the events depicted in *Blood Meridian*. The violence lends an air of authenticity to McCarthy’s version of the West; relentlessly and unflinchingly, he keeps the lens of his narrative trained on the gruesome underbelly of popular misconception, skewering the virginally pure notion of Manifest Destiny in the process.

However, this counter-myth is merely a side-product of the main myth that is created. McCarthy’s goals are much more complex than a simple deconstruction of how the West was won. Other functions of the violence in the book will be treated in subsequent chapters; for now let it suffice that one of the primary functions of the violence is the creation of myth, of a heightened reality.

The mythical is continually evoked by the book’s unique brand of language, which employs menacing and violent imagery to create a unique narrative effect. Astride “tragic mounts” (*BM* 185), Glanton’s filibusters are described as “a patrol condemned to ride out some ancient curse” (*BM* 151). There is something preternatural about them:

Deployed upon that plain they moved in a constant elision, ordained agents of the actual dividing out the world which they encountered and leaving what had been and what would never be alike extinguished on the ground behind them. Spectre horsemen, pale with dust, anonymous in the crenellated heat. Above all else they appeared wholly at venture, primal, provisional, devoid of order.²² Like beings provoked out of the absolute rock and set nameless and at no remove from their own loomings to wander ravenous and doomed and mute as gorgons shambling the brutal wastes of Gondwanaland in a time before nomenclature was and each was all. (*BM* 172)

They are “ordained” yet “primal” and “devoid of order.” They “extinguish” what they find. They are “spectre[s],” nameless beings, “gorgons.” They are travelers, “ravenous and doomed,” on a vanished continent (i.e. “Gondwanaland,” a supercontinent believed to have once existed in the southern hemisphere and to

²² Cf. the description of the hog drivers and the preacher after Culla has jumped over the cliff in *Outer Dark*: “[A]fter a while they were very small and then they turned and went on along the bluff with no order rank or valence to anything in the shapen world” (*OD* 227). Are the riders like Dante’s rebel angels? See chapter III of part I for a discussion of Dante in *Outer Dark*.

have broken up in the Mesozoic era, roughly one-hundred-and-fifty million years ago)—a continent that ended in a sort of apocalypse, splitting into the separate land-masses extant today.²³ The passage hints both at the personal apocalypse lying in store for the gang (i.e. the massacre at the ferry) and the larger cataclysm that will break apart the world they inhabit. A change is most certainly on the horizon; however, it is unclear whether that impending upheaval spells a turn for the better or the worse.²⁴ What is clear is that the gang has had its beginning, as it will have its end; both are chronicled within the compass of the book, its journey from first blood to blood final is tracked in parallel by the larger apocalypse framing the events of the book.

III.

*genesis of blood (part two):
the mettle and the man*

In the child's first confrontation with the belligerent sailors, the fights are rendered in a Biblical light: the child "is not big but he has big wrists, big hands" (*BM* 4) and already we see something in him of David going up against Goliath, making up in courage what he lacks in height. And the child fights and he vanquishes his foes, "[a]ll races, all breeds," and in the end, when he "[stands] over them where they lie bleeding in the mud[,] he feels mankind itself vindicated" (*BM* 4). He has already orphaned himself: first by the inevitable assertion of his own life (his birth, killing his mother in the process) and then by an act of will, when he decides to run away from home, leaving his father behind. The power of human will is one of the novel's central themes—how much a man's will can achieve in

²³ Cf. the entry for "Gondwanaland" in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

²⁴ If the destruction of the modern world as described in *The Road* is the logical outcome of the events set in motion in the late 1840's world of *Blood Meridian*, then the disaster could be viewed not as a scourge but as a purification—a sort of universal factory reset in order to give mankind a second chance at creating a better world. Whatever hope or promise is available to humanity in *The Road* is symbolized by the boy. More about this in part IV.

the world and how far it can carry him. The child's first decision, namely to leave home, makes him a murderer all over again: he has run away, abandoning his father, thereby rendering him useless. The kid has become his own father. It is no coincidence that near the end of his first wanderings (at the end of the first section) he comes across "a parricide hanged in a crossroads hamlet" (*BM* 5).

"All history present in that visage, the child the father of the man" (*BM* 3), McCarthy writes of the kid, and by "history" he probably means violence, first and chiefest among all else. And it is violence that sets the kid free, that forms the first impetus for him to embark on his own life, and to seek whatever lies in store for him. Could he have suspected that for him there would be only more of the same, more violence?

Only when the kid is nearly killed by a Maltese boatswain, does he, after his recuperation, finally come into his own:

Only now is the child finally divested of all that he has been. His origins are become remote [sic] as is his destiny and not again in all the world's turning will there be terrains so wild and barbarous to try whether the stuff of creation may be shaped to man's will or whether his own heart is not another kind of clay. (*BM* 4–5)

Here then is described another function performed by the novel's all-pervading violence: it is a test, a yardstick by which the characters essay to gauge their worth; it is how they try to prove themselves. A contest between man and nature that will bring triumph and dominance to only one of them; for the other there remains only defeat and enslavement. The violence in the book functions as a mechanism for survival: on the apocalyptic killing fields *Blood Meridian* evokes with such ingenuity, a man's worth often is the only coin in his purse. And he has to preserve and nurture that worth with every fiber of his being.

Only a few days before they encounter the Yumas, whom the gang will betray mercilessly, the judge offers the following theory on a man's worth:

Men are born for games. Nothing else. Every child knows that play is nobler than work. He knows too that the worth or merit of a game is not inherent in the game itself but rather in the value of that which is put at hazard. Games of chance require a wager to have meaning at all. Games of

sport involve the skill and strength of the opponents and the humiliation of defeat and the pride of victory are in themselves sufficient stake because they inhere in the worth of the principals and define them. But trial of chance or trial of worth all games aspire to the condition of war for here that which is wagered swallows up game, player, all. Suppose two men at cards with nothing to wager save their lives. Who has not heard such a tale? A turn of the card. The whole universe for such a player has labored clanking to this moment which will tell if he is to die at that man's hand or that man at his. What more certain validation of a man's worth could there be? This enhancement of the game to its ultimate state admits no argument concerning the notion of fate. The selection of one man over another is a preference absolute and irrevocable and it is a dull man indeed who could reckon so profound a decision without agency or significance either one. In such games as have for their stake the annihilation of the defeated the decisions are quite clear. This man holding this particular arrangement of cards in his hand is thereby removed from existence. This is the nature of war, whose stake is at once the game and the authority and the justification. Seen so, war is the truest form of divination. It is the testing of one's will and the will of another within that larger will which because it binds them is therefore forced to select. War is the ultimate game because war is at last a forcing of the unity of existence. War is god. (*BM* 249)

War, the judge seems to be arguing, is the defining quality of a man, the truest state he can possibly achieve, and only through participating in the game of war, putting his life on the line for the very purpose of war itself, can he attain real worth. War then becomes both the means and the end. Life force and meaning are derived from an agent of death, which could serve as a metaphor for the entire book: there is no meaning without war, the loss of all meaning, no life without death. A man's worth is predicated on his willingness to choose death over life, in a determined bid for the latter. In a strange way, war—through the destruction and ruin it wreaks—becomes the only life-affirming principle that has any value attached to it at all. Steven Frye calls “[w]ar and violence [...] unavoidable characteristics of existence,” maintaining that “order is achieved only through deliberate and forceful acts of violence” (*Understanding* 85). The violence in *Blood Meridian* gives structure to the characters, the narrative, the landscape. It is the mechanism by which meaning (or, in other words, “order”) is constructed.

Men must pass through war, engage in it, revel in it fully, in order for them to know themselves and the price put on their heart.

IV.

survival, courage, and fear

“Survival as a challenge to manhood,” Bell claims, “is partly what *Blood Meridian* is about” (Bell 118). Glanton’s “sociopaths,” as she calls them, have done what most people are unable to do—they have “wholly transcended fear,” living in the moment only, “stoically [enduring] excruciating suffering and deprivation [...] in a perpetual, moving present.” The judge doesn’t believe in fear. He says that “[t]he man who believes that the secrets of the world are forever hidden lives in mystery and fear” (*BM* 199). The concept of fear as portrayed in the book then ties in with Bell’s notions of courage and survival, the theme of willpower. However, the brand of courage espoused by the judge is not identical to Bell’s notion of a “challenge to manhood.” What the judge means is that fear can only ever be renounced if the world is laid bare by violence. All mystery is subjected to a brutal divestiture that strips away “the secrets of the world,” leaving only the bare artifacts sketched in his ledger, wherein they are forced to a complete revelation of their origins and obscurities. It is through this revelation that they finally come into possession of true meaning and continued existence. The existence of the world with all its material manifestations, for the judge, is only possible through his acquiescence and approval, for as he says, “Whatever in creation exists without my knowledge exists without my consent” (*BM* 198).

The judge is a seeker—of knowledge, of war, of the cruelty in men’s hearts, of many things—and the violence of his seeking is a counter-violence, a reaction to the violence of the world. It is both a defense mechanism and a ruthless power play. In order to avoid becoming a slave of nature, man has to

possess it fully, and this possession is only possible through repeated acts of violence:

These anonymous creatures, [the judge] said, may seem little or nothing in the world. Yet the smallest crumb can devour us. Any smallest thing beneath yon rock out of men's knowing. Only nature can enslave man and only when the existence of each last entity is routed out and made to stand naked before him will he be properly suzerain of the earth. (*BM* 198)

The concepts of fear in the novel are highly significant, especially fear in connection with the judge. By marking things down and sketching them in his ledger-book, the judge takes possession of the items thus rendered in perfect facsimile. It is a kind of soul-snatching (if things like rocks and other sundry items and implements can be said to be invested with a soul), and this takes on special relevance when the judge's specimens include human beings. Consider the scene in which Webster asks the judge to desist from including his "crusted mug" in his ledger. He does not "want [it] in [his] book," which, incidentally, is another instance of fear on the part of one of the scalpers. Webster seems to have an inkling that such a reproduction of himself is not desirable, could indeed be harmful to him, and the judge's response is imbued with a Mephistophelean logic—he comes across as a perfidious salesman making his pitch in order to rope in another hapless customer:

My book or some other book [...] What is to be deviates no jot from the book wherein it's writ. How could it? It would be a false book and a false book is no book at all [...] Whether in my book or not, every man is tabernacled in every other and he in exchange and so on in an endless complexity of being and witness to the uttermost edge of the world. (*BM* 141)

The above passage gives vital clues to the judge's nature, or at least to how he sees himself. His reference to the existence of more than one "book" indicates that he is not the sole ruling power or "judge" in the world. There *are* other forces at work, which is an important admission on his part, even if he appears indifferent to them. Indeed, he suggests that his book is most definitely not a "false book," thereby branding most others as false. An interpretation of this indirect comparison of the various books extant could be that, while he acknowledges that

there may be other law-givers on earth, he is implicitly saying that he is the only true one. But even that statement is relegated to a place of inferior importance when he claims that “every man is tabernacled in every other,” suggesting that the books do not matter because there is no escape anyway, history will repeat itself. War is eternal. All men are alike and they all act in keeping with the acts of their fathers and ancestors.

This is an important notion in regard to the question of whether *Blood Meridian* can be read, ultimately, as a story about redemption and regeneration. Such an interpretation is certainly possible; an attempt at an answer will be made in subsequent chapters. What is important here is that the judge ascribes some sort of ruling function to himself. The phrasing he uses is of further significance. If he is something akin to a war-god, as Sepich (111) and others seem to suggest, then the religious meaning of “tabernacled” lends additional depth to what he is saying. It is almost as if he were speaking about the very soul of violence, which, according to his worldview, resides in every man.

The power of the judge and the fear he is able to instill in men is considerable. By making a portrait of an old Hueco, he manages to “[chain] the man to his own likeness,” the picture so faithful to its original that the old man becomes fearful of any harm coming to it. In the end the man is unable to have any peace until, together with the judge, he has taken the portrait “deep into the mountains and [...] buried [it] in the floor of a cave where it lies yet for aught the judge knew” (*BM* 141). The judge relenting—helping the man bury his portrait and forbearing to draw Webster—is a curious notion, but it only confirms his ultimate conviction that man is doomed to war regardless of whether he puts him in his book or not. The judge, being immortal or, at the very least, blessed with preternatural longevity, has time on his side; he will see all men come to ruin, despair, a bloody end—or so he believes. His ethics of war without end cast a bleak shadow over all human endeavor: the judge is both crux and crucible of the evil he calls down on the world, eliciting from the hearts of men only the blackest tar with which he smears them and taints them and forever binds them, marking

them down to be devoured at the feast of savagery over which he presides like an amiable host. If the judge were to dream, one supposes he would go nightwalking through a dreamscape similarly depleted of human decency as the burnt and barren lands of McCarthy's *The Road*. The judge is a demon and a ghost and an evil angel, and the power he has over Glanton and his men is immense. The question of whether his ultimate attempt at temptation is crowned with success will be examined at a later point.

The novel's other characters, despite the atrocities they inflict without hesitation, exhibit enough fear to call into question their so-called courage, which at any rate is seen as a courage founded on violence: The kid, for example, "keeps from off [sic] the king's road for fear of citizenry" (*BM* 15) and later, in a Mexican prison, where his jailers believe "his mind [to have] come uncottered by the acts of blood in which he [has] participated" (*BM* 305), grows "giddy with fear" when his guards "[come] for him" (*BM* 308). Tobin is likewise in the grip of fear when he exhorts the kid to "[d]o him," meaning the judge, as he is convinced the kid will "get no second chance," and if he doesn't act, the kid's life will be "forfeit" (*BM* 285).²⁵

Fear is an important catalyst in the novel, and it is what ultimately dooms the kid—if one assumes the kid's end to be a doom brought on him by the judge, as opposed to a renunciation of and triumph over the judge's abject evil. For the sake of argument the implications of the most obvious interpretation will be examined first. Such a reading then suggests that the kid tries to act bravely in the presence of the judge, acting out his repeated affirmations of not being afraid of him, when every sane assessment of the situations he puts himself in would call for a contrary reaction. The kid's refusal to give in to his fear makes him even more vulnerable to the judge. The real question, of course, is whether the kid is really unafraid, as he claims to be, and therefore acts out of moral conviction and a sense of superiority, or whether his behavior is based on false bravado, a

²⁵ See, "The kid took the pistol but the expriest clung to his arm whispering and when the kid pulled away he spoke aloud, such was his fear" (*BM* 285).

keeping up of appearances. The difference lies in whether the kid's fate is a tragic or a sorrowfully comic one, a circumstance which furthermore begs the question of whether the kid's acting in opposition to the judge's philosophy of war is founded on an innate longing for redemption or whether his resistance serves merely to prove himself courageous, a display of courage for the sake of displaying courage and, ultimately, an empty gesture. If the latter were true, then the kid would be nothing more than an obdurate child, oblivious to the true evil of the judge; there is ample evidence that this is not the case.

In the novel there are two key instances of the kid's refusal to be afraid of the judge. The first is the scene where the kid helps the judge kill one of the horses so they will have something to eat. The kid is the only one of the gang to answer the judge's summons from "the dark beyond the fire" (*BM* 219). When Tobin, the ex-priest, tries to discourage the kid from joining the judge in the darkness, the kid's answer is suitably truculent: "You think I'm afraid of him?" The judge makes for a menacing picture— "[j]ust his teeth glisten[ing] in the firelight"—but the kid ignores Tobin's warning. One has to wonder what Tobin is afraid will happen: that the judge will hurt the kid, in that darkness beyond the fire; that he will perhaps commit upon him what Shakespeare called "the act of darkness" and rape him, as he has presumably raped the boy they encountered at the presidio near the Santa Rita del Cobre mines; or, even worse perhaps, that through sharing in the ritual of killing another living being the kid will somehow implicate himself, binding himself to the judge and delivering himself up to his mercy, much like that old Hueco had done by allowing the judge to draw his portrait?²⁶ Does Tobin fear that the kid will become chained to the judge in the same way the old man had become chained to his likeness?

Even more important than this first denial of the kid's fear is his second act of resistance, his brave defiance, when he tells the judge to his face, "I aint afraid of you" (*BM* 307). The confrontation takes place in the jail, after the kid has been

²⁶ See Shakespeare, *King Lear*, "served the lust of / my mistress' heart and did the act of darkness with her" (III.iv.83–4).

arrested and the judge shows up outside his cell, spick and span in a “suit of gray linen and [...] new polished boots” (*BM* 305). Several key moments occur in this scene, besides the kid’s standing up to the judge and refuting the charge of being afraid of him. Another important facet of the judge’s personality is revealed during the course of the exchange: When the kid asks him what will happen to him, the judge immediately voices his “belief” (*BM* 306) that the kid will be hanged. As things turn out, however, the kid is released a couple of days later. It is very likely that the judge’s answer to the kid is not just a wrong assumption on the judge’s part but a conscious falsehood, which would be in agreement with the theory that the judge is not really a judge at all, but a liar, a deceiver, and a cheat. He is neither an archon nor a demigod nor a high priest of war, but a common trickster. The way the dialogue continues seems to support this reading. When the kid asks the judge what he told the authorities, the judge simply answers, “Told them the truth” (*BM* 306), knowing full well that his testimony was pure fabrication from start to finish.

Another matter that finally receives clear expression in this scene is the question of the relationship between the kid and the judge. When he tells the kid that “[he]’d have loved [him] like a son” (*BM* 306), the dynamics between the kid and his self-appointed surrogate father take on added meaning. The kid, as has been explained in a previous chapter, made himself an orphan by an act of will right at the very beginning of the story. It does not seem farfetched then that a new father figure would surface eventually. The judge has clearly tried to make the kid into one of his “disciples” (*BM* 130), as the other members of the gang are sometimes referred to, but the kid—in keeping with the classic trope of a father-son conflict—has defied him repeatedly. If one views the relationship between the judge and the kid, his anti-disciple, in the light of a father-son paradigm, one must examine the meaning fatherhood has for the judge. The “son” the judge wants to have is someone he can corrupt in his image, to have him follow in his bloody boot prints. And whatever love he might exhibit for his so-called son may very well be of an incestuous nature.

Throughout their journey in each other's company the judge had kept making guarded yet sexually tinged overtures to the kid, and it comes as no surprise when, standing outside the kid's jail cell, he asks the kid to "[I]et [him] touch [him]" (*BM* 307). The kid silently refuses. Then the judge, after taunting the kid by asking if he is afraid of him and receiving the kid's answer in the negative, makes the following stunning pronouncement:

You came forward [...] to take part in a work. But you were a witness against yourself. You sat in judgement on your own deeds. You put your own allowances before the judgements of history and you broke with the body of which you were pledged a part and poisoned it in all its enterprise. (*BM* 307)

The would-be father is disappointed in his chosen son. What the judge is telling the kid here is that by refusing to share in his philosophy of war, by taking for himself the role of judge, he has usurped the judge's place—in point of fact, the kid has made himself a parricide for the second time in his brief life, and as a consequence the judge baits him with the thought of the noose. He tries to explain his reasoning thus: "If war is not holy man is nothing but antic clay" (*BM* 307).

The kid plainly does not believe this; their views collide in disagreement, which goes a long way toward establishing him as the judge's moral opposite, a fact made abundantly clear by the nature of their dispute. Like father and son, they are locked in opposition and eternal strife; there is no hope of their ever coming to an agreement. "It was you" (*BM* 307), the kid tells the judge, and what he is saying is, You were the one who poisoned our enterprise, whose heart is in the wrong place. You are the one I blame. You are the one I hate.

And if the true North of the kid's moral compass really differs from the judge's, then the kid, especially when compared to the other characters, is imbued with a redemptive quality. He fled from his father, the first as well as the second, refusing to be made a disciple to either one of them, and by refusing to submit to the judge's vision, by turning aside his perverted fatherly love, the kid has preserved himself as a better man than the judge ever was or ever will be. He is a murderer, a killer, but he is not as purely evil as the judge. Therein lies the only

salvation open to him. And maybe the kid's death at the end of the novel is payment for his sins: the only atonement possible. The kid redeems himself by dying, by insisting to be different from the judge, who claims that "he will never die" (*BM* 335).

The troubled relationship of fear that the kid has with the judge—a relationship of being afraid and not being afraid at the same time, or at the very least of *purporting* not to be afraid—then seems to be not so much his doom but rather his dogged pursuit of deliverance, deliverance from the judge, from Glanton, from the violence and the blood and the horror that have become part and parcel of his existence. The judge seems to be giving the kid a choice: accept my ways, partake in war everlasting, and live. Refuse me, and the choice will be no choice, only death.

By not giving in to the judge, by refusing not only his philosophy of the "sanctity of blood" (*BM* 331) but also the very principles upon which his person is founded, by refusing to join in the judge's *dance*, the kid sets himself apart. Finally, the kid forces a caesura; he breaks free of the judge.

After a passage of many years and atrocities without number, when they have their fateful reunion inside a Fort Griffin saloon-slash-dancehall, the kid takes his stand against the judge. In the true style of the Western, the kid and the judge engage in a showdown, albeit a showdown of words. It is the most important confrontation in the book. Now, finally, the kid achieves his apotheosis. The circle of violence and bloodshed is brought to a close. The kid, a squalid murderer and scalp-hunter in the past, having in fact just shot a boy before riding into town, finds his deliverance; or rather, the thing the kid finds is the possibility of a reclamation, of a taking back of something that was stolen from him at an early age, when that "taste for mindless violence" (*BM* 3) had first blossomed within him. Only then does the kid finally and truly come into his own.

Physically killing the judge would be tantamount to surrender—a surrender to his teachings, his war. The kid would stain himself with a transgression he'd never be able to overcome. The only real way of killing the

judge, of ending his sway over him, is by consciously rejecting his teachings and pronouncements. Even in *Blood Meridian*, a narrative steeped in blood and murder, good triumphs, in a small but not insignificant way. The kid is not fully corrupted by the judge, resisting his malevolent influence. He breaks with the judge by negating him. “You aint nothin” (*BM* 331) the kid says, and this reduction of the judge to nothingness is the kid’s ultimate heroic act. When he says those three words, the book finally has its hero. A tattered, tarnished, bloodstained hero, no doubt, but a hero nonetheless. A hero for a new age, perhaps, one in which innocence is not just an implausibility but a laughable conceit. Innocence in the many worlds conjured by Cormac McCarthy is a dirty fighter. Forged in blood, it is to blood it resorts in its opposition to the agents of mayhem and destruction against which innocence is perpetually pitted. And, always, it is a fight to the death.

Steven Frye calls the kid a “heroic counterbalance to the judge’s view of things” (*Understanding* 87). He claims that “[t]he kid’s resistance is implicitly founded on a faith in the transformative power of moral order and meaning, as well as ethics and benevolence, and at the center of these virtues is the question of God and his nature” (*Understanding* 87–8). If one extrapolates this interpretation, it follows that in McCarthy anarchy and bloodshed are necessary forces. They are a smelting furnace through which order has to pass for it to achieve real meaning. True order, McCarthy seems to be saying, can only be arrived at through a ritualistic immersion in its opposite. This concept will be examined more fully in the next chapter.

Before the novel can be further discussed in the light of its possibly redemptive features, another murder (based on another father-son conflict) needs to be looked at first. This is the last deed of blood the kid commits—the slaying of the boy Elrod. Facing the kid (at that point the kid has already morphed into “the man”) over the coals of his campfire, Elrod calls into question the provenance of the kid’s scapula of human ears, effectively calling the man a liar and, furthermore, professing himself to be unimpressed with the notion of their having

been harvested from the bodies of Apaches, presumably killed in combat—"I bet them old Apaches would give a watermelon a pure fit," Elrod says, making fun of the man. An interesting dynamic is revealed when the man asks, "You aint callin me a liar are ye son?" Elrod replies, "I aint ye son" (*BM* 321). This is significant, as it comes just a few pages before the ultimate confrontation between another pairing of father and son, namely the judge and the kid. Here is another "son" denying his "father," just as the kid will shortly be denying his second father, the judge, who would have liked to fill that role (in his own perfidious way).

The exchange between Elrod and the man takes on even more meaning when Elrod says, "I knowed you for what you was when I seen ye" (*BM* 322), which does not suggest a high estimation of the man's character. Elrod is like the man at the beginning of his life, when he was still the boy and then, later, the kid—he is a hell-raiser and a killer. Elrod knows only contempt and blood-thirst, and he's spoiling for a fight. His verdict on the man is of no consequence; the significance of this exchange is revealed when the man comes across the judge a short time later, and the judge tells him, "I recognized you when I first saw you and yet you were a disappointment to me. Then and now" (*BM* 328). The judge, too, passes judgment on the man's character, but he finds the man wanting in a category entirely different from the one criticized by Elrod. Whereas Elrod accused the man of being a disreputable character, the judge comes to the opposite conclusion. It is this exchange which firmly establishes the kid as a character who stands morally opposed to the judge. Otherwise, the judge would have recognized and welcomed the man as one of his own. The kid/man, however, could not be more different from the judge.

"Even so at the last I find you here with me," the judge says, speaking of the kid's resilience, his contrariness, to the judge's worldview. And the kid says, "I aint with you" (*BM* 328). The kid's rejection of the judge is in every word he utters.

The kid has made his choice to oppose the judge long before the confrontation at the saloon, or even earlier, at the jail. Perhaps he arrived at that

decision the moment he first laid eyes on the judge. Whatever the case may be, the pivotal moment comes when the kid has the possibility to shoot the judge and refuses to do it. Tobin waxes prophetic when he urges the kid: “You’ll get no second chance lad. Do it. He is naked. He is unarmed. God’s blood, do you think you’ll best him any other way? Do it, lad. Do it for the love of God. Do it or I swear your life is forfeit” (*BM* 285). Even then the kid seems to know that the only way to “best”²⁷ the judge is to let him continue on his way unhindered, unharmed, and alone. The kid’s life is forfeit either way.

This juxtaposition of life and death makes clear McCarthy’s concept of morality: there is a difference between death of the body and death of the soul. The kid chooses the former.

His death at the end of the book then takes on a sacrificial character. The kid is murdered by the judge in an outhouse (after, or possibly even before, being raped by that monster of semi-human form), which is one of the worst defilements of the body imaginable, and yet the kid chooses that death himself, knowing that there is no escape, that “that night [his] soul [is] required of [him]” (*BM* 327). At least that is one reading of the novel; however, it seems unlikely, in a novel so concerned with the nature of human drive, ambition, and will, that there would be no will or self-determination involved in the kid’s death—that the book’s ultimate act of blood would not have originated with the kid, that said act were not a willful submission on the kid’s part to the judge’s violence, a grand gesture of surrender to and therefore triumph over the judge’s sanctity of blood, canceling it out and thereby negating the judge and everything he stands for. Otherwise, why would the book end on such a hopeful note of the world turning forward, toward a future that will see the rise of a counterforce to the judge’s malevolence?

All meaning in *Blood Meridian* is ambiguous; therefore speculative arguments have to take precedence over definitive statements. However, one unalterable fact is that in an early draft McCarthy had the judge reveal to the kid

²⁷ The only way to defeat the judge is by rejecting his dictums, proving wrong his view that war is the primary ruling order of all. The kid does that repeatedly by going against his will. See, for the example, the scene concerning the lottery of arrows, which is discussed in chapter VI.

that he was an immortal being (Wallach 107). McCarthy removed the admission in the course of subsequent edits, but the question remains how the kid would have reacted to such a revelation; and, even more importantly, what kind of significance this has in regard to the kid's death. If the kid had been told by the judge (and believed him) that he was immortal, that he was a supernatural, god-like being, then the kid's resistance to the judge's creed of war and violence (the kid allowing said violence to be wreaked upon him in turn) becomes less creditable. How could the kid have thought to stand against a being of an altogether different and higher order? On the other hand, the kid has contravened the judge's tenets repeatedly, so it is hard to say whether the judge's revelation would have impressed the kid significantly enough for him to submit to the judge's violence in defeat rather than in defiance. If literature—from the Bible to *Moby Dick*—has proven one thing, it is that ordinary humans resist evil all the time, rising above themselves and taking a stand against the demon out to tempt and corrupt them.

The question of the kid's death is another matter for speculation. What is certain is that the kid's journey began in blood. Traveling in the path laid down by his dark stars, the kid rides forth in the company of the filibusters, the war-bringers, on a "dead man's horse" (*BM* 42), its former owner—"the boy from Missouri" (*BM* 42)—having relinquished his claim to it when he died "in the dust of the courtyard" (*BM* 42) outside a cantina in the Laredito, an old barrio in the town of San Antonio, where he lay "with his skull broken in a pool of blood" (*BM* 42). It stands to reason that the kid meets his end in like circumstances.

The magnificent conceit of the novel is that after its meticulous chronicle of every manner of bloody deed, it omits the details of the book's most important atrocity. It is never explicitly stated that the judge killed the kid, but every indication seems to support such a reading.

V.

via negativa:

“*all the land lay under darkness and all a great stained altarstone*” (BM 102)

There are two different approaches to assessing the belief system that underpins *Blood Meridian*: while some scholars reject a metaphysical reading of the novel, viewing it as an expression of a nihilistic worldview, there are other voices that claim to be desecrating a vast operation of redemptive meaning deployed at the heart of the story.²⁸ Steven Shaviro claims that in the novel “fate and will alike fade into insignificance.” He elaborates: “We are called to no responsibility, and we may lay claim to no transcendence. *Blood Meridian* is not a salvation narrative; we can be rescued neither by faith nor by works nor by grace. It is useless to look for ulterior, redemptive meanings” (148).

This reading is in direct opposition to, for example, the interpretation of Harold Bloom, who ascribes a scheme of “negative transcendence” (“Tragic Ecstasy” 87) to *Blood Meridian*, a reading which he sees confirmed in the epilogue. To Bloom, the nameless man moving across the prairie and striking fire from the rock denotes a “new Prometheus” (*How to read* 263) rising up in opposition to the judge. Shaviro and Bloom’s interpretations both have something to recommend themselves, and whether one leans toward the one or the other seems largely a matter of taste, depending on which elements of the book are

²⁸ There is a division of critical opinion that concerns all of McCarthy’s works. Vereen Bell, Dana Philips, Steven Shaviro, and Mark R. Winchell are foremost among those who view McCarthy as a nihilistic writer, whereas Edwin T. Arnold, Leo Daugherty, and Walter Sullivan are proponents of metaphysical interpretations—as Hanna Boguta-Marchel puts it, they are “advocates of the metaphysics of grace and redemption.” She goes on to explain that “both of these categories are too limited and too exclusive to embrace all that McCarthy is trying to say” (*Evil* 187). The solution to understanding McCarthy may lie in the “third way” (*Via* 147) Christopher Metress offers, the concept of negative theology, commonly described by the term *via negativa*. This is an approach I also favor, and which I will examine in the course of this chapter.

For texts illustrating the aforementioned division of critical opinion, see, for example: Vereen Bell, *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy*; Dana Philips, “History and the Ugly Facts of Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*”; Steven Shaviro, “‘The Very Life of the Darkness’: A Reading of *Blood Meridian*”; Mark Royden Winchell, “Inner Dark: or, The Place of Cormac McCarthy”; Edwin T. Arnold, “Naming, Knowing and Nothingness: McCarthy’s Moral Parables”; Leo Daugherty, “Gravers False and True: *Blood Meridian* as Gnostic Tragedy”; Walter Sullivan, “About Any Kind of Meanness You Can Name.” For full details of these texts, see the Bibliography.

chosen for examination. If taken at face value, then *Blood Meridian* has to be read as a nihilistic piece, in accordance with Shaviro's analysis. If one delves deeper, however, examining the motivations and choices the characters display, and further extending the book's interpretational space, then Harold Bloom's view seems much more plausible.

I concur with Bloom in that Daughtery's reading of the text as a Gnostic tragedy is an incomplete interpretation (Bloom, "Tragic Ecstasy" 81), focusing only on the book's Gnostic aspect and neglecting others; a Manichean explanation, for example, may find as much application in the book as an Orphic one (Bloom, "Tragic Ecstasy" 84), but taken on their own, they will yield only a very one-dimensional reading. The truth is that *Blood Meridian* employs a variety of different belief systems, cunningly intertwined and yet disparate, a maelstrom of sources which prevents the book from distinctively committing itself to any one recognizable *Weltanschauung*. Yet this impossibility of pinning the book down and fitting it into any preformed category is largely responsible for the novel's aesthetic merit. Harold Bloom rightly observes that "it would lessen the imaginative force of the book if you could [...] reduce the Judge [to his origins]" ("Tragic Ecstasy" 81). The same is true for the novel itself.

The concept of the *via negativa* is introduced by Christopher Metress in his examination of *Outer Dark*, who applies the term to the book's underlying structure. What he has to say about *Outer Dark* bears repeating for *Blood Meridian*:

What McCarthy's novel is trying to tell us [is] that the darkness never passes, that serenity [...] will come to us [...] only when we reconcile ourselves to darkness as a permanent condition, when we unlearn our desire for some vision of divine light that will heal us of our crippling uncertainties and give us full knowledge of who we are, why we are here, and what God is like and would have us do. (Metress 153–4)

Boguta-Marchel elaborates on this point:

McCarthy's insistence on evil, deprivation, loss, blindness, darkness, desolation, and crippledness, as well as his skepticism toward the notions of light, seeing (or "the eye" in general), and a sense of progress and purpose

as concepts traditionally associated with transcendence, place his work near the assumptions of negative theology. (Boguta-Marchel 188)

Negative theology teaches that God can only be understood through what God is not, employing negation and contrast, or, as Boguta-Marchel puts it, “paradoxes [...] and oppositional metaphors” (*Evil* 188) to construct an explanation of the Divine (Metress 147–8). If one examines *Blood Meridian* through the lens of negative theology, then the darkness and evil that pervade McCarthy’s creation serve as a foil to the Divine, describing a state of anti-grace through which his characters (and the world they inhabit) have to pass in order for them to reach salvation—some kind of salvation, whatever small measure is available to them. The darkness is a road the characters have to walk. And that road leads somewhere, away from the place it began. Boguta-Marchel observes most accurately: “We *are* walking through darkness, but that does not mean we are doomed to lose our way” (*Evil* 189). The darkness becomes a ritual, a proving ground for the characters to examine their worth and to test their spirits.

VI.

the worth of a thing

The worth of physical realities—the life of a man or an animal, the existence of a rock in the desert—is a reoccurring theme of the book. It begins with Captain White’s recruiter telling the kid about his having been saved by the captain: “I’d done took to drinkin and whorin till hell wouldnt have me. He seen somethin in me worth savin and I see it in you.” This passage is important, as it clearly establishes that there is something in the kid “worth savin.” What is even more important is what the recruiter says immediately before the passage just quoted: “I was a sorrier sight even than what you are and [Captain White] come along and raised me up like Lazarus. Set my feet in the path of righteousness” (*BM* 30). There are two important clues here: one is that the recruiter was even worse than

the kid; the other is the reference to Lazarus. Not only has the recruiter been saved, he has been *resurrected*.²⁹

The flip side of this hint that salvation and resurrection might be lying in store for the kid is that it occurs some time before the kid encounters the judge and comes under his horrific influence. If the recruiter were to meet the kid at the end of the book, he might arrive at an altogether different assessment of his character. Captain White at least has neither salvation nor resurrection to offer the kid. If anything, the exact opposite befalls the kid after his time under the captain's command. The judge is his guide to "the floor of the pit," showing him the "horror in its round." The question this analysis is trying to examine is whether said horror "speaks to [the kid's] inmost heart" (*BM* 331) or not. I believe it does not.

The kid starts out with the already cited "taste for mindless violence" (*BM* 3), he is a brawler and a bare-knuckle fighter, and he is a killer too, but he is not, in the words of popular parlance, rotten to the core. And if he is a killer, then at least he is a reluctant one.

There are several instances in the book when the kid clearly demonstrates that he is a far cry from a mere man of "mindless violence," repeatedly going against the grain of "blood and war" espoused by the judge and Glanton, the judge's chief proselyte. An important scene comes when the gang is pursued by General Elias and Glanton holds a lottery of arrows to select four men whose task it will be to dispatch the wounded, so the gang will not be hampered by them in their escape. Unsurprisingly, the kid ends up as one of the four executioners determined by the luck of the draw, and there is the hint that again the judge has

²⁹ John Vanderheide offers an interesting (albeit far-fetched) interpretation of the novel's ending, which is partially supported by the recruiter's story given in Chapter III. Vanderheide argues that when the three men open the door to the outhouse near the end of the book, their cry of disgust could be a reaction merely to a terrible stench. Believing the jakes to be empty, he compares the scene to the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the discovery of the empty tomb by the two Marys—the third man in McCarthy's discovery scene would then serve as a substitute for the revelatory angel awaiting the women at the tomb of Christ (Vanderheide 180). He draws additional meaning from the name of the town in which the jakes scene is set: "The very fact that this whole scene takes place in Fort Griffin underscores the suggestion that the jakes can be read as the site of a kind of resurrection, as the mythological creature by the same name was an emblem of the victorious Christ" (Vanderheide 181).

had something to do with the kid's lot: "When the kid selected among the shafts to draw one he saw the judge watching him and he paused [...] He let go the arrow he'd chosen and sorted out another and drew that one. It carried the red tassel. He looked at the judge again and the judge was not watching" (*BM* 205). The judge, being a man of war, apparently influenced the kid somehow so he would draw one of the marked arrows—because he wants the kid to kill. (If one ignores the supernatural aspect of the judge's possible influence, then he is probably just interested in the proceedings; it is safe to assume, however, that he is satisfied with the results.) With the four killers lined up to perform their grisly task, the rest of the gang mounts up and rides away. Now comes the crucial point: Only the kid and Tate are left—the other two have been relieved of their duty by one of the Delawares, who decided to dispatch his wounded kinsmen himself. The kid makes the same offer to Tate, telling him to "[g]o on if [he] want[s] to." Tate hesitates, rightly fearing that the kid "might not do it" (*BM* 206)—this reservation alone illustrates the kind of reputation the kid has with the other gang members. They know he is different, just as the judge knows.

In the end Tate decides that he does not care whether the kid kills the remaining two wounded men or not. And so he rides off. Now it is just the kid and his two charges: the Mexican, who "was shot through the lungs and would die anyway" and Shelby, who has "had his hip shattered by a ball and [...] was clear in his head" (*BM* 207). The kid is in a dilemma, of course. He knows they are doomed: if Elias's men catch up with them, they will kill them, but every indication is that it won't be a quick and painless death. There is no question their death will be horrible.³⁰ Therefore, if the kid kills the wounded men, it will be a *coup de grâce*: a mercy killing. And yet he doesn't do it.

He says Shelby can "just [...] leave" (*BM* 207) him if that is what he wants, and that is the best chance he can give him. He fills Shelby's canteen from his own before he leaves, and he has not killed. Indeed, the kid's compassion goes

³⁰ "You know what they'll do to them?" (*BM* 207) Tate asks the kid. When the kid says that he can imagine, Tate replies with a laconic "No you caint" (*BM* 207).

further than that. On his way north he encounters Tate, leading his horse, which had split its hoof and could only walk at a slow pace. Instead of leaving Tate behind, he dismounts and stays with him, displaying a sense of comradeship wholly absent in the rest of the gang.

Another memorable scene comes toward the end of the book; it is no coincidence that it marks the end of the kid's life as "the kid." In the next chapter only the pronoun "he" is used, until, in his exchange with Elrod, "he" is identified as "the man" (*BM* 321). In that last episode of his life as "the kid," when he comes across the slaughtered penitents that lie "hacked and butchered among the stones in every attitude" (*BM* 315), the change in the kid is already made apparent by the presence within him of two different natures: the personalities both of the kid and the man already exist side by side, or so the wording seems to indicate. The kid wakes in the dawn, "watching the east where the light commence[s]" and when he continues his journey, he is referred to as "the man[,] watching the tableland to the south and the mountains to the north" (*BM* 314). He is "the kid" once more—for the last time—when he sees, at some distance from the carnage, the old woman kneeling among the rocks. He goes to her, and when he speaks, it is as if he is a man confessing to a priest, giving in to his need to unburden himself:

He told her that he was an American and that he was a long way from the country of his birth and that he had no family and that he had traveled much and seen many things and had been at war and endured hardships. He told her that he would convey her to a safe place, some party of her countrypeople who would welcome her and that she should join them for he could not leave her in this place or she would surely die. (McCarthy 315)

The key thing he tells the old *abuelita*—the "grandmother"—is that he "ha[s] been at war," which indicates that he is at war no longer. The days of bloodshed and homicidal mayhem are behind him. And what he offers her is to "convey her to a safe place." He wants to help her, to save her from certain death in the desert. The book's dark irony manifests itself in the chapter's closing paragraph: "He reached into the little cove and touched her arm. She moved slightly, her whole

body, light and rigid. She weighed nothing. She was just a dried shell and she had been dead in that place for years” (*BM* 315).

This passage will likely be embraced by readers favoring a nihilistic approach to the book—in the face of all-powerful death human compassion is rendered futile; it is no time for heroes, who arrive on the scene too late anyway. However, the gesture is not made futile just because it comes too late; it is still valid. The kid adheres to some basic moral code, despite being a hugely conflicted character. The problem is that even if he keeps away from the war, the war does not keep away from him.

In the months following his operation,³¹ he undergoes a process of emotional hardening that seems to compound his alienation from the world. He watches Brown and Toadvine being executed at the *cárcel* (the prison) and afterwards he purchases from a soldier for his last two dollars “the scapular of heathen ears that Brown had worn to the scaffold” (*BM* 312). It is this grisly collection of human ears that, like some strange boon of blood, will bind the kid to his past and perhaps to his fate also. It is a puzzling question why he wants to hold on to the ears, why he wants to preserve the memory of the things they stand for. Perhaps they are to be something like his own crown of thorns, a reminder for all the sins he has committed—the kid owning up to his past, carrying forever after the emblem of his guilt. Conversely, though, the ears might be nothing more than a grisly trophy, the kid’s assertion of having survived in the face of terrible slaughter (whereas the owners of the ears have fallen and succumbed to death). Owens compares the scapular of ears to the hacked-off body parts (ears, scalps, or fingers) of killed enemies American soldiers used to wear on their belts in the

³¹ Following the massacre at the ferry, the kid is struck in the leg by an arrow during his escape from the Yumas: “The kid carried an arrow in his leg and it was butted against the bone. He stopped and sat and broke off the shaft a few inches from the wound and then he got up again and they went on” (*BM* 277). Later, after his release from prison, the kid sees a doctor to have the arrow shaft removed from his leg: “The doctor that he found was a young man of good family from the east. He [...] looked at the blackened shaft of the arrow and moved it about. A soft fistula had formed about it [...] He said that he could perform the surgery and that it would cost one hundred dollars” (*BM* 308).

Vietnam war—“badge[s] of merit earned by participation in primal violence” (Owens 24).³²

Whatever the reason for the kid’s macabre acquisition, it is the necklace of ears that will play its part in the kid’s final killing, when he shoots Elrod, who “wouldn’t [have] lived anyway” (*BM* 322), in self-defense.

The ears are not the only token the kid acquires after striking out alone in the months after his surgery. Passing through the mining camps, he picks up a bible “no word of which [he can] read.” It seems rather pointless—another futile gesture on the kid’s part—to equip himself with a bible he can’t read. However, maybe the words themselves are not as important as the symbolic power of the book. The kid seems enshrouded in an aura that is both mysterious and awe-inspiring. Accordingly, “[h]e [is] treated with a certain deference as one who ha[s] got onto terms with life beyond what his years [can] account for.” This is an unmistakable indication that his personality has changed. And regardless of his being unable to read the bible he carries, there seems to be an air of devoutness about him, stemming mainly from the “dark and frugal clothes” he wears. The impression of piety seems strong enough for people to think the kid some “sort of preacher,” although he is “no witness to them, neither of things at hand nor things to come, he least of any man.”

³² Owens cites several sources describing this phenomenon prevalent among American soldiers during the Vietnam War. He writes: “Readers may well recall similar war trophies taken by American soldiers, as documented by numerous veterans returning with war stories. In *The Things They Carried*, Vietnam War veteran Tim O’Brien describes one of the soldiers, ‘otherwise a very gentle person,’ who carried a thumb, hacked off ‘a VC corpse, a boy of fifteen or sixteen’ (13). Charles Stephens, of the 101st Airborne Division, remembers how it became an unspoken battalion standard operating procedure, or SOP, to cut the right ear off everybody they killed ‘to prove our body count’ (qtd. in *Winter Soldier* 9). Scott Camil, of the 1st Marine Division, describes the ‘cutting off of ears, cutting off of heads, torturing prisoners’ that occurred in his company, and admits: ‘People cut off ears, and when they’d come back in off of an operation you’d make deals before you’d go out and like for every ear you cut off someone would buy you two beers, so people cut off ears’ (12–13). Frank Shepard, of the 9th Infantry Division, remembers that his battalion awarded badges for confirmed Vietcong kills, and that one ‘common way’ was ‘to cut off the ear of the dead Vietnamese and bring it in’ (56). As a helicopter pilot in Vietnam, Glen McCoy mentions the ‘sight of human scalps and ears worn on the belts of the special forces’ (McCoy 57). More than any story or scar, the ears, like scalps, are visible proof of success in war, announcing graphically, without words, *I am alive, and the owners of these are dead*. Tim O’Brien states this most succinctly in ‘How to Tell a True War Story’: ‘You can tell a true war story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil’ (*Things They Carried* 76)” (Owens 24–5).

The kid has become a man apart: he no longer has any interest in the violent turnings of the world, and he has no ear for the obsolete news of the regions he travels, where people still “[toast] the ascension of rulers already deposed and [hail] the coronation of kings murdered and in their graves.” The notion that the kid has become a secular and jaded stand-in for some world-weary philosopher or sacrosanct prophet is reinforced when he is described as “travel[ing] with no news at all, as if the doings of the world were too slanderous for him to truck with, or perhaps too trivial” (*BM* 312).

The kid has neither news nor gospel to offer, and it seems he has broken with his past.

VII.

the “dawn that would not be” (BM 310) and the dawn that is

As Bloom intimates in his discussion of the book’s metaphysics (“Tragic Ecstasy” 81), the kid’s dream of the judge and the “false moneyer” (*BM* 310) may very well be the key—or at least one of the requisite keys—to the book’s code. A complete decipherment may be impossible, but one fact the dream clearly establishes—again I side with Bloom’s interpretation—is that the Gnostic system is not sufficient for an understanding of the book. Whether the judge is a Gnostic archon or demiurge is beside the point because “there [is no] system by which to divide him back [sic] into his origins for he [will] not go” (*BM* 309); therefore “no trace of any ultimate atavistic egg by which to reckon his commencing” will be found (*BM* 310). The judge is an enigma, and McCarthy warns the reader of the futility of trying to discover his “antecedents” (*BM* 309).

McCarthy refuses to yield up concrete and unambiguous evidence that the judge is in fact a preternatural being, but what is beyond doubt is that his concerns and obsessions at least are of an utterly otherworldly nature, which is made evident by what the kid sees in Holden’s “lashless pig’s eyes” (*BM* 310): “bodies

of decisions not accountable to the courts of men.” However, that is not the only thing the kid sees in those eyes. Far more disconcerting than the decisions or rulings the judge might have made is that the kid sees “his own name which nowhere else could he have ciphered out at all logged into the records as a thing already accomplished, a traveler known in jurisdictions existing only in the claims of certain pensioners or on old dated maps” (*BM 310*). As his name has been “logged into the records,” there seems to be the suggestion here that the kid has found his way into the judge’s ledger-book, which is not a good thing—by this point in the narrative the reader knows what happens to the things the judge copies down in his book. The facsimiles are preserved in a domain over which the judge holds sole sway; the originals are destroyed. This passage is difficult, as it seems to prophesy the kid’s death at the hands of the judge—the implications of this complicate the previously offered interpretation of the kid’s death (i.e. as a sacrificial act in accordance with the kid’s own will). The kid’s death seems to be “a thing already accomplished,” the kid having already been removed from the present sphere of existence and now being relegated to a realm of antiquity, impossibly distant: “certain pensioners” might recognize the “jurisdictions” in which he travels, or they might be found still on “old dated maps” (*BM 310*). The kid’s a goner, in other words, regardless of his tenuous hold on life.

The complication for the interpretation of the kid’s death as a self-sacrificial act is the following: if the judge has already marked the kid for extinction, then it’s hard to see any autonomy in the kid’s demise. However, the fate the kid sees in the judge’s eyes could be nothing more than a nightmare—the kid fearing that he will not survive the operation and said fear finding expression in his dreams. In the end, what this could prove may be that the kid really is afraid of the judge, regardless of what he tells him. He is afraid that the judge will kill him, that he has already formed a resolution to that effect. If that is the case, then the kid’s death as self-sacrifice is possible again. In fact, the kid, aware of his fear, could decide to give in to the thing he fears most, knowing that it is the only way

to defeat the judge. His death would then become doubly heroic. First he takes a stand against his fear of the judge; then he takes a stand against the judge himself.

The dream continues with what is one of the most complicated metaphors in the book: the judge “enshadow[ing]” (*BM* 310) the coiner. Daugherty makes some interesting inferences from that dream parable, again examining it in terms of Gnostic thought (Daugherty 166–8). He argues that the judge “keeps judging its [the coin’s] likeness of him inadequate” because he “doesn’t want a victory based on any currency [...] in any ‘marketplace’” (Daugherty 166). Being a man of war, the judge has no use for the decadence and falsity of trading in common coin, “the markets where men barter” (*BM* 310) being but “derivative” markets in which men stage their counterfeit “war games” (Daugherty 167). Should he ever approve of the moneyer’s forgery, finding the face on the coin “pass[able],” he would disprove himself and, presumably, “the night [would] end” (*BM* 310). If he were to demean himself in such a way (judging the forgery adequate), he would call into question the nobility of war (*BM* 331).

What Daugherty does not attempt to answer is who the coiner is working for. Whether he is laboring for himself, a free agent having petitioned merely for the judge’s patronage, or whether he is in fact in the judge’s employ. The difference could be that if the “coldforger” were working for the judge, then the motivation behind his task might not be what Daugherty reads into it. If the judge had engaged the metal-worker’s services, then it stands to reason that he would want him to produce an adequate coin—and not purposely judge his productions inadequate to keep the coiner from achieving his task. The question is simply who came to whom—was it the coiner, “seek[ing] favor with the judge” (*BM* 310), or was it the judge who set the “coldforger” to work? If it was the latter, then the judge would want him to succeed—not thwart his attempts by perpetually proclaiming them short of the mark, which is how Daugherty reads the dream sequence (Daugherty 166). The judge, being the trickster that he is, might be eager to have a forgery made that will successfully deceive all men with the false promise of a “dawn that would not be” (*BM* 310). The coiner’s task might be the

subjugation of all mankind, but the coins aren't good enough. Because there is one person who eludes the judge, one who was "mutinous" (*BM* 299).

It is not clear whose face the moneyer is attempting to engrave on the coins—is it the likeness of the judge, as Daugherty suggests, or the likeness of the kid? John Sepich argues that the judge killed the kid because he found him wanting in an essential way. He closes that argument with the following phrase: "His [the kid's] name had become lost, his face certainly no face for a coin" (Sepich 135). This suggests that the moneyer could have been trying to put the kid's face on the coin, but the judge didn't find the forgery good enough—good enough to chain the kid to his likeness (as the judge had done to the old Hueco) and yoke him to his nefarious purposes. This then could also explain why the judge tries so hard to make the kid his disciple—because the judge needs the kid in order for him to continue on in his way: if he can break the kid, then his conquest will be complete. But he cannot break the kid.

If the above is a correct intimation of what the kid's dream means, then the coiner's labors are a vision the kid has of the danger the judge poses to him—ending in the realization that the judge cannot possess him. Just the same, however, the night does not end as long as Holden sits in judgment of the forgeries. There is only one way for the kid to remove himself from the judge's influence: death. There are a lot of what-ifs in this theory, but it is worth pondering.

John Vanderheide suggests yet another possibility: he argues that the coiner might be the kid himself (*Elimination* 182). If the kid were the coiner, then it seems plausible that he would be trying to capture and possess himself of the judge's likeness. If that is so, then the vision is one of failure, in which the kid sees himself trying to best the judge but failing.

What seems certain is that the "coldforger" stands in direct opposition to the man crossing the prairie in the novel's epilogue. They both employ metaphoric

circles³³—the forger has his coins and the traveler the holes he makes in the prairie by means of his two-handed implement—but their labors are directed toward vastly incongruous ends. Whereas the “coldforger” is a “false moneyer” and an “exile from men’s fires” (*BM* 310), expending his time on inadequate forgeries, the man wielding his “implement with two handles” traverses a nameless prairie, “striking the fire out of the rock which God has put there” (*BM* 337). The epilogue abounds with religious overtones, and Harold Bloom’s conviction that the two-handed implement is a reference to the two-handed engine in Milton’s *Lycidas* comes as no surprise (“Tragic Ecstasy” 80). In his attempt at an explanation of Milton’s mysterious “two-handed engine,” Leon Howard argues that it stands for both “the Sword of the Lord” and “the Word of God” (“Two-Handed Engine” 178). If one applies that interpretation to the “implement with two handles” in the epilogue of *Blood Meridian*, what one gets is a man freeing God’s fire from the rock with the Word of God. If there has to be one argument for the regenerative aspects of *Blood Meridian*, this is that argument.

The idea of regeneration is there in the epilogue. The travelers’ trek across the land “seems less the pursuit of some continuance than the verification of a principle, a validation of sequence and causality as if each round and perfect hole owed its existence to the one before it there on that prairie” (*BM* 337). Instead of a “continuance” of the old (i.e. the judge’s) order, a principle is verified, which restores “sequence and causality” to the world. Thus, after a long night of murder and bloodshed, the world is finally ready for its dawn. It is significant that a book whose subordinate title is *The Evening Redness in the West* ends not with the sun going down—that ultimate image of the Western—but with the first light of a new day. And that is what the epilogue describes: a new day, a new chance, with the fire of God being freed from the rock. It is noteworthy that in the world of *Blood Meridian* “a man and a rock become endowed with unguessed kinships” (*BM*

³³ For an analysis of the circle metaphors in Cormac McCarthy, see Boguta-Marchel, *The Evil, The Fated, The Biblical*, Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012, p. 92–6.

247). It is that kinship which suggests the spark of salvation to be “enkindl[ing]”³⁴ (*BM* 237) not merely the rock of the prairie but the cold hearts of men too.

³⁴ One caveat concerning this interpretation: The *OED* gives the following definition of enkindle: “1.1 trans. To cause (a flame, etc.) to blaze up. Chiefly fig. to excite (passions, war, etc.)” Note the figurative meaning: “to excite passions, war, etc.” One must hope that the man’s steel does not enkindle men’s hearts with more war.

IV.

—Slouching toward Bethlehem—

The Road (2006)

Several years after an unexplained cataclysm laid waste to the entire United States, and possibly the whole world with it, a man and his young son travel across a landscape of ash and ruin. McCarthy's post-apocalypse is a time for robbers and killers and eaters of human flesh. Death is everywhere, and the man's health is failing. Beset by constant dangers, they can trust no one. When a truck of cannibals pulls up on the road, the man and his boy hide in the woods, where the man is forced to shoot one of the "truck people" (TR 59) to save his son. The killing raises moral concerns for the boy, who wonders whether one can take a life and still remain one of "the good guys," as he calls them. The man and the boy reach an old mansion, and locked away in its basement they find a number of captives who are being kept there as food supply. Unable to help them, the man and his boy flee. They "dont eat people" (TR 239). Close to starvation, they find an underground shelter stocked with food. They spend a few days there, but then leave because the man is afraid of somebody finding them. They resume their journey down the road. They meet an old man, Ely, and the boy insists they help him, share some of their food with him. The father remains suspicious but gives in to the boy's demands. Eventually, the boy and the man reach the ocean. A thief steals their belongings, and the man goes after him, forcing him at gunpoint to give up his entire belongings including his clothes, which is tantamount to killing the thief. Again, the boy pleads for his father to relent. It is on the beach that the man finally succumbs to his illness. There, one of the elusive good guys finds the boy, who decides to go with him and join his family.

I.

a journey and its destination

Vereen M. Bell argues—roughly twenty years prior to the publication of *The Road*—that the roads in McCarthy’s novels neither have a direction nor do they lead “somewhere that could reasonably be anticipated to be a vicinity of meaning,” adding that “the point [...] seems to be precisely that roads are helpful to us only as long as we believe they are taking us somewhere but that in the long run they don’t” (*Achievement* 1). Bell has been outspoken in his evaluation of McCarthy’s works as espousing an “antimetaphysical bias” (*Metress* 148), favoring a nihilistic interpretation of the texts. There is no doubt, however, that *The Road*, published in 2006, is a far cry from the roads he claims to discern in McCarthy’s fiction.

Despite all its tragedy and despair, the book is certainly McCarthy’s most optimistic novel to date—the world lies in ruins, but from its ashes rise a father and his son, trying to survive in a “darksome” (*OD* 226) shadow-land from which all human decency, compassion, and love have fled. Despite the absence of empathy and basic humanity from the world at large, however, it is the love the father and son bear for each other that proves the strongest ligament of their survival instinct. *The Road* reads like a bold refutation of Bell’s dismissal of McCarthy’s capacity for crafting a morally traceable narrative; it is a journey as well as a destination, and the place it leads is a signature McCarthy trope: there is darkness and death at its end, and yet—or maybe because of it—there is also the promise of salvation and healing. The book ends on a strongly redemptive note, affirming that rarest of all things in McCarthy’s universe; for the first time in his career it is put boldly and unmistakably: hope. In that cruel wasteland of ashes and black ruin, where marauders, thieves, and cannibals prowl under license of a darkened age, there persists the hope that humanity has not had its swan song yet; not all things must perish, and those that do not succumb to extinction labor on

and persevere. As is typical of McCarthy, the glimmer of hope he extends toward his characters must be purchased at a price. There is no redemption without sacrifice, and in none of McCarthy's works is this more true than in *The Road*, where a devastated planet's vanished humanity is reclaimed through one father's love for his son.

II.

the fallen world

No loss is irreparable; after the end comes the beginning.

The lesson of *The Road* is that life goes on—in a severely altered, diminished state, maybe, but there is continuance; resumption; *life*. “The clocks stopped at 1:17” (*TR* 45), but the hearts of men did not. To be sure, there are some hearts that faltered (the man's wife is a case in point) and some that have grown black with evil and malice—a common reaction in a time when “all stores of food ha[ve] given out and murder [is] everywhere upon the land” (*TR* 152). But there are other hearts out there, still beating strong and true, and they are lodged inside the man and the boy. They are not immune to the horrors of McCarthy's gruesome new world, but the pulse that beats through their veins comes just as steady as before the “long shear of light” (*TR* 45) that precipitated the novel's otherwise unspecified disaster.

“In my end is my beginning,” T.S. Eliot concludes in his poem “East Coker,” and thus is the state of things in *The Road*. Post-apocalyptic stories that concern themselves with survival in the immediate aftermath of the end of the world as we know it—McCarthy's vision firmly belongs in that category—are always stories about second chances: they produce “textual spaces that are open to the possibility of ontological clarity and, perhaps, to the distillation of a new world” (Steven 71). The “new world” Steven mentions is still enwombed in the present darkness, and its birth will necessitate a journey of faith—a process of

reclamation that will restore goodness and light to the gray order of the world. The boy is key to that reclamation: “What if I said that he’s a god?” the man asks Ely, a lone and hungry wanderer they have encountered on the road. Ely adds to the boy’s messianic promise when he calls the man’s son “the last god,” although the inference is mostly negative: “I hope that’s not true what you said because to be on the road with the last god would be a terrible thing.” While clearly admitting the possibility of the boy’s being an agent of salvation, Ely cannot ignore his conviction that such a situation would be far from being a good thing.

Ely does not believe in hope: “Things will be better when everybody’s gone” (*TR* 145). After the annihilation of the old world and its sinful ways, the only solution is a call for *complete* annihilation. The only way to defeat death, according to Ely, is death itself: “When we’re all gone at last then there’ll be nobody here but death and his days will be numbered too. He’ll be out in the road there with nothing to do and nobody to do it to. He’ll say: Where did everybody go? And that’s how it will be. What’s wrong with that?” (*TR* 145–6). Ely then envisions a complete surrender of life that will put humanity beyond the means of resurrection; he believes in an absolute end—a stillness and “dimming away of the world” (*TR* 3) that will overtake and subdue even death, the very agent behind the world’s demise. The way the novel ends indicates that McCarthy has a different strategy in mind; but as is exemplified by *Outer Dark* and *Blood Meridian*, the ritual of darkness and despair needs to be observed before any attempt at reconciliation can be made—a reconciliation occurring between the flawed individual and its fallen world.

The Road employs a number of genre³⁵ tropes and conventions, drawn from horror literature and the post-apocalyptic disaster novel,³⁶ to mark that ritual.

³⁵ In “Crenellated Heat,” his article for the *London Review of Books*, Philip Connors has the following to say about Cormac McCarthy and genre: “He has always been something of a genre novelist, from his early work in Southern Gothic to *No Country for Old Men*, his 2005 dalliance with the noir thriller. It’s just that the genre is never quite the same when he’s finished with it.”

³⁶ Steven Frye on the topic of the book’s literary ancestry: “Essentially a journey narrative, it draws from the popular genre of the apocalyptic novel, the postapocalyptic and dystopian narrative, as well as from the wasteland iconography of medieval legend and T.S. Eliot’s poem.” As regards the setting, Frye claims to discern “the wilderness typology of the Old and New Testaments,” further arguing that “[i]n its treatment of corpses, cannibalism, the extremes of human avarice, and

The setting is dominated by smoking ruins and dilapidated structures; sad relics, forgotten and rendered useless in hopeless disrepair, litter the wasteland. The blasted landscape yields a grim picture of barrenness and isolation. Long fallen away from its center, the world is disintegrating inexorably: “The cold and the silence. The ashes of the late world carried on the bleak and temporal winds to and fro in the void. Carried forth and scattered and carried forth again. Everything uncoupled from its shoring. Unsupported in the ashen air. Sustained by a breath, trembling and brief” (TR 9–10).

The land is burned and ravaged, haunted by the ghosts of old fires, the destruction they brought:

On the far side of the river valley the road passed through a stark black burn. Charred and limbless trunks of trees stretching away on every side. Ash moving over the road and the sagging hands of blind wire strung from the blackened lightpoles whining thinly in the wind. A burned house in a clearing and beyond that a reach of meadow-lands stark and gray and a raw red mudbank where a roadworks lay abandoned. (TR 7)

And yet, the gothic squalor that has taken hold of the world, crushing all order, all symmetry, cloaks a dark romance that imbues the ruins and hovels with a stark beauty, shedding a moonglow of grace, jagged and fierce, on the rotting corpse-world depicted in *The Road*. The ubiquitous violence (or its grim aftermath) that the man and the boy encounter does its part to complement McCarthy’s nightmare setting of sublime horror; indeed, it is Dana Phillips’s view that the novel’s darkness and violence serve as an aesthetic element of style:

I cannot see that the book differs in kind from, say, *Blood Meridian* or *Child of God*. As those books do, it takes violence and beauty as given, as natural; and like those books it also refuses to comfort its reader by positing a difference, much less admitting a contradiction, between the violence and the beauty it depicts. In *The Road*, sometimes the violence simply is the beauty. (Phillips 174)

As Janet Maslin also observes in the *New York Times*, there is a strange beauty to darkness that McCarthy recognizes. In *The Road*, he achieves a unity bordering on the sublime between those two elements, lending both an ethereal splendor and a ubiquitous decay, the novel features elements of the gothic, and though set in an unnamed southern locale, this genre motif is by no means specific to region” (171).

sense of ruinous despair to the haunting devastation he conjures up for the reader, thus ennobling the dramatic failing of the world.³⁷ Against this backdrop of decay and the allure of destruction, the man and the boy's efforts to survive become heroic acts; as a foil to that (mostly) undaunted heroism, McCarthy stages a monstrous shadow-play—or, as Grace Hellyer would have it, a “*Trauerspiel*” (Hellyer 58)—of cannibals that discriminate neither between grown men and women (*TR* 93) nor new-born infants (*TR* 167), “bloodcults” (*TR* 14), and marauding “arm[ies] in tennis shoes” (*TR* 77) that travel with “slaves in harness” and “supplementary consort[s] of catamites” (*TR* 78). The novel's horrors are at times rendered in graphic detail, and its imagery and scenarios, adhering largely to genre standbys, frequently recall the works of Stephen King or other horror writers. *The Road* yields a plethora of blood, viscera, and severed pieces of human anatomy.

The imagery is disturbing, serving up a gut-wrenching shock fare of bodies and human remains: “They passed a metal trashdump where someone had once tried to burn bodies. The charred meat and bones under the damp ash might have been anonymous save for the shapes of the skulls. No longer any smell” (*TR* 126). Or: “Human bodies. Sprawled in every attitude. Dried and shrunken in their rotted clothes” (*TR* 40). Or, yet more graphic, with a note of haunting sadness mixed in:

Shapes of dried blood in the stubble grass and gray coils of viscera where the slain had been field-dressed and hauled away. The wall beyond held a frieze of human heads, all faced alike, dried and caved with their taut grins and shrunken eyes. They wore gold rings in their leather ears and in the wind their sparse and ratty hair twisted about on their skulls [...] The heads not truncheoned shapeless had been flayed of their skins and the raw skulls painted and signed across the forehead in a scrawl and one white bone skull had the plate sutures etched carefully in ink like a blueprint for assembly. (*TR* 76)

When one of the cannibals discovers the man and his son hiding in the woods, the man threatens to shoot the clearly bad guy, relating in no unspecific terms the damage the bullet will do to him, should he try to betray them: “It will be in your

³⁷ In the *New York Times*, Janet Maslin calls *The Road* “an exquisitely bleak incantation—pure poetic brimstone,” arguing that it “would be pure misery if not for its stunning, savage beauty.”

brain before you can hear it. To hear it you will need a frontal lobe and things with names like colliculus and temporal gyrus and you wont have them anymore. They'll just be soup" (*TR* 55). Despite being couched in the precision of cold medical jargon, the description of the man's brain exploding is sufficiently gruesome to present itself to the reader in the full efflorescence of its horror. The scene in which the father and son discover the cannibals' food stores—incarcerated naked men and women, revealed by the flame of the man's lighter—is similarly harrowing: "Huddled against the back wall were naked people, male and female, all trying to hide, shielding their faces with their hands. On the mattress lay a man with his legs gone to the hip and the stumps of them blackened and burnt. The smell was hideous" (*TR* 93).

The nightmarish quality of the setting weighs heavily on the characters, and the father finds himself torn between wanting to protect his son and at the same time wishing to relieve him, once and for all, of the miseries he has to endure daily. It is a choice between life and death, and as Paul Sheehan correctly points out, the world depicted in *The Road* has fallen prey to a cataclysm of such unprecedented violence that the question arises of "how much can be pared away from human existence for it still to qualify as 'life'" (Sheehan 91). Against such a complicated backdrop of emotional tug-of-war, the father's choice is cruelly inverted, becoming no choice at all, but an intolerable impasse.

Fighting growing despair and illness, the father vacillates between thoughts of giving up and a grim resolve to prolong the fight, to engage in a holding action for as long as he must. "If only my heart were stone" (*TR* 10), he thinks; but he loves the boy too much to be capable of ending his life with a bullet to the head, even though he does not shy away from instructing the boy in the most reliable method of taking his own life,³⁸ should the boy be in danger of falling into the hands of "the bad guys." The father's duty to his son—his obligation to keep him alive—is immutable because he is bound to it by a force

³⁸ "No crying. Do you hear me? You know how to do it. You put it in your mouth and point it up. Do it quick and hard. Do you understand? Stop crying. Do you understand?" (*TR* 95).

far stronger than the bonds of mere blood. His duty to the boy is commensurate with a duty to God. Protecting his son is a father's sacred task,³⁹ a divine order: "My job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God. I will kill anyone who touches you" (*TR* 65).

Faced with the dangers of a broken world, made hostile and predatory by an inexplicable catastrophe whose aftermath is even less likely to yield an explanation of the fate awaiting it, the man becomes increasingly alienated from his past, the life he led before the onset of the sundering of familiar form and order that has befallen the world. The past has simply ceased to exist:

The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true. More fragile than he would have thought. How much was gone already? The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality. Drawing down like something trying to preserve heat. In time to wink out forever. (*TR* 75)

The despair of this passage is hard to ignore. The threat of oblivion—of final extinction—is a constant companion on the road, and there is no escaping its implications. If everything ends in absolute death, in accordance with Ely's predictions of such a terminus, then going on is pointless. And yet the father and the son do not give up. The father loses heart repeatedly, wishing for it "to be over" (*TR* 130), but his continued efforts to keep himself and the boy alive, to keep themselves from harm, draw a very different picture of the father's state of mind; his survival instinct is fueled by his fear of failing his son:

Maybe he understood for the first time that to the boy he was himself an alien. A being from a planet that no longer existed. The tales of which were suspect. He could not construct for the child's pleasure the world he'd lost without constructing the loss as well and he thought perhaps the child had known this better than he. He tried to remember the dream but he could not. All that was left was the feeling of it. He thought perhaps they'd come to warn him. Of what? That he could not enkindle in the heart of the child what was ashes in his own. Even now some part of him wished they'd never found this refuge. Some part of him always wished it to be over. (*TR* 129–30)

³⁹ This recalls the words of the squire in *Outer Dark*: "It's a sacred thing, a family. A sacred obligation" (*OD* 47).

The part of the man that yearns for death—his own and his son’s—is eclipsed by his love for his boy. However, this love is complicated by the man’s knowledge of what his paternal instinct to protect the boy may require him to do—his duty may extend to the extreme of having to kill his boy in order to save him from harm.

The conflict arising from the father’s desire to look out for his son, paired with his growing realization that his worsening condition will soon render him incapable of action, comes to a head when the man lies dying and the boy begs his father to “take [him] with [him]” (*TR* 234). Now the man is finally faced with the dilemma of wanting the best for his son while at the same time not wanting to part company with him. All along he has been concerned only about the boy’s safety, thinking himself prepared to end his son’s life at a moment’s notice in order for him to be beyond the perils of “the stark gray world” (*TR* 40). When the time comes to make the dreaded decision, he is paralyzed: “I cant. I cant hold my son dead in my arms. I thought I could but I cant” (*TR* 235). In the end, the father realizes that the only hope available to his son lies in his continued passage along the road. That is the only way for him to reach safe harbor, “to find the good guys,” which the father exhorts him to do without “tak[ing] any chances” (*TR* 234).

III.

the good guys and the bad

The book’s moral stance is dominated by the concept of good and evil, which is exemplified by the man’s division of the world as being inhabited by “the good guys” and “the bad guys.” This dualism first comes into play after the man shoots one of the “truck people” (*TR* 59), a band of marauding cannibals who posed a threat to himself and the child. The killing, although an act of self-defense, leaves the boy markedly traumatized, and he refuses to speak to the man until, more than a day later, the father finally tells his son, “You wanted to know what the bad guys

looked like. Now you know” (*TR* 65). The bitter irony of this is that the cannibal was “the first human being other than the boy that [the man has] spoken to in more than a year.” When the man thinks of the other man as his “brother at last” (*TR* 64), the phrasing suggests a reflection on his own personal kinship to the abhorrent violence and unclean tastes (i.e. his eating of human flesh) personified by the cannibal. The man’s realization of being related, on an ontological level, to the cannibal and the sacrilege he represents raises the question of whether here the man is weighing his own (and perhaps also the boy’s) potential for degradation to such a primal state. The matter is resolved at the end of that day, when the boy asks, “Are we still the good guys?” The man replies in the affirmative: “Yes. We’re still the good guys.” More by way of personal resolve than an inquiry, the boy says, “And we always will be.” The man’s answer offers reassurance: “Yes. We always will be” (*TR* 65).

This opposition of good guys and bad guys sets the tone for the rest of the novel. Each human encounter the man and the boy make brings with it the conflict of the good guys (i.e. the man and the boy) having to take a stand against the bad guys. The fallen world and its horrors have exercised the man in suspicion and a jaded low opinion of fellow survivors. For the man, everybody else besides himself and the boy is one of the bad guys until proven different. And even when other people seem perfectly harmless, the man remains adamant in his refusal to trust them.⁴⁰ In his heart, the man seems not just unwilling but utterly unable to believe that there are still any good guys left in the world:

We need to get out of the road.
Why, Papa?
Someone’s coming.

⁴⁰ See Ely and, later, the thief. Even when it becomes apparent that Ely is just an old man who “cant see good,” the man regards him with suspicion. When the boy takes the old man’s hand to guide him to their camp, his father tells him not to hold it (*TR* 140). During their encounter with the thief, the man forces him at gunpoint to relinquish all his clothes including his shoes, which is tantamount to a death sentence. The thief was just another refugee looking for food—“an outcast from one of the communes” (*TR* 215). When he drew the butcher knife on the man, he was acting in self defense. Framed in the sights of the man’s gun, the thief proves himself compliant enough, following the man’s commands. He repeatedly begs the man for mercy, telling him that he was “starving” and that he will “die” if the man takes his clothes and shoes away from him. The boy tries to intercede too (“Papa”), but the man does not listen, and he leaves the thief “the way [he] left [them]” (*TR* 217).

Is it bad guys?
 Yes. I'm afraid so.
 They could be good guys. Couldnt they?
 He didnt answer. He looked at the sky out of old habit but there
 was nothing to see. (TR 87)

The only option the man sees is for them to “hole up[, g]et off the road” (TR 87). Thus the man and the boy become fugitives from not only bad guys but potentially good people as well. In the scene quoted above, the man’s caution may have been justified as, a few days after the appearance of the “two men [coming] down the road almost at a lope” (TR 88), the man and the boy come “upon a once grand house sited on a rise above the road” (TR 89), where they will make the gruesome discovery mentioned in chapter II—a cache of human prisoners locked away in the basement to serve as nourishment for their keepers, who eat them piecemeal, presumably to make their “food supply” last longer.

Yet not everyone traveling on the road is one of the bad guys. Ely, the book’s fatalistic prophet,⁴¹ is wary but kind, and despite the man’s uneasiness he poses no danger to the man and his boy. If not for his son, his father would not have agreed to having Ely share their fire and food that night after they met. The father’s inability to believe in the possibility of finding goodness in other people—of encountering any “good guys” on the road—is borne out by another scene, following their departure from their “tiny paradise” (TR 126), the bunker that comes stocked with everything from “canned goods” (TR 117) to “gold krugerrands” (TR 120), “toiletpaper”, “spaghetti sauce” (TR 117), “drycells” (TR 118), and “a box of .45 ACP cartridges” (TR 120). But the concrete-walled Eden offers only temporary shelter, because “somebody is coming [...] [s]ometime,” and in the father’s eyes that spells not merely trouble but danger. “What if some good guys came?” the boy asks, to which the father replies with characteristic solemnity: “Well, I dont think we’re likely to meet any good guys on the road.”

⁴¹ Prophetic characters are familiar elements of McCarthy’s narratives. As if bound to take part in some strange, sullen communion, they often share food and drink with the protagonists while expounding on the state of the world and the fate that is likely to befall the travelers. Ely is comparable to the blind man in *Outer Dark* and the prophets in *Blood Meridian* (i.e. the hermit and the Mennonite). Yet unlike the blind man in *Outer Dark*, Ely offers his hosts only predictions of doom and darkness. In *The Road*, the world has finally become Culla’s swamp.

When his son points out that “[they are] on the road,” the father answers with a laconic “I know” (*TR* 127). Nothing more needs to be said for the father to make clear his point.

The question of the existence of other “good guys” besides the father and the boy is central to the reading of the novel as a narrative of regeneration and salvation. Nearing the end of his life, the man finds himself, “for all his speeches,” to have become “more faint of heart than he ha[s] been in years;” and still he cannot give up, relinquish the hope that they will reach a safe place yet. His insistence on hope, on continuing the journey, is relentless, despite all his doubts and fears.

He advises the boy to guard against the allure of happy dreams: “When your dreams are of some world that never was or of some world that never will be and you are happy again then you will have given up. Do you understand? And you cant give up. I wont let you” (*TR* 160). The man’s exhortation adds a new level of meaning to the violent world they traverse: the darkness then becomes a catalyst, a propulsive force that ensures they do not yield to the false siren song of happiness. They must follow the road; the dogged pursuit of salvation is the only means of saving themselves. Boguta-Marchel elaborates:

[W]hat dominates is [the father’s] absolute urge to go on, to persist, and not to give up since, as he seems to be implicitly yet constantly professing, “he who endures to the end will be saved” (Mark 13: 13). The father’s recognition of God as the deviser of history together with his remarkably strong will to carry on against all odds and adversities render *The Road* an authentically apocalyptic piece in keeping with the canonical biblical tradition. (Boguta-Marchel 172)

Shortly after the man’s death, the boy encounters another man on the road, one of the good guys, who—the following scene leaves little doubt about this—will become the boy’s surrogate father. His father lying dead on the beach, the boy has achieved his mission: joining up with a group of “good guys,” he has finally found a family—a mother, a father, “a little boy and [...] a little girl” (*TR* 239). They might even have a dog—perhaps the same dog the boy heard long ago, on the

outskirts of an abandoned town,⁴² the day before he spied a boy, “about his age” (*TR* 71). What the early appearance of the dog and the other boy suggest is that the good guys have been trying to make contact with the man and his boy for some time—almost for the entire length of the story. When the other man finally approaches the boy after his father’s death he tells him as much: “There was some discussion about whether to even come after you at all” (*TR* 238). By joining with the other man, the boy attains some closure at last, and his being integrated into their family⁴³ is nothing less than his salvation; he has found his place in the world.

This eventual meeting becomes a telling moment in the book in that the other good guys are unable to show themselves as long as the boy’s father is alive: the man, not believing in the existence of other “good guys,” cannot stop running; he cannot stop hiding. The risk of running into “bad guys” and thereby endangering his son is too high. Hence the boy never encounters any “good guys” while his father is alive. In that sense the father’s death is necessary for the boy to be given a new start as part of a whole family, all its members alive and accounted for. Boguta-Marchel calls the man and the boy’s journey “a dramatic struggle for the preservation of a sense of purpose” (Boguta-Marchel 117), and it is only through his father’s death⁴⁴ that the boy finds his real purpose: to continue the journey with the hope of better days to come. It seems that an ending is always necessary for a new beginning to be possible.

⁴² “Then in the distance [the man] heard a dog bark. He turned and looked toward the darkening town. It’s a dog, he said” (*TR* 69).

⁴³ The boy’s new family welcomes him with open arms: “The woman when she saw him put her arms around him and held him. Oh, she said, I am so glad to see you” (*TR* 241).

⁴⁴ The father’s death carries an air of sacrifice, having enabled the boy to take part in a future and bestowing on him the ultimate gift a father can give to his son: life.

IV.

“[g]olden chalice, good to house a god” (TR 64)

Cormac McCarthy has an ambivalent relationship with religious belief. When asked by Oprah Winfrey, in the course of her exclusive television interview with the famously reclusive author, whether he had “the whole God thing worked out,” he gave the following reply: “It would depend on what day you asked me[...] Sometimes it’s good to pray. I don’t think you have to have a clear idea of who or what God is in order to pray. You could even be quite doubtful about the whole business” (McCarthy, “On Writing”). The “business” of God operates well behind the scenes in works like *Outer Dark* or *Blood Meridian*. There the divine is mostly absent, and if it is explored at all, it finds expression primarily through the application of its polar opposite, the place of God having been usurped by a sense of inescapable damnation and violence—in the words of William Kennedy, “evil victorious”⁴⁵ takes center stage.

In the case of God *The Road* is different. Even Kennedy concedes, as Frye puts it, “a redemptive potential [is] more fully expressed” in that novel (*Understanding* 167). For the first time, McCarthy has written a novel that has as its theme the healing benevolence of God and the restorative power of faith. The relationship of a father and his son, bound to one another in unassailable love,⁴⁶ “takes its life from a mystery that transcends material contingency and instinct, as their bond is consistently linked with the divine, with ‘God,’ however

⁴⁵ William Kennedy’s notion of “evil victorious” is in direct conflict to my reading of the cited works. Steven Frye’s interpretation of the novels, on the other hand, is much closer to mine: he calls Kennedy’s consideration of McCarthy’s themes “rather single-minded,” arguing that his conviction of “the unambiguous triumph of evil” is an “extreme assessment given that in McCarthy’s previous works [previous to *The Road*] goodness often resonates, alive however tenuous, embodied in friendships as well as in moments of self-sacrifice and stoic resistance” (*Understanding* 167).

⁴⁶ When Winfrey asks McCarthy whether the book was “a love story to [his] son,” he blushes, reluctantly replying, “In a way I suppose it is.” He concedes that without his having had a son at that time in his life, the book would have never been written (McCarthy, “Oprah’s Exclusive Interview”). All of this shows how personal the material is for McCarthy, which may explain the shift in the novel’s religious underpinning. In *The Road* the existence of God is at least possible, despite all the cruelty and horror the man and the boy encounter. The honesty and the strength of their love for each other are what returns the goodness of God to the damned world.

inadequately understood” (Frye 165).

The presence of God in the novel is significant in regard to a redemptive reading of the text. Frye describes the book as “a narrative of the soul’s nature: its moral embodiment in human form; its visibility in human action, whether in acts of brutality or self-sacrifice” (*Understanding* 166). The book’s religious or “mystical infrastructure” (Kennedy) adds several dimensions of meaning to the story, which, as McCarthy himself has said, “is just about the boy and the man on the road.” However, he is quick to qualify that statement, allowing that “[one] can draw [...] conclusions about all sorts of things from [...] reading the book [...] depending on [one’s] taste.” McCarthy has a reputation for playing things close to his chest, and therefore it comes as no surprise when he calls the novel a “pretty simple, straightforward story” (McCarthy, “On Writing”)—which it is, on the surface at least. In the *London Review of Books*, Philip Connors observes the following: “The subjects that obsess McCarthy are the notion of fate, the problem of evil in the world, and the inescapability of death. He has spent forty years writing as if he were trying to expand the Old Testament. With this latest novel he appears to want to build a bridge to the New.” All these “subjects” figure largely in the novel, but as Connors points out, there is a new thematic core, something McCarthy has not explored to this degree before.

In solemn tones, the novel’s narrator describes the country as “[b]arren, silent, godless” (*TR* 4), skillfully steering the reader clear of the realization that the line is one of the novel’s biggest conceits. The world of *The Road* may very well be “barren” and “silent” but it is far from “godless,” as is evidenced repeatedly by the behavior of the boy and his interaction with the man and other travelers on the road. The presence of the boy in the text and the presence of God in the boy further support the view that *The Road* is a novel that deals with the themes of redemption and regeneration through violence.

According to Frye, “Connors makes direct reference to the [novel’s] religious and philosophical themes, noting that the story deals directly with the role of God in human affairs, the possibility of an active and benevolent

deity” (*Understanding* 168). There is no question that the boy in the novel marks a strong counterforce to the sin and violence that make up his world. Even the man, who is undoubtedly one of the good guys, is not as pure and morally responsible as the boy, who is Christ-like in his suffering and forbearance. Without the intercession of the boy, the man, in his rage, is likely to have killed the thief; what is certain is that without the boy’s repeated admonition that their taking the thief’s clothes has sentenced him to death, the man would not have left the thief’s belongings in the road for him to reclaim. The boy, being ill-treated by fate himself, always makes a case for the weak and the famished and the equally abused. He is determined to turn the other cheek while the man sees striking out as the only recourse.

The boy is the man’s moral gauge, unerring and determined not to stray from the path of the good guys. What makes this even more remarkable is the fact that the boy was born into the book’s ruined world; he has never known anything else. And yet he manages to retain, or rather to recapture, a probity, compassion, and kindness of spirit that is gone from the world. Frye writes: “Like Kennedy, Connors notes the messianic quality rather unambiguously presented in the boy’s character, which implies not only the moral purity and self-sacrifice of Christ, but also the political and religious strife that led to his execution” (*Understanding* 168).

There is no execution in *The Road*, however, and if the boy is said to die (emotionally) with his father, then his resurrection comes at the moment he meets the other good guys, the ones he has been searching for all along. His faith is stronger than before, his moral integrity intact: “She said that the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all of time” (*TR* 241).

Another clue to the boy’s role in the book is to be found in the time McCarthy chooses for his clock-stopping catastrophe—1:17. Frye suggests that the numbers refer to “Revelation 1:17 and the dream vision of John the Divine, in which he witnesses the Second Coming of Christ.”⁴⁷ He claims that “the novel as

⁴⁷ In typical McCarthy fashion, the author refuses to commit to a concrete interpretation of the

parable is a kind of prophesy” (*Understanding* 169) that stands to be fulfilled in the continuance of the boy. “If he is not the word of God God never spoke,” the father says, thinking of the boy as his “warrant” (*TR* 4). After washing “a dead man’s brains out of his [the boy’s] hair” (*TR* 63), the man sits beside the fire with the boy asleep in his arms and, stroking his hair, thinks, “Golden chalice, good to house a god.” This gesture of devotion and reverence—and also of recognition of the divine in the boy—is followed by, “Please dont tell me how the story ends” (*TR* 64). And like the reader, the father does not see the boy live up to his promise; but he dies with the hope that the promise is real. Because, as he tells his son, the fire inside him is real (*TR* 234), and the boy has his father’s “whole heart” (*TR* 235). The scene ends in hopefulness:

Do you remember that little boy, Papa?
 Yes. I remember him.
 Do you think that he’s all right that little boy?
 Oh yes. I think he’s all right.
 Do you think he was lost?
 No. I dont think he was lost.
 I’m scared that he was lost.
 I think he’s all right.
 But who will find him if he’s lost? Who will find the little boy?
 Goodness will find the little boy. It always has. It will again. (*TR* 236)

The boy, that “Promethean son” (Kennedy), is the novel’s true regenerative force. In a world that has fallen hard and far from grace, he is the only one left in whom the flame of true goodness still burns bright and undiminished. He is not lost, and goodness will find him again. The world will have its second chance. The boy is the one carrying the fire, the Promethean fire that will rekindle the sun and rebuild the world.

number: It is “lodged in here [pointing at his head] for some reason but I don’t have [...] some answer about that. It’s not a reference to anything specific that I know of [...] I’m sure it’s a reference to something, I just don’t know what it is, so I’m like the reader [...] I don’t know what it is [...] Obviously it was some experience with the number 1:17 and that’s lodged in my head and it had some [...] sort of reference to something” (McCarthy, “On Passages from *The Road*”). What is interesting is that 1:17 is also mentioned in *No Country For Old Men*. There it is the time Chigurh, the psychopathic assassin hunting Llewelyn, arrives at the house of Carla Jean’s mother: “Chigurh pulled up across the street and shut off the engine. He turned off the lights and sat watching the darkened house. The green diode numerals on the radio put the time at 1:17. He sat there till 1:22 and then he took the flashlight from the glovebox and got out and closed the truck door and crossed the street to the house” (*NCOM* 202–3). This passage seems to suggest the arrival of evil, which would precede the Second Coming. As is true for everything in McCarthy, there is no one meaning; one has to compare a variety of interpretations to arrive at an approximation of what could be the author’s intended meaning.

V.

carrying the fire

The image of fire reoccurs repeatedly throughout the pages of *Outer Dark*, *Blood Meridian*, and *The Road*. While the traditional connotations of fire as a source of safety and warmth, an oasis where weary travelers may seek shelter from the darkness of the night and the dangers it holds, can also be found in *Outer Dark* and *Blood Meridian*, nowhere are they stronger than in *The Road*.

In *Outer Dark* and *Blood Meridian*, fire is often associated with evil: the triune uses it to lure Culla to them,⁴⁸ and the bearded man basks in its glow like a devil; Judge Holden evinces a similar affinity for the element, frequently indulging his peculiar predilection of sitting before the fire naked or at least partially undressed, reveling in its flames. Culla's child shows the marks of burns,⁴⁹ and it is the fire out of which came the "sour black chunk of meat" (*OD* 176) which binds Culla to the evil of the three men. But it does offer warmth and comfort too.

In *Blood Meridian*, the scalp-hunters spend countless times by a campfire, talking and spitting into it and resting. The image is used so often that it acquires the marks of a ritual, exercised nightly and performed with rigorous adherence to its rules. The fire keeps the dark at bay, and in a poignant scene the judge beckons to the kid from beyond the safety of fire, which causes Tobin to counsel the kid against joining the judge in the darkness.⁵⁰

For McCarthy, fire seems to be a symbolic representation of good and evil—it can destroy life as well as foster it. *The Road* espouses the second: there fire becomes a criterion for the survival of the man and the boy. It gives them light in a gray world of ashes; it gives them warmth in the cold nights; it heats their food; and, figuratively, it burns inside their hearts, guiding them like a beacon

⁴⁸ The bearded one: "I like to keep a good fire. A man never knows what all might chance along" (*OD* 232).

⁴⁹ "It had a healed burn all down one side of it" (*OD* 231).

⁵⁰ See Part II, chapter IV

along the path of righteousness and moral purity. It also marks the difference between life and death.

The man's wife could not bear the thought of living in a world of ash and fear. She was not carrying the fire inside her, and therefore for her there was neither hope nor the benevolence of God in the world. She had "taken a new lover" and his name was Death. "You talk about taking a stand," she says to the man, "but there is no stand to take" (TR 48).

She has lost all hope: "I am done with my own whorish heart and I have been for a long time [...] [M]y only hope is for eternal nothingness and I hope it with all my heart" (TR 48, 49). The woman's beliefs are contrary to the man's, whose hope is for his son to find the good guys. The woman's hopelessness is the epitome of the man's moments of disheartenment and fear. The difference between them is that the man continues to fight despair, whereas the woman succumbs to it.

On a metaphorical level, fire is the means for salvation. And its telling characteristic is that in order for it to have any real meaning, any strength, it has to be found within. That is what makes *The Road* a narrative of redemption and regeneration: the boy (and the man, to a lesser degree⁵¹) carries the metaphorical fire of salvation and renewal within him. At the end of the novel he finds the good guys and they are carrying the fire just like him. There is hope, there is God, and all of it is enshrouded in "mystery" (TR 241).

⁵¹ Luce describes the man's "love for his son and for the lost world of nature [as] an aspect of the spiritual 'fire' that is the answer to the gnostic view of the world" (*Reading* 278n18).

V. Conclusion

Cormac McCarthy's world is dark and terrible. His characters often are morally outlawed misfits, hounded by fate and given to unspeakable acts of savagery. They live by the Old Testament creed of taking an eye for an eye, and it is thus that they meet the world: violence is the answer to their violent surroundings. Whether it is the kid riding with the scalpers and participating in the slaughter of warriors and civilians alike; or the man from *The Road* shooting another man at point-blank range to keep his boy safe; or Culla Holme watching as the bearded man cuts his unwanted child's throat and hands the corpse to the mute to feed on the gushing blood; violence is the defining ontology of McCarthy's writing.

"Only where there are graves are there resurrections," writes Zarathustra (Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* 136), and his words provide the perfect metaphor for approaching Cormac McCarthy. Light has no meaning without darkness, which is what this thesis is attempting to demonstrate. Culla, Rinthy, the kid, the man and the boy—they are adrift in a sea of darkness, and it is the violence that rules their existences that steers them toward the calmer waters of potential redemption and regeneration.

In the context of his story, Culla Holme has to pass through the gruesome experiences that befall him after he tries to turn his back on the sin he has committed upon his sister. He has to stand by and watch his son being killed—that is the only way for him to come to understand and to come to terms with the extremes of his guilt. Only then will he be able perhaps to find a way out of the hellish swamp that is his destination. The kid starts out as a killer, a rogue, and his actions draw him into the company of bad men. The violence surrounding him is like a maelstrom he cannot escape; and yet he gradually builds up resistance—to

the judge, the violence, the war. When he finds the corpse of the old *abuelita*, he is as close to showing his desire for redemption as he will ever get. Knowing he is beyond saving, he wishes to save the old woman. And then there is the boy in *The Road*, whose heart is incorruptible: he grew up in a maddened world of blood and horror, and yet he is as pure and good as the man's love for him. There is something of the boy in the kid when he tells the *abuelita* that he will take her to safety. The kid will never be able to attain the goodness of the boy—there is no redemption strong enough to achieve that degree of purity—but he stands against the judge, who is the personification of all the darkness and evil McCarthy's characters have to contend with. And the kid stands and he does not give in, validating himself against the falseness that is the judge's lust for blood and war.

There is redemption for McCarthy's fallen heroes and blood-stained reprobates; there is a winning through to the other end where a new day awaits. The violence his characters battle and engage in is inextricably yoked to their regeneration. There is morality and sacrifice and, in stark contrast to the darkness of sin and evil, life *despite* death. Humanity perseveres, in small ways and in large, and sometimes death is necessary for new life—*better* life, without the flaw of violence—to begin.

Even if Culla is lost, Rinthy is free of her sinful brother, and she is at peace. Even if the kid dies, he has not allowed himself to become a disciple of the judge. Even if the whole world lies in ruin, buried under smoldering ashes, there rises from the rubble a boy whose heart is strong enough to persevere against all the horrors and depraved acts of a darkened age. And the fire he carries within him burns bright enough to illuminate the shadows and to drive out the monsters that lurk in the darkness. The good guys win the day, and the night does end.

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VII. Appendix

- I. Abstract (English)
- II. Abstract (Deutsch)
- III. Curriculum Vitae

I.

Abstract (English)

The aim of this thesis is to examine the connections between violence, redemption, and regeneration in three of Cormac McCarthy's most important works, and to determine whether there exists between those seemingly contradictory concepts a causal relationship that predicates the process of regeneration on the presence of violence. The works selected for close analysis are *Outer Dark* (1968), *Blood Meridian* (1985), and *The Road* (2006), novels united by a complex of violence and moral devastation that frames the characters and the stories in a way that does not readily allow for a redemptive reading.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the functions of violence, and to discover in what way redemption and regeneration might be possible for McCarthy's characters. The novels' protagonists all have first-hand experience of bloodshed, and their guilt is what keeps them indentured to the system of violence that is in McCarthy's works. The violence in the three books examined serves as a foil, a hard counterpoint, to the characters' inner development and the decisions they make. The damaged heroes and flawed sinners of McCarthy's bleak narratives are doomed to pursue broken lives full of cruelty and ill luck. What is of interest for this thesis is whether they will become able to counter that doom, and how they go about resisting it.

In McCarthy, the promise of regeneration is merely hinted at; it is a thing on which one has to speculate, but there are a number of clues suggesting that redemption is possible. The changes are often subtle, occurring in small, seemingly inconspicuous ways, but they can be neither denied nor ignored.

The lesson that seems to prevail in so many of McCarthy's novels is that men persevere not just *despite* the darkness of violence but *because* of it. Without

the manifestations of evil in the world that McCarthy goes to such painstaking lengths to describe, human goodness would be of no consequence.

Violence gives meaning and order to the author's world. It is a necessary element which his characters require for the alchemy of their redemption. In *The Road*, the man engages in repeated acts of violence to protect himself and his son. The redemptive factor comes into play when one examines the different ways in which the father and his boy react to threatening situations. Whereas the man believes in preemptive strikes and reprisal, the boy counsels forbearance and forgiveness. The relationship between the judge and the kid of *Blood Meridian* is another juxtaposition of violence and regeneration. The kid starts out as a violent murderer, but he does undergo a change—though slight, the change is significant. And while Culla Holme does not seem to develop much, it is the possibility of change that enables *Outer Dark* to become a tale of redemption founded on violence (especially in the case of Rinthy).

In Cormac McCarthy's fiction, the presence of darkness is also a strong indication of the presence of light, and this thesis will attempt to excavate that light of redemption, to put it into context, and to analyze its potential and application for the characters. Violence is a necessary force that drives the characters, providing them with a means to define themselves, and it is the primary pattern that guides them toward redemption and regeneration.

II. Abstract (Deutsch)

Ziel dieser Arbeit ist es, die Verbindungen zwischen Gewalt, Erlösung und Regeneration in drei der bedeutendsten Werke Cormac McCarthys zu untersuchen und dabei festzustellen, ob zwischen diesen scheinbar widersprüchlichen Konzepten ein kausaler Zusammenhang besteht, der den Prozess der Regeneration auf dem Vorhandensein von Gewalt begründet. Folgende Werke wurden für eine eingehende Analyse selektiert: *Outer Dark / Draußen im Dunkel* (1968 / 1994), *Blood Meridian / Die Abendröte im Westen* (1985 / 1996) und *The Road / Die Strasse* (2006 / 2007). Die Romane sind durch ein Geflecht aus Gewalt und moralischer Verwüstung verbunden, welches Charaktere und Handlung in einen Rahmen fasst, der eine Interpretation in Hinblick auf Erlösung nicht unbedingt erleichtert.

Daher sucht diese Arbeit Funktionen der Gewalt in McCarthys Werken zu analysieren und zu untersuchen, auf welche Weise Erlösung und Regeneration für McCarthys Charaktere möglich sein könnten. Die Protagonisten der Romane haben alle Erfahrung aus erster Hand mit dem Vergießen von Blut, und es ist der Umstand ihrer Schuld, der sie dem in McCarthys Büchern bestehenden Gewaltgefüge verpflichtet. In McCarthy dient Gewalt als Kontrast, als starker Gegenpunkt, zu der inneren Entwicklung der Charaktere und den Entscheidungen, die sie treffen. Die zerschissenen Helden und fehlergeplagten Sünder in McCarthys düsteren Geschichten sind dazu verdammt, gebrochene Leben voller Grausamkeit und Unglück zu verfolgen. Von Interesse für die vorliegende Arbeit ist die Frage, ob die Charaktere Wege finden, ihrem Schicksal zu entgehen und auf welche Weise sie Widerstand leisten.

In McCarthy wird das Versprechen einer bevorstehenden Regeneration lediglich angedeutet und verlangt daher ein hohes Ausmaß an Spekulation, jedoch

finden sich unzählige Hinweise im Text, die ein vorhandenes Erlösungspotential aufzeigen. Diesbezügliche Veränderungen sind oft subtil und treten in scheinbar unauffälliger Weise auf, können aber weder geleugnet noch ignoriert werden.

Die Lektion, die in so vielen von McCarthys Romane vorzuherrschen scheint, ist, dass Männer nicht nur *entgegen* der Dunkelheit der Gewalt bis zu einem Wendepunkt durchhalten, sondern es oftmals genau *deswegen* tun. Ohne die Manifestationen des Bösen, die McCarthy mit solcher Hingabe beschreibt, würde das Gute im Menschen jeglichen Sinn verlieren. Gewalt verleiht der Welt des Autors Struktur und Ordnung. Als unentbehrliches Element ist sie erforderlich für die Erlösung der Charaktere. In *Die Strasse* vollzieht der Mann wiederholt gewalttätige Handlungen, um sich selbst und seinen Sohn zu schützen.

Erlösungsfaktoren kommen ins Spiel, wenn man die unterschiedlichen Arten untersucht, auf die der Vater und sein Sohn auf bedrohliche Situationen reagieren. Während der Mann an präventive Erstschläge und Vergeltung glaubt, hält sein Sohn an Nachsicht und Vergebung fest. Einer Gegenüberstellung von Gewalt und Regeneration begegnet man zudem in der Beziehung zwischen dem Richter und dem jungen Mann in *Die Abendröte im Westen*: Der junge Mann beginnt sein Leben als gewalttätiger Mörder, durchläuft aber eine Wandlung, die durchaus von Bedeutung ist. Und wenngleich sich Culla Holme nicht stark zu verändern scheint, ist es die Möglichkeit der Veränderung, die es *Draußen Im Dunkel* ermöglicht, eine Geschichte einer Erlösung zu werden, die auf Gewalt beruht (besonders im Fall von Rinthy).

In Cormac McCarthy ist das Vorhandensein von Dunkelheit sogleich ein Hinweis auf das Vorhandensein von Licht, und es ist eine Bemühung dieser Arbeit, dieses Licht der Erlösung zu Tage zu fördern, es in Kontext zu stellen und ihr Potential und ihre Anwendung für die Charaktere zu analysieren. Gewalt ist ein unabdingbares Mittel, das seine Charaktere vorantreibt und ihnen zur Eigendefinition verhilft, es ist das primäre Muster, das zu Erlösung und Regeneration führt.

III. Curriculum Vitae

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