

Desert Pandemonium: Cormac McCarthy's Apocalyptic "Western" in *Blood Meridian*

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What are the roots that clutch what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water. Only
There is shadow under this red rock,
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you
Or shadow at evening rising to meet you;
I will show you fear in a handful of dust.

T.S. Eliot *The Waste Land*

All of Cormac McCarthy's novels are unmistakably and significantly from a specific region of the US. Landscape and the natural surroundings are imprinted like a signature on their discourse. His first four novels are set in the South, in a Tennessean landscape McCarthy knew from his own experience, having grown up in Knoxville, Tennessee. His allegiance to the Southern tradition of the gothic and the grotesque as seen in Faulkner and O'Connor has repeatedly been noted by critics. Yet, Faulkner's grotesque pales compared to that of McCarthy. As Mark Roydon Winchell puts it in his discussion of *Child of God*, for Faulkner "necrophilia was the punch line (I hesitate to say climax) of the story, beyond which nothing needed nor could be said. For McCarthy it occurs at the center of the narrative, with its implications worked out in

increasingly shocking detail" (301). Although it is not misguided to align McCarthy with Faulkner and the Southern grotesque, this comparison surely needs modifications. In spite of all the local references and the attention paid to details in the landscape, it is not primarily the local and the specific which is McCarthy's main concern in his Southern novels. More importantly, the Southern tradition provides a literary context for transgressive writing – that is, writing that attempts to go beyond the point where "nothing needed nor could be said" and which thus challenges its own limits as well as the limits of the readers. And, as already implied, McCarthy's transgressiveness far exceeds that of the "classic" Southern writers.

McCarthy's fifth novel *Blood Meridian* represents a geographical redirection of his authorship and is the first of four novels set in the Southwestern borderlands. In spite of this change of scenery, the preoccupation with the transgressive forces of existence, particularly the extremities of darkness and violence, is very much at the core of his writing also in *Blood Meridian*. As Tom Pilkington facetiously remarks, "[t]he reader may be excused for concluding that McCarthy's most recent fiction was composed by the illegitimate offspring of Zane Grey and Flannery O'Connor – and that the Marquis de Sade was the delivering physician" (312). McCarthy is an excellent portrayer of landscape and the local, whether it is the arid deserts of the Southwest or the lush woodlands of the Southeast. At the same time, all of his novels share a fascination with phenomena that supersede any specific landscape, historical period or genre, and it seems to be this, rather than the local colour in his work, that has enticed his small but devoted and ever expanding audience as well as repelled his harshest critics.

My reading of McCarthy's first "western novel" *Blood Meridian* will explore the characteristic co-existence of, on the one hand, the local and the specific and, on the other hand, the universal and the transcendent. The writing of a genre novel as extremely stylized as the western entails relating to and staying within already existing boundaries. Similarly, the writing of a historical novel requires attention to a specific historical context, typically this context being itself also the theme of the text. In McCarthy the questions of genre and historicity are more complex, and we are invited to deal with a historical novel that has at its core a view of time and history that appears ahistorical. *Blood Meridian* seems more

concerned with what lies beyond boundaries than with what is contained by them. Indeed, the novel seems intent to challenge every notion of boundary and reaches out to the silence of beyond language. This inferred concern with liminality is indicated also in the full title of novel, *Blood Meridia: Or the Evening Redness in the West* – a title which dwells on the horizon and the beyond.

It was no mere coincidence that McCarthy chose the American West and the western as frame for his fifth novel. In one of the very few interviews he has given he states that “ I've always been interested in the Southwest. There isn't a place in the world you can go where they don't know about cowboys and Indians and the myth of the West’ “ (Pilkington 312). This mythic West has been chronicled in numerous westerns, films and literature, and *Blood Meridian* leaves no doubt that McCarthy is well acquainted with the western genre as well as the Western landscape. However, when compared to Jane Tompkins's description of the ideology of the West and the western in *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns*, *Blood Meridian* evokes a sense of difference rather than similarity:

This West functions as a symbol of freedom, and of the opportunity for conquest. It seems to offer escape from the conditions of life in modern industrial society: from a mechanized existence, economic dead ends, social entanglements, unhappy personal relations, political injustice. The desire to change places also signals a powerful need for self-transformation. The desert light and the desert space, the creak of saddle leather and the sun beating down, the horses' energy and force these things promise a translation of the self into something purer and more authentic, more intense, more real. (4)

Blood Meridian is teasingly tangent to what Jane Tompkins describes here. Phrases like 'conquest,' 'freedom from social entanglements,' 'the desire to change places' are all echoed in *Blood Meridian* but the positivity that surrounds these phrases are conspicuously absent from McCarthy's fiction. *Blood Meridian*'s close relationship to the western is obvious but the nature of this relationship is not. The question is whether *Blood Meridian* is best seen as a revisionist western, as most contemporary westerns of some literary quality profess themselves to be, or whether it is not indeed an anti-western?

Its main character, the kid, embodies the concept of the "man with no name" as well as that of the numerous kids, the young lawless gunmen, of western history. From beginning to end the story describes the kid's

journey westward and the plot development of *Blood Meridian*, to the extent that this exists, mirrors westward expansion – “[s]patial displacement is in fact the central image of the text” (Pughe 380). Westward expansion as a heroic venture laden with purpose and notions of progress is, however, thoroughly undermined in McCarthy’s novel as the kid’s “progress” appears wholly random; an incessant wandering westward repeatedly broken by eruptions of mindless violence. This violence is sometimes motivated by trivial episodes, sometimes apparently not motivated by anything at all. It is never heroic or in any way justified or justifiable. The only underlying motif to be found is the scalphunters’ pursuit of Apache scalps – in itself a historically authentic element and one that accentuates the capitalistic motivation of westward expansion in a grotesque manner.

Violence and regeneration through violence are common features of the western and of the myth of the west, and the cover of my Vintage edition of *Blood Meridian* boldly states that this is a “classic American novel of regeneration through violence.” It is, however, precisely the issue of regeneration that seems to strike a false note in McCarthy’s book as it may be difficult to relate to the idea that anything can exist after the violent story of *Blood Meridian*. Yet, there is no overt critique, possibly not even an implied critique, of the violence that is displayed in this novel. The novel’s final effect is a nauseating feeling of abyss, of nothingness.

The narrative of *Blood Meridian* defamiliarizes the patterns and conventions of the western by magnifying its genre elements. Excess is in many ways this novel’s most striking device. Situations and ideas are carried to their utmost extreme, to the point where they appear fantastic and totally out of order. One instance of this is the novel’s presentation of the tension between wilderness and civilization. Traditionally, the frontier has been seen as the geographical and metaphorical line that marks the boundary between wilderness and civilization, and causes a process of acculturation. Turner’s thesis on the frontier in American history has at its core the temporary conversion of civilized man into a being more in correspondence with wilderness, a transformation into a less civilized person. In westerns this tension between civilization and wilderness plays a prominent part but it typically remains clear that, as Richard Slotkin observes, “though we were a people of ‘the wilderness,’

we were *not* savages" (11). A frontier hero needs to have preserved a core of basic decency and should have a level of reflection high enough to bridge the gap between civilization and wilderness: "As the 'man who knows Indians,' the frontier hero stands between the opposed worlds of savagery and civilization, acting sometimes as mediator or interpreter between races or cultures but more often as civilization's most efficient instrument against savagery" (Slotkin 16). In *Blood Meridian* the judge in many ways fills the role as frontier hero. The judge is the man who knows Indians and who knows how to survive in the wilderness. However, the judge offers no consolation, no assurance, that man in his encounter with wilderness did not become savage indeed, no consolation that man even before his encounter with wilderness was not inherently savage and evil. The scene where he returns from the desert after having survived several days in its arid wilderness without even the basest means of survival is truly grotesque:

More strangely he carried a parasol made from rotted scraps of hide stretched over a framework of rib bones bound with strips of tug. The handle had been the foreleg of some creature and the judge approaching was clothed in little more than confetti, so rent was his costume to accommodate his figure. Bearing before him that morbid umbrella with the idiot in its rawhide collar pulling at the lead he seemed some degenerate entrepreneur fleeing from a medicine show and the outrage of the citizens who'd sacked it. (297-298)

The judge in this passage appears like an impossible incarnation of the Devil *and* Robinson Crusoe. If this is acculturation, then it is acculturation gone awry; we may even wonder if it is not the presence of the Judge that causes this wilderness to be a place of savagery and not the other way around. The image is transgressive and for that reason strange – yet, it also strangely echoes Jane Tompkins when she states that "men imitate the land in westerns; they try to look as much like nature as possible. Everything blends imperceptibly into the desert" (72).

Blood Meridian reveals western paradigms but presents them in an unfamiliar way. This brings us back to the question of whether it should be described as revisionist or, rather, as an anti-western. The western as a genre, be it literature or film, is structured around a series of binary oppositions, like west-east, wilderness-civilization, masculine-feminine, to mention but a few. Revisionist westerns typically invert these binaries so that the previously discredited or "othered part, at the cost of which

the frontier self is constructed, in the revised version becomes the preferred part. A feminist revision will give preference to the previously feminine other as self, and a Native American revision will give preference to the previously Native American other as self. This strategy cannot possibly be ascribed to *Blood Meridian* as it makes no pretence of speaking for the other. There are no positive female characters and woman as a nurturing presence, which is one of the most typical components of any western, is erased already in the opening of the book: "The mother dead these fourteen years did incubate in her own bosom the creature who would carry her off. The father never speaks her name, the child does not know it. He has a sister in this world that he will not see again" (3). The women in *Blood Meridian*, frequently whores, are too distant even to be thought of as characters. Nor are we introduced to individualized and likeable Indians. Either they too are distant, just figures falling off horses, or they are as unsympathetic and violent as any other character in this book. Rather than inverting these canonical binaries, McCarthy dissolves the oppositional apparatus by giving exclusive attention to one side of the binary only. There can be no tension between the masculine and the feminine when there is no femininity; there can be no tension between wilderness and civilization when there is no civilization. These absences in the text are present as something we as readers long for and expect. Consequently, McCarthy magnifies the presence of the traditionally dominant side of the binary and thus forces the myth of the American west to its most appalling extreme.

As it really offers no revision, that is, no alternative vision, and since it places the western paradigm in a defamiliarizing relief, it is tempting to conclude that *Blood Meridian* comes closer to being an anti-western than a revisionist western – an anti-western deeply fascinated by the western. McCarthy's novel appears profoundly immoral, or possibly amoral, and has none of the clean conscience of modern revisionist projects. A revisionist western, like for instance Kevin Costner's *Dances With Wolves*, has as an important bi-product a redemptive revision of its own self as well as a revision of the other. The film sheds a positive light on the agent of the revision, in this case the white, western male, precisely because this shows the (self-)insight it takes to unravel the unjust perspective of history. It also clears a positive space for its audience where they can take part in a rewriting that "heals" the wounds of history.

Blood Meridian offers its readers no such redemptive consolation; we cannot feel as better human beings for having witnessed and suffered with the suffering. Instead, the reading is "a harrowing moral experience" (Pughe 372), so much so that it raises ethical questions concerning the issue of reading. Are we partaking in an immoral act by accepting this text – could our act of reading even be considered a complicity?

The aesthetic pleasure derived from reading even the bloodiest scenes of McCarthy's novel has frequently been noted by critics, as for instance by Steven Shaviro: "*Blood Meridian* sings hymns of violence, its gorgeous language commemorates slaughter in all its sumptuousness and splendor" (143). The *mise en scene* of the skirmishes in the desert is as elaborate as it is eloquent. The harrowing moral experience of reading *Blood Meridian* arises partly from the fact that in spite of the gore we cannot deny feeling a certain reluctant pleasure. The visual pleasure that McCarthy's discourse clearly offers is akin to that of Sergio Leone's meta-westerns. Leone's love for the vacillation between stills and extreme close-ups, and a panning camera that sweeps over an amorphous dusty landscape, is reflected also in McCarthy's style. The spectral music of Ennio Morricone would probably not have appeared out of context in *Blood Meridian*.

The pleasure derived from the representation of violence has repelled many of McCarthy's readers and can easily be used as an ethical argument against the book. Since it takes no stand against the violence it represents, since it offers its readers no didactic guiding lines, it is susceptible to the label *unethical*. I would say that McCarthy's novels exemplify, intentionally or unintentionally, the following point made by Adorno in his essay "Commitment": "The so-called artistic rendering of the naked physical pain of those who were beaten down with rifle butts contains, however distantly, the possibility that pleasure can be squeezed from it. The morality that forbids art to forget this for a second slides off into the abyss of its opposite" (88). *Blood Meridian* dispenses with any discursive rhetoric that conceals the narrative pleasure we are susceptible to feel when reading the text. It offers no space where we as readers, in conjunction with the text, can condemn the evils of history. The readers' solitude in dealing with the events of the text and with their own reactions to these, is one of the most difficult aspects of reading *Blood Meridian*. The effect of what Adorno sees as genuinely committed works

of art is that one that makes "official works of committed art look like children's games – they arouse the anxiety that existentialism only talks about" (Adorno 90) – and this appears to be a suitable description of the effectiveness of McCarthy's style. In his discussion of *Blood Meridian* as a historical novel Robert L. Jarrett makes a similar argument:

The novel's violence is in fact "historical" in the fullest sense of the term; it is used so as to represent the dynamic ethnic, racial, and social tensions of this period of Western history [...] This is not to say that we take no pleasure in its violence, for its linguistic "rendering" is neither unadorned nor unesthetic. This very esthetic pleasure may compel the reader to a guilty consciousness of his or her own esthetic consumption of narrated violence. And this guilty sense of participation may be McCarthy's point. The very disjunction between his poetic style and the "viciousness" of the violence his language represents, both in this passage and elsewhere, should lead us to question the characters who wield that violence, their motives, and the social and historical tensions they represent. Does averting our eyes from the violent acts of the national history banish those acts or absolve the present from the burden of the past? (90)

Blood Meridian recreates the experience of violence through accurate depiction void of value judgement. McCarthy's style at times owes much to an early Hemingway, the Hemingway of *In Our Time*, only McCarthy's stylistic path toward recreating the experience of violence is more ornate than Hemingway's. The unsettling thing for the readers of *Blood Meridian* is that the novel takes no stand, not even at the end. If anything, it seems to support the misanthropic brutality, as the only triumphant survivor is the judge, the most relentlessly vicious character of them all.

Jarrett leaves a space open for the redemptive effects of McCarthy's books when he says that they "should lead us to question the characters who wield that violence...and the social and historical tensions they represent." In the context of *Blood Meridian* it seems like a gross understatement to say that we "question the characters." Our first encounter with most of these characters, like the judge, is an encounter with malice and evil and we see already at a very early stage in our reading that they are wholly unredemptive. Rather, the problem is that in spite of not only questioning the characters but even fearing them, we may find ourselves fascinated by them. We could take this issue even further and conclude that *Blood Meridian* makes no attempt whatsoever at redeeming neither itself nor history. It does not take part in what Leo Bersani calls "the culture of redemption":

A crucial assumption in the culture of redemption is that a certain type of repetition of experience in art repairs inherently damaged or valueless experience. [...] This may sound like an unattackable truism, and yet I want to show that such apparently acceptable views of art's beneficently reconstructive function in culture depend on a devaluation of historical experience and of art. The catastrophes of history matter much less if they are somehow compensated for in art, and art itself gets reduced to a kind of superior patching function, is enslaved to those very materials to which it presumably imparts value. (Leo Bersani 1)

But even this argument could be turned against itself. Bersani mentions Nietzsche, Bataille and Baudelaire as examples of "literature without redemptive authority" (2) and in so doing could be said to create the impression that this literature is redemptive *for the very reason that it makes no claims to be so*. An ethical reader will inevitably seek a redemptive reading or, if this cannot be achieved, reject *Blood Meridian* altogether. For a reader not troubled by the immorality implied in the reading of the novel, its representation of violence will be precisely that; a naturalistic representation of a violence that can be seen as realistic or historical.

One problem with Jarrett's otherwise highly perceptive writing on the violence in *Blood Meridian* is that he unambiguously sees the violence as "in the fullest sense of the term" historical. True, there can be little doubt that the violence and anarchy portrayed in *Blood Meridian* was actual enough in the American West of the mid-nineteenth century but McCarthy's text nevertheless seems to stretch out beyond the limits of historicity. It seems to be violence *qua* violence the text will have us experience, rather than primarily the imperialistic violence of westward expansion. We may even question whether *Blood Meridian*, in spite of its historical context and many authentic historical references, should be read as a historical novel.

We cannot with any respect for the text ignore the fact that history is forcefully present in *Blood Meridian*. It is set on both sides of the Mexican-American border and the story begins in 1848,¹ shortly after the termination of the Mexican-American War. The moral and social chaos that permeates *Blood Meridian* is thus, at least to a certain extent, a

1. Or, we could say that it begins in Tennessee in 1833 when the kid is born. It is tempting to read the kid's birth in Tennessee and his subsequent journey to the Southwest as a reflection of the development of McCarthy's authorship.

picture of authentic historical circumstances in this region where the relationships between Anglos, Mexicans and Indians were entangled and mutually hostile.² John Emil Sepich in a series of articles on *Blood Meridian* has further shown how the novel relies closely on actual persons and incidents found in historical sources of the time.³ For instance, two of its major characters, John Joel Glanton and Judge Holden, are based on actual historical persons referred to in Samuel Chamberlain's autobiographical narrative *My Confession* from the 1840s. It is nothing new that westerns base themselves on authentic historical persons and incidents. On the contrary, quite a few westerns chronicle the same legendary episodes, the same legendary personages, like the Earps and the O. K. Corral. What is special about McCarthy's selection of specific historical elements for his fiction is that he has chosen persons and incidents unknown to the majority of his readers. Most of us need to read Sepich's articles in order to identify some of the factual elements. Thus McCarthy does not establish a specific and common frame of reference with his readers outside of the general frame of the west and the western. We can only conjecture why he has made this choice. It does give him the advantage of *not* having his text confront whatever specific preconceptions and pre-knowledge the readers might already have. Had *Blood Meridian* shown, say, Wyatt Earp viciously collecting Indian scalps and killing women and children, the novel would indisputably have been read as a critical revision of an old legend. Contrarily, had it shown the Earps as the heroes they are frequently portrayed to be, McCarthy's novel would have fallen in line with numerous other westerns and fortified the legend. As it is, McCarthy avoids direct confrontation with specific and commonly shared legends, yet unquestionably grafts the text onto history and reality.

Why is it then that reading *Blood Meridian* primarily as a historical novel feels somehow deeply unsatisfying and does not seem to be an adequate approach to the text? This is not just yet another version of "how the west *really* was won," although it partly can be read that way. We again return to the fact that the discourse of *Blood Meridian* takes no

2. Robert L. Jarrett offers a clarifying and rigorous historical reading of *Blood Meridian* in *Cormac McCarthy*.

3. See list of reference for sources.

stand in its matters and mostly conveys no historical consciousness. Rather, it seems, oddly, to situate itself above and beyond every notion of historicity. This problem is addressed by Thomas Pughe in his eminent article on *Blood Meridian* where he approaches the issue theoretically by bringing in George Lukács. In *The Historical Novel* Lukács discusses the function of the frontier hero Nathaniel Bumppo in James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking novels: "In this simple, popular figure who can only experience his tragedy emotionally, but not understand it, Cooper portrays the enormous historical tragedy of those early colonizers who emigrated from England in order to preserve their freedom, but who themselves destroy this freedom by their own deeds in America" (65). Pughe identifies at least one problem with *Blood Meridian* as a historical novel when he observes that "*Blood Meridian* contains no European American character who, like Natty Bumppo, shows a tragic sense of historical contradictions and no Native American one with a voice of his own, like Chingachgook. [...] He creates no 'world-historical individuals' (Lukács) but instead de-individualized brutes who seem to be of no historical interest at all" (372). What Pughe draws our attention to here is one of the most characteristic features of McCarthy's fiction: his characters are present through their actions, which are rarely redeeming, and we are also frequently made aware of their physical stature. Apart from this they appear to have no subjectivity, no emotions, no motivations⁴ – their brutality simply seems inherently natural to them. The "McCarthyesque" narrator does not reveal his position but remains inscrutably aloof. Pughe concludes that the model McCarthy uses frequently transcends history and could be called "transhistorical and mythic" (372).

Another aspect of *Blood Meridian* that, paradoxically, offers resistance to historicizing is its image of time and place. Paradoxically, since *Blood Meridian's* strong sense of time and space is one of its most prominent and stunning features. However, this is time and space as essences rather than locally and historically significant references. One discursive marker of timelessness is the present tense framing of the story. The

4. The desubjectivization of the characters is visible also in the way the narrator rarely uses the names of the characters but instead refers to them as »he« and also avoids capitalizing their nicknames, as in 'the judge' and 'the kid.'

opening sentence is quiet, and calls for our undevoted attention: "See the child. He is pale and thin, he wears a thin and ragged linen shirt. He stokes the scullery fire." This is the genesis of the kid, all told in the present tense. The long main section is told in the past tense and relates the kid's progress through the landscape before he meets his destiny, his apocalyptic ending, on the last pages of the book. The last paragraph is again in the present tense and here the present tense communicates a distinct sensation that the story has not yet ended, that it might still be progressing. The judge is still dancing – and this can hardly be reassuring: "His feet are light and nimble. He never sleeps. He says that he will never die. He never sleeps the judge. He is dancing, dancing. He says that he will never die." Beginnings and endings, origins and destinations seem diffuse and indeterminate, and consequently blur the novel's historical specificity, its historicity. The gang of scalphunters are in the novel referred to as exiles, but, as Steven Shaviro argues, "exile is not deprivation or loss, but our primordial and positive condition" (145). There is nothing these characters can have been exiled *from* since we do not know anything outside of their wanderings in the desert and there does not seem to be anything the survivors can be resocialized into.

The peculiar sense of time *and* of timelessness is also reflected in the landscape of the novel. In this context it is necessary to distinguish between landscape and region: A region is a specific place made identifiable by its characteristic culture whereas a landscape could be seen as a more universal phenomenon, as space in contrast to place. The regional aspect of *Blood Meridian* and its corresponding literary context has already been discussed through the American West and the western. But the Southwestern region also offers a transcendent element in its desert landscape with its extreme qualities, and this "desert absolute" is very much at the heart of discourse in McCarthy's book. The desert is an autonomous and extreme setting where human beings make little difference: "The desert upon which they were entrained was desert absolute and it was devoid of feature altogether and there was nothing to mark their progress upon it" (295). Or, to evoke the judge's characteristically grandiose words, "This desert upon which so many have been broken is vast and calls for largeness of heart but is also ultimately empty. It is hard, it is barren. Its very nature is stone" (330). This is a landscape that reduces human beings and their worth as such.

Their individuality and subjectivity are erased, something which forms an important contrast to the western where individuality and singularity are at the centre. Human beings have been a presence in this "desert absolute" for ages but the only traces they have left are scattered bones and the ruins of their dwellings. They are reduced to physical presences and the movement of our riders through the desert sand is like a forever ongoing palimpsest: "And so these parties divided upon that midnight plain, each passing back the way the other had come, pursuing as all travelers must inversions without end upon other men's journeys" (121). The judge, with his powerful speeches and giant luminous body, appears an exception to this but the judge is a larger than life character, larger than death even, and is better seen as the embodiment of evil than as an individualistic character. His continued dancing at the end of the story accentuates the progressive and eternal aspect of time and history; history will continue to repeat itself like it always has, and like it does in the repetitive plot movement of the characters' progress through the desert. The quote from *The Yuma Daily Sun* that introduces the story underlines the omnipresence of evil throughout history, regardless of historical period or region:

Clark, who led last year's expedition to the Afar region of northern Ethiopia, and UC Berkeley colleague Tim D. White, also said that a re-examination of a 300,000-year-old fossil skull found in the same region earlier shows evidence of having been scalped.

Rather than representing a specific place at a specific time the desert becomes the central metaphor of *Blood Meridian*, a metaphor for transgression, for that which cannot be contained or controlled, and for that which is not human.

In *Blood Meridian* the presence of the West and the western as well as of history and historicity remains indisputable. Yet, more than anything else, these elements seem like inspirational stepping stones for deeper probings into civilization's discontents, and in this context language and discourse are central issues. The discourse of *Blood Meridian* could be described as both liminal and transgressive. The text is repeatedly testing the limits for discourse and language itself. One of the ways it does this is by confronting and transgressing the readers' acceptance of what can be directly represented in words. McCarthy's discourse shows no reverence whatsoever for many of its objects and the area where it is particularly

irreverent is in descriptions of human beings. Already mentioned is the opacity of the characters; the obscure if at all existing motivation for their acts of violence. Since they all seem to have the capacity for mindless violence it is difficult to imagine their soul as a warm and light place or as anything worthy of respect. The same irreverence is shown in descriptions of the human body. Although we know and accept that human bodies, like all bodies, eventually are exposed to decay and decomposition we shy away from descriptions or representations of this process. Direct representation of a decomposing human body breaks with our sense of textual decency and respect for human matter. In *Blood Meridian* the decomposition of the body is freely shown and the human being is reduced to organic matter, un sentimentally terminable. One of the most devastatingly grotesque and glaringly naturalistic descriptions is the picture of Sproule's infected arm: "He took off the shirt. It stuck to the skin and a yellow pus ran. His arm was swollen to the size of his thigh and it was garishly discolored and small worms worked in the open wound" (67). On this point *Blood Meridian* has as much in common with the horror genre and with splatter films as with the western. Westerns typically tell us that violence exists and that human life is fragile in the West but they also typically refrain from showing naturalistically the results of this violence. Even Peckinpah's "ballets of violence" do not dwell descriptively on dismembered bodies.

The total result is a desecration of the human body and soul that is grotesque and transgressive and that makes any notion of idealism absurd. There is a clear parallel here to Georges Bataille's philosophy: "Base matter is external and foreign to ideal human aspirations, and it refuses to allow itself to be reduced to the great ontological machines resulting from these aspirations" (Bataille 51). The blazing desert sun of *Blood Meridian* has more in common with Bataille's evil sun than with the sun as a positive and regenerative force:

They rode on and the sun in the east flushed pale streaks of light and then a deeper run of color like blood seeping up in sudden reaches flaring planewise and where the earth drained up into the sky at the edge of creation the top of the sun rose out of nothing like the head of a great red phallus until it cleared the unseen rim and sat squat and pulsing and malevolent behind them. (*Blood Meridian* 44-45)

The Sun exclusively loves the Night and directs its luminous violence, its ignoble shaft, toward the earth, but finds itself incapable of reaching the gaze of the night, even

though the nocturnal terrestrial expanses head continuously toward the indecency of the solar ray. (Bataille 9)

There is no elegiac reminiscing of bygone times and remote places in *Blood Meridian*, no romantic visions of oneness with a benevolent nature. On the contrary, oneness with nature in McCarthy's novel is ominous and disturbing since nature is cruel. McCarthy writes about the uncultured, or savage, element in nature and culture, regardless of whether his scene is the city, like San Antonio, or the blazing desert.

It is tempting to conclude, as does Thomas Pughe, that "[i]n fact, 'the kid's' or any other character's consciousness – containing 'interior' information such as fear, anger or pain is totally absent from the text" (373). This is, however, not quite the case. What becomes astonishing to us as we proceed with the reading is not the omnipresence of violence but the occasional glimpses of something that might be taken for humanity. These glimpses are more often than not disembodied and humanity seems to exist in the discourse of the novel, as a certain softness of tone, rather than anywhere in its story components. One incident where we do see it in relation to one of the characters is when the kid talks to the old woman in the rebozo. Here the kid does reveal a consciousness and this beautiful passage conveys a sensitivity and fragility that comes quite as a surprise to us after having just witnessed an episode of relentless killing:

The kid rose and looked about at this desolate scene and then he saw alone and upright in a small niche in the rocks an old woman kneeling in a faded rebozo with her eyes cast down.

He made his way among the corpses and stood before her. She was very old and her face was gray and leathery and sand had collected in the folds of her clothing. She did not look up. The shawl that covered her head was much faded of its color yet it bore like a patent woven into the fabric the figures of stars and quartermoons and other insignia of a provenance unknown to him. He spoke to her in a low voice. 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.

He knelt on one knee, resting the rifle before him like a staff. *Abuelita*, he said. *No puedes escucharme?*

He reached into the 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. (315)

The language in this passage has a sensitive lightness and simplicity to it that mirrors the fragility of the dried up human being in the cave. The kid here expresses symptoms of human weakness, of which we have seen signs earlier when he on occasions has abstained from killing someone although he has had the chance. In this rarely eloquent monologue he infers his humanity; his loneliness, his need to bond with someone. He reveals, in short, that he is, after all, "human, all too human" and this is the reason why the judge kills him in the end: "There's a flawed place in the fabric of your heart. Do you think I could not know? You alone were mutinous. You alone reserved in your soul some corner of clemency for the heathen" (McCarthy 299). The reason why we after all side with the kid is precisely that he on rare occasions does show humanity and this, I would argue, also fuels our continued interest in the book.⁵ Another element that gives privileged emphasis to the kid is the fact that the sacrificial murder of him is omitted from the text. The other characters have been displayed shamelessly as mere matter, dispensable and unholy. The killing of the kid is the only act of violence in this book that is only presented metonymically as traces in the expressions of those characters who see his corpse. This is the only act of reverence toward the human body visible in the whole text and that is in itself significant.

On the one hand, *Blood Meridian* seems to insist that all matter is base matter and that this is all there is. This would be a thoroughly anti-metaphysical statement that denounces the spiritual and the ideal. Steven Shaviro points to the possibility of reading the novel ultimately as a critique of western metaphysics:

Western culture has dreamed for centuries of some act of heroic transgression and self-transformation: whether this take the Enlightenment form of rational mystery, or the romantic and mystical one of apocalyptic transfiguration. McCarthy, like Nietzsche, exposes not just the futility of the dream, but – far more troublingly – its inherent piety, its ironic dependence upon the very (supposed) mysteries that it claims to violate. (147)

5. Another place where subjectivity and feelings like fear and insecurity exist is in the horses, as in this scene when the pale horseriders have sought shelter for the night in a stable: »Their arms aloft pulling at their clothes were luminous and each obscure soul was enveloped in audible shapes of light as if it had always been so. The mare at the far end of the stable snorted and shied at this luminosity in beings so endarkened and the little horse turned and hid the face in the web of his dam's flank« (222). The wandering kid as character and the sensitivity in portrayal of animals are continued in McCarthy's next three novels, *All the Pretty Horses*, *The Crossing* and *Cities of the Plain*, which are also westerns of a sort.

On the other hand, the text has an auratic quality that only can be described as mythic and metaphysical. The text's central oxymoron, spoken by the judge, "Your heart's desire is to be told some mystery. The mystery is that there is no mystery" (252) summons the self-contradictory impasse at the core of the text. And this seems like a greater mystery than anything else.

Reading *Blood Meridian* as a historical novel or as a western (or anti-western) entails an explicatory mapping out of historical elements and representations as well as of generic patterns, and is both enlightening and relevant – as far as it goes. The problem is that it does not approach the text's attempt to deal with what cannot be contained within the boundaries of the historical novel or the western. What the readers eventually are confronted with when reading *Blood Meridian* are themselves and their own reactions to what they have experienced. The experience of *Blood Meridian* bears resemblance to the incommunicable experience of horror in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, only that in McCarthy's case "the horror" belongs to the reader rather than any of the characters. The novel offers no consolation and its obvious literary qualities make it impossible to denounce it as "a cheap thrill." Homi Bhabha describes the experience implied but not explained through the uttering of the words "the horror, the horror" as "the recognition of an anxious contradictory place between the human and the not-human, between sense and non-sense" (125). This describes our meeting with something that is both recognizable, yet seems like absolute other. In this intangible tension between sense and not-sense; between the specific and the undefined, the beautiful and the atrocious, *Blood Mevidian* ignites its own mystery:

The mystery in literature is undoubtedly of such a nature that one degrades it if one respects it, and we drop it if we grasp it. If we honor it from afar, calling it secret and ineffable, it makes itself an object of disgust, something perfectly vulgar. And if we approach it to explain it, we encounter that which conceals itself and we pursue only that which flees. (Blanchot 43-44)

The regenerative force of the western is replaced by an apocalyptic finale that promises nothing. The kid, the only possibly likeable element in the novel is ritually slain at the novel's end and *Blood Meridian* seems to confirm Bataille's contention that "there is nothing that can conquer violence" (Bataille 1986, 48). This statement seems atrocious – even

more so because in the context of *Blood Meridian* the atrocity does not only belong to an other we can easily denounce. It becomes something we as readers experience as part of ourselves in our encounter with the novel; it is the horror of facing the fact that we are capable of being fascinated by the atrocity, by that which conflicts with our ethical instincts. And that is a far more horrible experience than the encounter with a "mere" realistic rendering of historical violence, simply because we cannot hide behind a historical distance to the horror.

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